

Nepal: Volunteers central

Young Singaporeans are flocking there to do community service



Bryna Singh

Exotic. Mysterious. A place where much can be done.

These are some of the reasons young Singaporeans and local chapters of international groups have been flocking to Nepal in recent years to do volunteer work and conduct projects.

Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduate Peng Bojie, 23, who has been there twice in the past two years to do community service, says: "Nepal seems mysterious. We do not hear much about it, apart from knowing that Mount Everest is there."

Mrs Foo Pek Hong, chief executive officer of World Vision Singapore, says Nepal has "many prevalent needs", both social and economic. According to United Nations Development Programme's human development index last year, which evaluates income indices, besides life expectancy and education, Nepal was ranked 157 out of 187 countries, she notes. World Vision is an international Christian humanitarian organisation.

There are no figures to show if the

number of volunteers going to Nepal has grown, but there are signs that it is becoming the go-to place for young do-gooders.

For example, students from SMU went there in 2006 on its first school-supported, student-initiated group community service trip. Since then, its students have made annual trips to Nepal in an initiative called Project Namaste.

Singapore Polytechnic's first Nepal project was in March 2012. In the past two years, it has held seven community service projects there. Over at Nanyang Technological University, the first two overseas community service projects to Nepal were undertaken last year.

Nepal has also been on the radar of organisations here.

The National Youth Council has been supporting Youth Expedition Projects (YEP) to Nepal since 2011. As Nepal was not part of Asean, India or China, it did not qualify for youth expedition funding and support. However, under the guidance of the YEP Advisory Panel in 2008, the youth council began supporting some community projects beyond Asean, India and China.

Over the past three years, it has supported an average of five overseas community projects to Nepal a year.

Dr Kumaran Rasappan, an orthopaedic surgical resident with the National Healthcare Group and a council member of the National Youth Council, says: "Overseas volunteerism is not a new trend, but we have seen increasing interest from young people to be involved in community projects in Nepal and other regional countries."

World Vision Singapore started a child sponsorship programme this year in Nepal, under the Sindhuli East Area Development Programme. Mrs Foo says: "This is our first



Friends (from left) Teo Zi Tong, Cristal Lim and Wong Kin Sin took over 1,000 photos of village children in Nepal and let the kids keep them.

ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

project in Nepal, although World Vision International has been working in Nepal since 1982."

She says Sindhuli is one of the poorest districts there. "The community suffers from poor quality of education. About 40 per cent of children under five years old are stunted and about 60 per cent of the people live below the poverty line."

Besides the desire to meet the country's needs, volunteers say a good working rela-

tionship with partner organisations in Nepal contributes to a positive experience.

Ms Oh Ai Ye, a lecturer at Singapore Polytechnic's School of Chemical and Life Sciences, has been on three trips to Nepal with the school, most recently as a teacher-in-charge.

"The organisation that I worked with was very transparent in the way it handled cash transactions and was very trustworthy. It also provided very good medical

support," she says.

For others, however, the intangible gains from a volunteer trip to Nepal are what keep them going back.

SMU student Elaine Teo, 21, spells out what these are for her: "Seeing shooting stars on a clear night, dancing with the local villagers, living humbly and learning what it means to be out of my comfort zone."

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Where eggs are a luxury

What began as one person's desire to do community service in Nepal has grown into a movement among some Singapore Management University (SMU) students.

Project Namaste I was born in 2006 after Ms Ivy Wong, then 21 and pursuing a double degree in business and accountancy at SMU, roped in more than 20 fellow students and travelled to a Nepalese village school in Kaski District. There, they conducted English learning activities and built a library for the students.

Since then, teams of SMU students have gone to Nepal every year to do community service, always with the aim of building the leadership potential of the Nepali youth. Project Namaste is now into its ninth edition, with a team going up later this year.

SundayLife! caught up with Mr Peng Bojie and Miss Elaine Teo (both right), team leaders of Project Namaste VIII, who returned from their trip in December. Both are from SMU's School of Accountancy and joined Project Namaste's seventh edition in 2012 as team members.

Says Mr Peng, 23: "I felt it would be good cultural exposure for myself. Not many people go to Nepal to do community service, in comparison to places such as China, Thailand and Vietnam."

Ms Teo, 21, adds: "I was drawn to Nepal as I saw it as a place with a lot of potential for help. I also wanted to experience doing community service overseas, after having done local community service projects."

Their experience in 2012 was so meaningful that they stepped up to be team leaders for last year's trip.

They partnered a local non-government organisation and World Vision Nepal to develop a sustainable education programme for teachers and students at a secondary school in Thumki Village, in the city of Pokhara. The programme saw 22 SMU students conducting English learning activities, daily reading sessions and basic computer classes, as well as helping to paint the school walls.



ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

The trips have been an eye-opener for the Singapore students. "We slept either in tents, classrooms or in the villagers' homes. We cooked our own meals in the open, did not shower much and held debriefing sessions around a campfire every night," Ms Teo says.

The team went to the city only on weekends to replenish paint supplies, stock up on groceries and to shower.

"We did not use our mobile phones much either," says Mr Peng. "The whole idea was to spend time with one another and the people there, and to immerse ourselves in their culture and way of life. This has been the focus of previous Namaste groups too."

This was also why they chose to cook mainly beans or vegetables with rice or potatoes for their daily meals, and rarely had meat.

"The villagers seldom get to eat meat. Even eggs are a luxury. They were so happy when we cooked steamed egg for them," says Mr Peng, who hopes to take his family to the village in future.

Ms Teo hopes Project Namaste will go on for years to come. She says: "People who have gone on the project are like members of a close family. We often talk about our experiences. Those who have been there before us speak of their trips as though they happened yesterday."

Village kids get own photos

After he found out that village children in Nepal have no childhood photographs, architecture assistant Teo Zi Tong, 27, decided to embark on a project to give more than 1,000 such children images of themselves.

He cannot remember who or what gave him the idea, but recalls being very struck by it. "I thought about how we have plenty of childhood pictures, but these children have none. I thought about how people on community service projects take lots of pictures of children, but these pictures are kept at home. I wanted the children to have pictures to call their own," he says.

He shared the idea with two friends, landscape architect Cristal Lim, 26, and cadet pilot Wong Kin Sin, 27.

Mr Wong says his interest was piqued the moment he found out about the project. "I thought it would be very meaningful for the children. We have smartphones and people here take selfies every day. Yet, for these children, their childhood may pass them by without any visual memory of it."

They decided the project would be an extension of a mission trip organised by Life Care Society, the community service arm of Singapore Life Church. Mr Teo had found out about the trip from his relatives, who are members of the church.

The trio's plan was to take the children's pictures on top of their volunteer work, which would see them documenting the church's efforts in reaching out to Aids sufferers and orphans in Nepal.

At one of the pre-trip briefings, they were told that they would meet about 1,000 village children.

They decided they would give the children Fujifilm Instax Mini instant camera prints, which were tear-proof and water-proof, instead of photographs.

They bought the film, an Instax printer and other related equipment. Each Instax print costs 68 cents, so the film cost of 1,200 pieces was \$816. To be safe, they bought more film.

Says Mr Teo: "We could have paid for this on our own, but we wanted to raise awareness about the cause."

He set up a blog (onphotoperchild-nepal.blogspot.sg) in February and raised the amount needed to buy the film and printer within 1½ weeks. They also managed to borrow two Instax cameras from friends.

The trio set off for the nine-day trip last month and all three say the photo project was a hit.

At one location, there were more than 300 village children who lined up to have their pictures taken.

Says Ms Lim: "Two of us were clicking the cameras non-stop, while Zi Tong was taking pictures of the children holding their pictures."

"Initially, some of the children did not know what was going on, but when we said 'hasnus' (please smile in Nepalese), they understood."

They taught the children to clasp the image between their palms, the way they would do their greeting, "Namaste" (hello in Nepalese). Heat from the palms causes the picture to develop faster and it ensures that the child is holding onto the image, Ms Lim adds.

Mr Wong says: "The photo was a foreign object to the children. They kept staring at it and holding it tight."

Due to the project's success, Mr Teo hopes they can sustain it in some way, perhaps in another place.

"Seeing the children smile when they received the photos was really satisfying. I felt we had not only given them a memory, but also joy."

Tough trek to raise funds for disabled

Two months ago, good friends Ashok Kumar (below left) and Ashik Ashokan (below right) thought of a way to raise funds for a charity, but could not get people to sponsor or donate money to their idea.

To help the Society for the Physically Disabled, they plan to trek up the Thorong La pass, the highest point of the Annapurna Himalayan Range in Nepal, next month. "We sent out 300 e-mail messages and letters in January and February to ask for sponsorship and donations, but we were rejected," says Mr Ashok.

Things turned around last month, after Red Bull Singapore came in as a sponsor, and StarHub said it would match donations dollar-for-dollar up to \$10,000. That amount was given by Mr Mohamed Abdul Jaleel, chief executive of Mini Environment Service Singapore, who heard about the cause through word-of-mouth.

The two men, both 23, have been friends since their schooldays at Innova Junior College. They say the idea to trek for a cause came after they scaled 3,210m-high Poon Hill in Nepal last May. They completed the climb without proper winterwear or a guide, and survived on just one meal a day.

When they returned, they were featured on TV and in a Tamil newspaper. They decided they would embark on another project. They chose the Society for the Physically Disabled as their beneficiary as they feel their upcoming trek parallels how the disabled literally "climb mountains" each day.

Mr Ashok, a business undergraduate at the Singapore Institute of Management, says: "For the disabled, even holding a spoon can be a huge challenge."

Their initial target amount was \$5,416, the height of the Thorong La pass in metres. They contacted corporate bodies and individuals for sponsorship and donations. "It was extremely disappointing and depressing. We kept getting turned down," says Mr Ashik, a communications and new media undergraduate at the National University of Singapore.

Hope was ignited when Red Bull Singapore confirmed its sponsorship. Mr Lam Pin Woon, director of Allswell Trading, the brand representative for Red Bull here, says: "Ashik and Ashok embody the core values of Red Bull, that of pushing one's limits to achieve bold aspirations in all aspects of one's life."

Red Bull will cover the expenses for the duo's journey, which is estimated to cost \$5,000. The two men raised the fund-raising target to \$17,769, the height of the Thorong La pass in feet.

After Mr Jaleel made the \$10,000 contribution, which StarHub matched with another \$10,000, the duo upped their fund-raising target to \$50,000. They have raised close to \$30,000 to date.

They have been promoting the cause on their website (www.heart2climb.com) and Facebook page.

Ms Helen Tay, senior manager for fund-raising and volunteer management at the Society for the Physically Disabled, says: "Funds raised through Heart2Climb will enable the society to continue providing affordable services to 4,500 beneficiaries."

Of the upcoming climb, Mr Ashik says: "There are risks. But even if something bad happens to us, it is worth it."



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