

## **Taken from Rebecca Morton's blog about her study abroad trip to India**

**August 17, 2008**

### **"T-Minus Two Weeks"**

That's right, as most of you know I'm headed to India in two weeks for the start of my semester abroad. Over the next four months, the Tibetan and Himalayan Studies program, organized by the School for International Training (SIT), will take me through some of India, Nepal, and Tibet, to study Tibetan culture, language, history, and current events.

In order to keep you informed while I'm traveling, I'll be updating this blog as often as possible (depending on internet availability). That way, I won't harass you with large group e-mails, and you can check in with me whenever you want. Feel free to respond whenever you feel like it, or just send me an e-mail (bkayemo@gmail.com), as I'm sure it will be great to hear from home while I am away!

Thanks to everyone for your interest in my trip, and your encouragement and excitement for me as I get ready to leave!

**August 30, 2008**

### **"So, are you ready to go?"**

Generally, when asked this question before large and daunting trips, for the sake of the inquirer, I lie. I say, "Yea, I'm ready! This is the trip of a lifetime, how could I not be ready?" But in my head, the mental check list appears, and as I go down it I realize, maybe this should be simply called a "list" because I don't see any actual check marks on the damn thing. I mean yea, I have all the necessary paraphernalia one might need for 15 weeks of the unknown... a new kick ass gore-tex jacket that will protect me from the elements, hiking boots recently broken-in on the way to the summit of Mt. Washington with Emma, a journal with countless empty pages to be filled with brand new experiences, a visa for India, the appropriate amount of money and passport pictures to get me into Nepal three times, and a lifetime supply of malaria pills which I was informed with extreme caution might make my skin, which is apparently resembles "a slice of white bread" (thanks Dr. Doyle) more susceptible to sunlight. So yea, sure, now that I've bought new SPF 45 sunscreen, I'm ready... in a physical/materialistic sense.

But emotionally and mentally ready? Ha, now that is a different story. Every few hours I ponder what it will feel like to get on the plane tomorrow, wave to Hannah and her mom at the airport and check in for the days of flights it will take me and everyone else to get to Delhi... then I immediately stop thinking about it because I realize my heart has started beating pretty freaking fast, and the temperature in the room feels like it has risen about 50 degrees in the last 20 seconds.

So I'm sorry folks, but I can't lie to you anymore when you ask me if I'm ready. To say the least, I'm a ball of nerves and excitement, bouncing back and forth from immeasurable excitement to sheer terror of the crazy journey I am about to step into.

Poor Mr. Fine got the brunt of it today when he asked frankly, "You're not nervous, are you?" and I couldn't help but blurt, with an uneasy smile, "Nervous? Nope. I'm freaking the f\*ck out."

### **September 3, 2008**

#### **"Apparently it is warm in Delhi..."**

And by warm, I mean scorching. You find yourself wishing for a monsoon if only to clean some of the sweat off your body. But despite the heat, it's been a nice 24 hours in the capital of India. After two days of time travel, we arrived at the Delhi airport on Tuesday, where we were picked up by our two Academic Directors, Pam and Manu, in a large charter bus clearly marked "TOURIST" on the front, and taken to our guest house. It has been nice to settle in a little bit with the people here. There are a total of 27 students from all over the states, all ages, and tons of different interests and reasons for choosing this study abroad program.

Today we all woke up early, with a little help from the jet lag, hopped in the "TOURIST" bus, and spent the day at a hotel for our first full day of orientation. Here we learned that we won't be trekking through Tibet as planned because of the current political climate. Obviously a HUGE bummer, but also a chance to explore another amazing place: Mustang. The Kingdom of Mustang is located in north-east Nepal and only allows 1,000 tourists in per year. Due to lack of ground transportation, the capital is only accessible by a 3-4 day trek in and another 3-4 back out. Yea, you just take a minute to think about that... I know I did.

Orientation was also used to talk about the normal entry process into a journey like ours. But discussions of culture shock and homesickness, the academic challenges that are to come, and how everyone is a little nervous about it all, made me feel a little more comfortable around my fellow students. Sometimes it is just nice to know that the girl sitting across from you is probably just as much of a nervous wreck as you are. Also, I had my first conversation that lasted for more than 5 painstakingly awkward minutes today. I admit, I am probably way more excited for that than seems normal. But it is moments like those that make you suddenly realize, this is going to be the trip of a lifetime.

### **September 6, 2008**

#### **"Losing One Sneaker"**

Losing one sneaker is like losing one of your favorite earrings right before a you want to wear them; looking in your sock drawer after the first snowfall, and realizing one of your warmest wool socks has gone missing. It is out of the blue, unexpected, and in some ways heartbreaking. I had expected to wear my sneakers today in the anticipation that it might rain, we might be walking a lot, or hey- you never know when you might step in a pile of cow crap. But as I looked at my backpack last night, I realized one was gone. I must have lost it while shoving my bag onto the over night train the previous night. The remaining shoe just looks so lonely now...if only I had lost both, they could have been good for someone somewhere. But instead, I'm holding onto a solitary sneaker... and for some reason, it is hard to even think about parting with it. What if I throw it away, and for some reason, in some act of universal randomness, somehow I am returned with my lost sneaker? I know it is ridiculous, and completely unlikely, but for now, I just don't want

to toss it. Go to your winter drawer, look at all those gloves and mittens missing their pairs... you'll know what I mean.

But other than my shoe dilemma, life here could not be better. Thursday night we took the overnight train out of Delhi. Navigating the train, and the cars was somewhat more stressful than I had imagined, but after a three hour delay we arrived at our destination unscathed. Here we hopped into the cars waiting for us, creating a little SIT caravan up to Dharamsala. First, I would like to say that the driving here is CRAZY. People are always honking horns to let you know they're coming up from behind or about to pass. The drivers were speeding along roads that you were confident were one-way and one-lane until trucks came barreling at you from the other direction. About an hour into the ride, we were held up by a protest in the streets. Apparently the textile workers in the area hadn't been paid in ten days. We stood in the crowds and waited until the rally ended, and then finished the rest of the three hour ride up to Dharamsala.

Oh Dharamsala, there is really no way to properly explain it. Upon entering, I immediately felt calm. Not because it isn't busy, because it is- the narrow mountain streets are lined with people coming in and out of shops, hurrying down the two main streets- but because it feels like a community the minute you walk into it all. The past two days have been filled with exploration of foods and shops, and several more orientation classes. I already love to sit in cafes, and look out the window at the sprawling valleys below. At the end of the monsoon season, the air is filled with a chilly humidity and the constant threat of rain. We will reside here for the next four weeks. I am already sad that we will have to leave.

### **September 11, 2008** **"Amala and Pala"**

Four nights ago we were introduced to our homestay families for the rest of our month long stay in Dharamsala. Before the start of this trip I imagined my homestay family with little children, and a small house. I had decided that they would be loud and boisterous, and I looked forward to my homestay mother picking me up from the group lunch and welcoming me home. But I did not get what I had imagined...

On Monday, Pala (Father) picked me up from Hotel Tibet to take me to my new home. At first it was awkward, neither one of us really knowing what to say to each other, but I was comforted by the enthusiasm in his smile. We walked down to Kanghi, the government area about 30 minutes below Upper Dharamsala, with a few other homestay families, not really saying much. As we entered our home, I realized it was somewhat smaller than what I imagined... two rooms: one a kitchen, and one doubling as a bedroom and a shrine room. Both rooms combined are perhaps a little larger than our dining room in New York. As I studied my surroundings and tried to adjust, Pala explained the pieces of the shrine, introduced me to his four children through the family portrait on the bedside table, and told me Amala (Mother) would be returning from work soon. I got out my homework, and Pala helped me practice my Tibetan alphabet. As we recited the letters, "ka, kha, ga, nga, cha, chha, ja, nya..." I could feel myself settling in to the situation. Here I was, sitting with a father, getting help on my homework... this was something I recognized.

Pala has proven to be an amazing teacher. He helps me with Tibetan each night, showed me yoga breathing techniques that he and Amala practice every morning, took me on a tour of the government area and the local monastery. Despite our amazing Academic Directors and Language teachers, Pala has become my favorite tutor of them all. He approaches each lesson with care, and laughs with me when I have absolutely no comprehension (which is admittedly very often).

When I met Amala her quiet nature was a stark contrast to what I had envisioned, but her patience with me and her laughter at me are constantly uplifting. She is always cooking for Pala and I, filling me to the brim with dal, tea, rice, tea, eggs, chipati, and more tea.. She called me fat the other day, grabbing her belly- "You are just like me!" she laughed. Never had I thought I would actually feel good when being called fat. She has promised to teach me some Tibetan cooking on my days off... everyone get ready for momos!

My two room home is becoming more comfortable as the days go by. I look forward to sitting in the shrine room and reading as Pala says his mantras and prayers; watching soap operas in Hindi with Amala as she cooks (there is really no need to understand what they are saying...); eating dinner with them and laughing, laughing, laughing at all the moments that I really have no idea what is going on. It is in these moments that I realize that at times, perhaps when we least expect it, reality has the ability to surpass imagination.

PS. I found my sneaker.

**September 28, 2008**

**"Wearing Chupas and Making Momos"**

The past three weeks in Dharamsala have flown by. They days are filled with classes and seminars, group lunches, and spending time with our homestay families. I love my Pala and Amala more everyday, and it is such a comfort to go "home" in the evenings and know that they will be there, ready to fill me up with dal and chipatis.

A few weeks ago, Amala taught me how to make momos (aka God's gift to Tibetan food). They're like dumplings... spinach, potatoes, garlic, onions, and cheese wrapped in dough and folded into crescent shapes. Then you steam them or fry them before eating. You can fill them with anything; some have meat, some just cheese, and many with vegetables. Caroline (God's gift to me on this trip) and I dream about opening a momo shop in Dharamsala and filling them with all sorts of goodness- fried ice cream momos, apple pie momos, pumpkin pie momos.... mmmmmm. Clearly we are already dreaming about Thanksgiving around here.

Caroline and I also splurged and bought ourselves chupas to wear to the Dalai Lama's teachings last week. The chupa is the traditional dress that the women wear here.. usually a solid color wrap around dress, with a thin cotton blouse underneath. They're pretty tight, and really only flattering on the skinny Tibetan girls, but we got them anyway and wore them to the teachings last Thursday. The teachings were amazing... we got in pretty early, and found seats near the isle where His Holiness walks by. As the

time neared 9 am, everyone shifted to face the isle, and you could feel the excitement of people as they anticipated the Dalai Lama's entrance. A little after 9 he walked from the steps of his home and headed for the temple, all smiles in his maroon and yellow robes. The Tibetans lowered their heads in respect and to accept his blessing, while all of us Western students couldn't help but stare, wide-eyed and smiling as he walked past. He was a lot shorter than I had imagined, and he moved pretty quickly for a man in his 70s. After he walked past, we could only see him on the television screen, but his voice filled the temple grounds. Every few minutes he would giggle, as only the Dalai Lama is known to do, and it didn't matter if you could see him or not, because you could feel his warmth in his laughter, and suddenly you felt perfectly content to just sit there and listen.

This past weekend we split into groups and traveled to different settlements in the area. Caroline, Sarah, Helen, Leigh, Tenzin, and I headed to Bir to study the settlement there for three days. I haven't laughed as hard on this whole trip, as I have this past weekend. It all started when we stopped the taxi for a bathroom break, and within five steps of the car I had somehow slipped and fallen into a bramble bush. Covered in scratches, and trying not to wet my pants from laughing so hard, I got up and started to walk down the hill again to find a tree to hide behind. I immediately slipped again, and somehow landed with my feet above my head. After we had finally stopped laughing and all gone pee, we got back in the car and finished our 2 hour ride to Bir. We got there, had lunch at the Joy Cafe, and spent the rest of the day exploring the settlement. We visited government buildings, the noodle factory in town, the western style hospital, and the Tibetan medicine doctor (Men-Tsee-Kang). The Tibetan doctor gave us each a check-up, taking our pulse and blood pressure. She told Leigh and I that the "fatness was coming," which basically meant that because our digestion was off we were going to be gaining some weight. Awesome. She also told me that I had weak nerves, and gave me some medicine to help with that. It tastes like herbal chalk, which is lovely.

I woke up the next morning to find that the Joy Cafe had left me with anything but joy, and I spent the whole morning the bathroom. I felt better by lunch and joined back up with the girls to get more research done. Sunday was finished off with the scariest taxi ride any of us have ever been a part of. The roads to and from Bir are like California's Route 1 except with no pavement or guardrail, and again really only room for one lane. I'm also pretty sure the driver had aspirations of being a stunt driver in Hollywood car chases and figured he would use this trip to practice. Needless to say, we had to pull over a few times due to car sickness. At one point, while I was on all fours reviewing what I had for breakfast, a bus full of Indians drove by, honking and waving at me. Without giving it much thought, I yelled some English profanities, while simultaneously giving them the Tibetan hand gesture for "shut your asshole." Cross-cultural learning at its finest.

Today we're back in Dharamsala, and I'm enjoying breakfast at the Green Cafe with Caroline, who has clearly become my other half here. It is our last week in Dharamsala before we head to Nepal and Mustang. I'm sad to be leaving here, but am looking forward to the next leg of the journey. Needless to say I'll be investing in some dramamine before we head out.

**November 11, 2008**

**“And From Here, We Just Walk...”**

Early in the morning on October 16th we landed in Jomsom, a small town at the base of the Annapurna circuit in Nepal. The air was crisp, and the moon still hung in the sky as the sun rose around us. Mountains stretched out beyond Jomsom in every direction; layers upon layers of them, the highest peaks covered in snow. We started our trip with high hopes and excitement. The first day was a simple trek through the barren river bed that formed a wide valley between hills. The dry air whipped through the valley, giving you a sense of just how strong the elements can be. By day three we had started to ascend, climbing in altitude and difficulty. Each day we looked forward to reaching camp at whatever small village we would inhabit for the night. The sherpas and porters would be there already, cooking dinner and helping to set up the tents for the night. The donkeys, finally free of their saddles and heavy loads, rolled happily in the dust.

After about ten days we reached our destination of Lo Mahntang, the main city in the area of Upper Mustang. Only about 1,000 tourists are allowed into Upper Mustang per year, and it had been quite some time since we had seen other foreigners. With three days to rest, we got to explore the community and get to know a little bit more about the culture of the Mustang region. Some of the more strong stomached students even helped to slaughter some yaks. Needless to say, I didn't participate. But even in Mahntang, the days flew by. Lecture, field work, and presentations took up time, and soon we were headed on our way back to Jomsom.

We took a different route on the way back, but it felt very similar to the walk there. Each day we pushed one foot in front of the other. Sometimes we walked in small groups, and sometimes there were hours where you were just on your own. You could not see a single person in front of you, or anyone behind. The only option was to trust that they were there, behind some mountain pass you had not come across yet, or hidden in a valley you hadn't reached the brink of yet. In these hours your mind just wandered- to home and the past, to the future, to friends and family, to the beauty of the hills and scenery around you. Although there was barely any vegetation, the surroundings were always changing. We passed through sandstone and slate, rocks stained red from iron, and whole sides of mountain that sparkled with shades of blue and silver. The silence enveloped you, the only sounds audible were your own breath and the shuffle of your feet as they trudged along.

At the end of the trip, we were all astounded with ourselves. In 20 days we had hiked 85 miles, reached elevations above 4,000 meters, braved an 11 hour day, spent hours in total isolation, and somehow still lived to tell the tale. But now, as I look back to those weeks, I am less amazed with the numbers and statistics, and more astounded by the relationships that formed during those countless hours of walking. At some point, each and every one of us reached a breaking point... I'll admit to sometimes crying with relief when we reached camp for the night, to feeling completely hopeless as we attempted to cross yet another mountain pass. But in these moments of distress and what you are convinced is insanity finally setting in, there was always someone by your side to pull you back to your feet. Even in the hours when you couldn't see who was in front of you, you knew they were there and that they would not actually leave you behind. Before

we left, I remember being scared about the social aspect of the trek- sticking 26 students in the middle of nowhere with no outside communication seemed like a recipe for disaster. But instead of becoming alienated from one another, our bonds grew stronger than I had thought was possible.

It was an unexpected shock when last week we seperated from each other to start on our independent research. Some of us are in Dharamsala again, others remained in Kathmandu, and a few traveled to places we had not yet been: Ladakh, Everest Base Camp. While I feel at home in Dharamsala again, it is a challenge not to miss the home we had found in our nomadic lifestyle of Mustang: the home we had found in each other.