I imagined Nepal would be a sort of Magical place. Buddhist temples on mountain tops, Sadhu holymen with painted faces and ornamental jewelery, and Mt. Everest, topped with Tibetan prayer flags. I went because I wanted something different. I wanted to get away from my cushy lifestyle and be somewhere as different as I could get. This mountaintop society seemed to fit the bill. The real Nepal was much different. Landing in Kathmandu, I realized how different it really was. Nepal is more of a place trapped between two times, struggling with development. There’s still magic in the place, but it’s more complicated.

The Cornell-Nepal Study Program (CNSP) program house is in Kirtipur, a suburb of Kathmandu, and right next to the central campus of Nepal’s largest university. There are three buildings, the boys hostel, girls hostel, and the program house where meals are eaten and classes are held. Each American student has a Nepali roommate, a student from the university. Most of the semester is spent here at the program house, with lots of classtime. This is to make up for the periods of time when we are away from CNSP and aren’t taking classes. When we aren’t at CNSP we were traveling all over the country. There are three organized trips and then the independent research period. The first trip it to Lumbini (the birth place of the Buddha) and Chitwan (location of a tropical national forest), both in southern Nepal. The second trip is to a rural village for a homestay, and the third is a trekking trip in the Annapurna range. Finally, each student picks a location and a topic and conducts their own research anywhere in Nepal for 4 weeks. These all provide an opportunity to get a sense of Nepal beyond
Kathmandu, and anyone who has been to Nepal will tell you, “Get out of Kathmandu”. Kathmandu can be dirty and noisy and busy, not the quaint mountaintop I was expecting.

The semester I was at CNSP there were 11 Americans. This was a pretty large group size for the program and had its benefits and drawbacks. We all got very close and it was easy to stay in our own culture bubble. Because of this I didn’t emerge myself as fully into the culture and my Nepali didn’t improve as much as it could have.

One of the things I was surprised by was the government. Nepali politics are much more complicated than our own. The country has countless ethnic and language groups scattered across the country. Each mountaintop and each valley has its own culture and language, and there are many mountains. The upper-caste Brahmans, however, have long been disproportionately in control of politics, and there are currently strong movements to put more power in the hands of the traditional ethnic groups, sometimes in ways that marginalize the Brahmans. One of the head faculty of CNSP, Dambar, was one of the people who developed the country’s electoral system, so we were able get a first hand look into the complexities of the current debates and challenges.

I went hoping to learn about development and I was definitely able to do that, through my own experiences and through those of the others in the program. When we went trekking we stayed in guesthouses along the trail run by local families. It occurred to me that these people had been living in these remote mountain communities for hundreds of years, completely shut off from the majority of the rest of the planet. Then, in the matter of a few decades, they became hotel owners in the most popular trekking
region of Nepal, interacting with people from every corner of the world, from dozens of countries, on a regular basis. In Manegau, where we conducted our rural homestay, our new families were living in very much the same way they had for centuries, except that they had cell phones, bought single-use shampoo packets, and many of the men traveled to the Middle East to find work. I realized how complex development was and so different than how it occurred in today’s higher income countries. The more advanced technology is arriving first and the intermediate technologies and lifestyles are totally being skipped in many areas.

Living in Nepal for a semester was an amazing experience and I would recommend it to anybody. CNSP was a great support system while getting to know the culture and the language. I learned a lot about Nepal and its neighbors, but many of the lessons of Nepal are universal. Upon returning, I compared experiences with people who went to other developing countries and many of our experiences were the same or similar. I was also able to bring real world examples to my classes in the following semester. Ultimately, I had a very unexpected experience, but it was exactly what I was looking for. My comfort zone was pushed and experienced a developing nation, its problems, potential solutions, and was able to take them home and apply them.