Nepal

For my international internship I decided to go to study abroad in Nepal through Cornell Study Abroad. I was really interested in Nepal after having spent some time in Asia previously, and really wanted to travel to another country in Asia. I am also really interested in rice systems, so traveling to another country where rice is the prominent agriculture system appealed to me. Nepal stood out to me due to its beautiful landscape, unique culture, and agriculture systems. In terms of deciding to study abroad, I wanted to be able to get the most out of my experience and to be able to fully get a sense of the country I traveled to. Rather than spending just 8 weeks abroad, I wanted something where I could spend more time, without having to spend a lot of money. Studying abroad fit completely, and I was able to go to Nepal for four months without needing to spend an excess amount of money.

My experience in Nepal was both exciting and exhausting. Studying abroad can be sometimes a challenging experience, but at the same time unforgettable and life changing. The biggest part of studying abroad in Nepal is the combination of classes and field trips. The program is designed to give you a complete look at different parts of Nepal. You will not always be stuck in a classroom all day, and will be given numerous opportunities as a group to go out and experience Nepal. The field trips that we took make the whole experience just that much better. During the program, we traveled to Lumbini, Chitwan National Park, Gorkha district, Pokhara, as well as trekking for a week in the Annapurna Conservation Area. You also get to do many day trips around Kathmandu to see many of the historic sites that exist there.
While the field trips definitely make the whole experience worthwhile, the classes also help complete the experience. During the four months, you take two language classes, oral and composition, a contemporary issues class on Nepal, and two classes on research and design. Part of the class work is being able to design your own research question, and then go do three weeks of independent field research on a topic of your choice (you get a translator so it is not as scary as it sounds!). The ability to do my own independent research and be able to go in the field was an absolutely amazing experience. It probably is the only time as an undergraduate you will be given money and guidance in doing your own field research in a foreign country.

The living experience was also a really enjoyable part of the trip. Unlike other study abroad experiences, you live in a hostel, and all of your food and living expenses are completely paid for by the study abroad fees. There are people who live in the hostel who do your laundry, clean up, and in general are there as a support system to help you with anything you need. All of the staff members and cooks are some of the nicest people I have ever met. You get placed with a Nepali roommate, and throughout the course they become your unofficial guide on all things Nepal. I loved having little conversations with my roommate and getting to tell her about home and to then have her tell me about her life and experiences, and practice my Nepalese with her. The unique experience of being in close contact with a Nepali student every single day helps you develop a stronger connection to Nepal.

You also get the opportunity to experience different holidays and festivals in Nepal. Throughout the experience, you either get to take day trips to different festivals. I went in the fall, and I was able to go Pashupatinath Temple during Teej, was able to celebrate Dashain in a village in Gorkha district, and was able to travel around Kathmandu to celebrate Tihar, the festival of lights. You will get plenty of opportunities to dress up in local clothes, try out
different traditions and ceremonies, and do lots and lots of dancing. You really get to have a very real non-tourist experience with religion and culture in Nepal. You are not just a tourist viewing these festivals. You get to actively participate with other Nepalis in very authentic settings.

But it was also challenging living in Nepal. Being a developing country, there is limited access to electricity, hot water (or water), and other comforts we enjoy in the western world. There are planned electricity outages everyday for anywhere between 5 to 8 hours. The first couple of weeks, it is really hard to get adjusted to this as a westerner. But after a few weeks, it is amazing how quickly this becomes the norm. It encourages you to get out and explore more of Kathmandu and Kirtipur. Within a few weeks, I was able to get completely use to not having consistent access to hot water, electricity, or wifi.

In terms of being a woman, traveling to Nepal or any other South Asian nation can be challenging. Double standards between men and women definitely still exist, and as a woman you will have moments where you may feel uncomfortable. Also, being a foreigner in general, in a part of Kathmandu that rarely seeks tourists, will make you stand out, and it is not uncommon to walk down the street on a busy afternoon and to have everyone stop and watch you. There will be times where you feel you are getting unwanted attention from men, especially younger men. It is something that can be really challenging and was something myself, and the other two women in the program, had to deal with. It is definitely something that you can deal with and manage, and I never once felt as if I was in danger or threatened. While I did experience unwanted attention, overall it did not negatively affect my experience in Nepal. After learning how to handle myself and deal with circumstances of unwanted attention I was able to go about my day-to-day business with no problems.
It is also important to note, that since you will be close to Tribhuvan University there will be students who will be excited to see you and will want to practice their English with you, or just get to know you as a foreigner. Do not always feel threatened by people who approach you, as long as you are in a safe location during the day. One of the most memorable experiences I had was when I decided to take a late afternoon walk around Tribhuvan University by myself, and had two Nepali men approach me. Initially hesitant, I ignored them. But after realizing my hesitation, they told me that they are English majors at the university, and were excited to see someone who possibly spoke English to practice their English with. I ended up having a 30 conversation with them about the upcoming presidential election, and got to talk with them about Nepali politics and culture. Not all attention will be threatening, so do not feel as if you need to avoid interacting with local people in the town.

Language is also an equally challenging and exciting part of studying abroad in Nepal. For the program through Cornell, and other study abroad programs through other universities and agencies I learned about, becoming fully engrossed into the language is a really important aspect of the experience. The language classes can at times be really challenging. For the first couple of weeks, you take four hours of language classes a day, and then two hours every day, sometimes six days a week, after that. There will be many times where you will be thrown into difficult situations (like having to go interview women in a village in Nepalese after only three weeks of classes) where you will be able to really learn the language and challenge yourself. The teachers however are fantastic, and due to the fact the nature of the program, my classes consisted of another student, the teacher, and me, which gave us a very personal experience.

All in all, I had a really amazing experience in Nepal. I was able to challenge myself, try new things, learn about an entirely different culture and make great Nepali and American friends.
You leave the program with a sense that you fully got to experience the country as a local, not just as a foreigner visiting the country. I would recommend this program to anyone with an interest in either Nepal or Asian countries.