
“CELEBRATE BIGU” VOLUNTEER TRIP

March 2019



In 2019, we will celebrate the **10th year** of our connection with the Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in Bigu, Nepal! To mark the occasion, we hope to share this unique, gratifying and impactful experience as many people as possible to experience. And we are matching each trip to Bigu with a special optional R&R opportunity. We hope YOU will join us!

A Decade of Changes

The **Tashi Chime Gatsal Gompa (Nunnery)** in Bigu, Nepal is home to over 70 Tibetan Buddhist nuns, ranging in age from seven to over 80 years of age. It was founded in 1934 by a lama from Bhutan and headman Nima Pasang Sherpa, primarily for the local populace of Sherpa, Tamang and Thangmi. Our first encounter with Bigu Nunnery was in 2010 when we led our first volunteer team there.

Life is not easy for the nuns of Bigu. It is in a very remote location, not easily accessible, and without many modern conveniences enjoyed by other monasteries and nunneries in Nepal. During the first six years, we saw them make remarkable steps towards improving the everyday lives of the women and girls in this community (thanks to generous donors and volunteers).

Then two devastating earthquakes hit Nepal in the spring of 2015. The second earthquake of 7.3 magnitude, was centered on Bigu. Nearly everything at the Nunnery - the nuns housing and all their possessions, the communal kitchen, the temple and many of its religious relics, the latrines, the schools - were destroyed or made uninhabitable. Most of their garden areas were buried in rubble, leaving them without supplemental vegetables so critical to their diets. Rooms where they were able to host trekkers and volunteers – a critical source of income for the nunnery – were gone. A difficult life was made



immeasurably more difficult for this community of women and girls.

The Nunnery has come a long way in its recovery from the earthquakes of 2015, once again thanks to its many kind-hearted and generous donors and our teams of volunteers who contributed significant funds through their trip fees. The nuns are now living in warm, dry, earthquake-proof housing complete with new beds to sleep on. The communal kitchen is back in use, (mostly) smoke-free and efficient. They are in the process of building multiple new latrines and solar showers. They have cleared their garden areas and are growing some vegetables again – and a new high-quality greenhouse is being installed this year. The school buildings are open again, and regular classes are again being taught. They have constructed new lodgings for volunteers and trekkers. They even have a new medical clinic for the nuns and villagers of Bigu! Pujas (prayers) are taking place in the former dining hall while the nuns wait for the new temple to be built.

And the population of the nunnery is changing. Our 1st year, there were a handful of nuns under the age of 13, but now there are more than 20. Many of these girls came from families who could not care for them, largely due to the impact of the earthquakes on families who had already been struggling. They are now being educated and well cared for.

For before and after pictures, see the accompanying pdf "Bigu Thru the Years 2018"

How We'll Help

While progress is being made to restore the lives of the nuns, there is still so much we can do! There may be some construction projects that we can work on, but the most impactful way to spend your time – for you and for the nuns – is by participating in their daily lives. That could mean helping to teach English, working in the gardens, minor repairs to the greenhouses and other buildings, milking and tending the cows. The nuns love to have help in the kitchen too – and you may learn a few new recipes to try at home! You are also welcome to attend any of their pujas (prayers) in the temple.

You can take time to go hiking / walking to experience real life in the area (and perhaps take a few young nuns with you for fun), sit and have tea with some of the older nuns (a great opportunity for them to practice their conversational English). You can paint, draw, meditate, do yoga, take pictures, read. Or just sit and "be" in the peace of the beautiful surroundings. This is the real beauty of being at the Nunnery, if you are prepared to embrace it.

What we do will also depend on the skills and interests of the volunteers. If you have a particular skill or interest, let us know and we will work with HGO to see if we can find ways to put them to use (which may take planning and bringing your own supplies). For example, if like to knit or sew, you can teach these skills to the



younger nuns (but you will need to bring wool and needles). If you have a medical or first aid background, you might teach first aid or help at the medical clinic. If like to garden, please bring gloves and hand tools (extras if you can, to share with the nuns and they will garden with you). If you would like to teach conversational English, you will need to think about lesson plans and perhaps bring some of your own teaching aids.



The important thing to understand is that this is not like many volunteer trips where your time is planned for you. **This is a very self-directed experience.** Each day you can decide what you'd like to do, how you'd like to help, and how much time you'd like to spend doing it.

Even with the best planning, be prepared that things often won't go as expected. For example, we may plan to help with a construction project - but when we arrive, we find the local workers have taken a holiday and there's no construction being done. We might plan to teach but find the student nuns are all taking exams or we've arrived during a holiday and there are no classes. We may plan to garden but then it rains. (etc, etc, etc)

If you anticipate that potential disruptions may happen, you remain flexible and willing to “go with the flow”, you will have a fabulous time!

That's Not the Only Way You'll Be Helping

Your trip fee includes a significant portion of donation. **\$2000** of your fee goes directly to supporting [American Foundation with Children with AIDS \(AFCA\)](#). Additionally, **\$200** of your trip fee will be a direct donation to **Himalayan Guge Organization (HGO)**, the Nepalese logistics partner that we have worked with for many years to take teams to Bigu. **HGO** is a small Nepalese aid agency that provide medical and education support to underserved communities in Nepal, especially Tibetan herbal medicine. They also have a long-term relationship with the Bigu Nunnery.

The Schedule

For most of us, it will take a while to fly to Kathmandu where we will meet up – typically arriving on the third calendar day - due to long flights, time differences, and some flights to Nepal requiring an overnight layover. You'll want to plan that carefully, as some countries require that you have a visa in advance to leave the airport for a hotel, while others do not require any sort of visa.

Once you arrive in Nepal, the schedule will include:

- two nights in Kathmandu to meet the representatives of HGO to finalize preparations for our trip to Bigu
- two days for travelling to Bigu;
- six or seven days in Bigu;
- two days to travel back to Kathmandu;
- one night in Kathmandu after returning from Bigu for sightseeing and shopping

OPTIONAL TRIP TO LHASA, TIBET. For those of you with extra time and a desire to explore a bit of Tibet, HGO can help arrange a trip to Lhasa from Kathmandu! Lhasa, the second most populous city on the Tibetan plateau, has more than 1300 years of history. It is also one of the highest cities in the world with elevation about 3650m above sea level. Lhasa is well known for its breathtaking awe-inspiring mountain views and many world heritage sites, including the Jokhang temple considered to be the holiest in Tibet, the Potala Palace, Norbu Lingkha (the summer residence of former Dalai Lamas) and Ramoche temple. Lhasa literally means "place of the gods". **If you are interested in this trip, let us know!**

Getting to Bigu

While the remoteness of the nunnery is what makes it so special, it can also create challenges that will test your **patience, stamina and adaptability**. If these potential challenges don't concern you – if they just add to the adventure and the stories you will tell - then you are already a great candidate for this adventure!

You will have the option of choosing from several ways to get to Bigu. All options start with an all-day "rough-and-tumble", long, uncomfortable jeep ride on the first day. And then on the second day, you will have the option of:

- 1) taking a jeep the rest of the way to Bigu (another 3 hours in the jeep on equally bad or worse roads);
- 2) a challenging 4-5-hour hike and then taking a jeep the last half of the way; or
- 3) completing the full grueling hike into Bigu – about 7 hours of fun that is OH SO SATISFYING to complete!
- 4) NEW THIS YEAR - Taking a helicopter (extra charge dependent on the number of people in the helicopter). ***If you are interested in this option, please let us know, as it will take some extra coordination.***



The full hike to Bigu is long and arduous, with over 4500 feet of elevation gain. ***Don't let the physical challenge discourage you from trekking.*** You do not need to be a super-athlete to complete the trek, but you **do need to do some training in advance** and be prepared for a long, challenging day. Believe us – the reward for your efforts will be repaid immeasurably by the views and opportunity to walk through small villages along the way!

To help you decide which way you'd like to get there, please carefully review the accompanying document "[Preparing for the Bigu Trek](#)". It will provide you with a clear overview of the trek and what you will need to do to prepare for it. **About 30 days before we go, we'll need a decision from you as to whether you'll stay in the jeep for the entire trip or attempt the trek**, so that HGO can make the necessary logistical arrangements.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED: Because the road and trail conditions are so unpredictable, you always need to be prepared for changes to the planned route to Bigu. Roads may be closed, hiking paths may be blocked, accommodations may be closed. And it's not uncommon for the jeeps to break down, road construction to impede passage and blockages by other vehicles on the single-track mountain roads. The weather can also be unpredictable causing planned routes to have to change last minute. Any or all of this can extend the uncomfortable jeep ride or alter the hike.



Accommodations

For the night we spend enroute to Bigu, we will stay in a **very basic**, local hotel or lodge in sleeping bags. There will be no running water (except for one communal sink), no western-style toilets, and no plug-ins for recharging. You will definitely have a real Nepalese hotel experience!

Once we reach Bigu, we will be staying in shared rooms in the nunnery guest quarters. The accommodations are again basic (outside latrine) – but there is electricity in each room. There are also now solar showers available, so you can have a warm (maybe not hot) shower!

Trip Cost: \$3500

Your fees cover most of your expenses while in-country. Included are the following:

- Donation to the Bigu Tashi Chime Gatsal Nunnery as well as our in-country coordinating partner HGO
- Breakfasts, dinners and accommodations in Kathmandu; All meals and accommodations en-route to and in Bigu
- In-country transportation, to and from the airport as well as to and from Bigu
- Coordination/administrative costs

The trip fees **do not include** airfare from your home to the host country; accommodations outside of the official trip dates; tips for our guides / drivers / porters; medical / emergency evacuation insurance; trip cancellation insurance; visa fees; vaccinations, or any other costs not listed above.

The reality

This trip is not for everyone. Along with the challenges of getting to and being in Bigu, just travelling in Nepal can be risky. Roads are narrow and typically in poor condition and driving around the country can frankly be a bit scary. Nepal is prone to earthquakes; no one knows when the next one might happen. Earthquakes and monsoon rains can make hillsides unstable; rock and landslides are not uncommon.

We are not trying to scare anyone away. In our opinion, anything can happen to anyone anywhere. But we want to be sure you know what you are signing up for. To us – and to all of those who have travelled with us to the nunnery in the past – the experiences you will have spending time with the nuns in this pristine, breathtaking place and the pride you will feel on completing the hike – **absolutely makes it all so worth it!**



If you've made it this far, we
know you'll love it in Bigu!

We hope you'll join us!!