



The Lepchas are very special people, who live in the remote foothills of the Himalayas in northern India. Gap year projects and volunteer opportunities with AV give you the chance to help them conserve their unique and ancient culture and experience a very different part of India, away from the bustling cities. They are a highly cultured tribe who lead a traditionally simple way of life. Wanting to preserve their identity, they have built tiny cultural centres, or 'night schools', in each village where children are taught Lepcha traditions. If you are looking for a truly unique cultural experience then volunteering with the Lepcha tribe may be for you. As an AV volunteer you will become part of the community, helping with all the daily tasks in the house, on the fields and working with children in both the day and night schools, teaching English and learning Lepcha traditions. A chance to fully immerse yourself in a unique Indian community and make a big difference on a small scale.

## Project Summary

**Departs:** February, October

**How long?** 12 / 16 weeks

**Accommodation:** Lepcha house in pairs

**Project Work:** Teaching, Art, Music, Drama, Sport, Community Work

**Explore Further:** Trekking, Temples, Beaches, Wildlife



## Project Overview

<b>Orientation + Briefing (4 days)</b>	Orientation course at the Wayside Inn, on the banks of the River Teesta. A chance to get to know your AV group whilst learning basic Nepali and attending briefings on teaching, keeping safe, staying healthy and Lepcha culture.
<b>Project Work (Approx 10-12 weeks)</b>	Living and working in rural villages. Together with a fellow AV you will live alongside a local family but have a high level of independence. Get fully involved in community life, helping around the house, on the farm and working with the children in the schools. Spending significant time in one place lets you become fully involved and gain a sense of achievement.
<b>Optional Independent Travel (+4 weeks)</b>	Explore India further using the confidence and local knowledge gained on your project to make the most of your travels. Trek up into the Himalayas; visit famous temples, bustling towns and colourful markets; experience the Indian Railway network travelling from place to place and relax on beaches. You choose what you do, but we are still on hand to help.

## Detailed Itinerary

### ARRIVING IN INDIA AND THE LEPCHAS

The group flight departs from London Heathrow and will be seen off by one of the AV team. You will fly into Calcutta (or Kolkata), where you will be met by Tendup Lama, AV's representative based in Darjeeling. Depending on flight times you may have a day in Calcutta where you can visit the Victoria Memorial, Mother Theresa's 'Mother House' or perhaps the busiest bridge in the world (over the Hooghly River). That night, accompanied by Tendup, you will catch the overnight sleeper train to New Jalpaiguri, the station for Siliguri and the Himalayas, arriving in time for breakfast. Indian trains are an experience like no other and a great way to travel long distances across the country. They are very sociable and there is never a dull moment: you could find yourself holding the baby for the family next to you, listening to musicians, or watching the cobbler at work!

### BRIEFING AND ORIENTATION

From Siliguri you will all take a bus to Teesta and the Wayside Inn where we start the orientation course. This is a chance to settle in, unwind after the hectic few days leading up to your departure, long journey and an opportunity to get to know your AV group. The orientation course is important to make sure you are fully prepared when you arrive in your school. It will be led by Tendup, giving you a chance to get to know him too. In a stunning steep-sided valley with the town of Kalimpong about 3000ft above, you will cover:

- Nepali (the standard language in these parts)
- The Lepcha people, their origins, customs and culture - a great introduction to these unique and generous people.
- Safety, health and security
- Techniques for teaching English

During the course you will visit Kalimpong to buy traditional local clothing - Kurta Pajama –to wear when teaching. At the end of the orientation course you will be taken with your partner to your new village home and host family, ready to start your project for real. To get there we go up through the forests - some quite ancient, with lichen bearded trees, wild magnolia and red rhododendrons - up to about 7000ft before descending to around 5000ft where the villages are. We call the valley around which the villages lie 'Shangri La' - almost untouched, but now with some electricity and, amazingly, a mobile phone mast! But practically no roads, so Lepchas will greet you to carry your bags to your home.

The AV representative will introduce you to your host family and leave you and your partner to settle into your new home, but remember they're never more than a phone call away if you needed!

### THE PROJECT

Your volunteer placement is concerned both with understanding the Lepcha culture, by participating in their lives, learning a little of their language and joining in village activities and with helping to raise the standards of English in the villages. For much of the year most Lepcha children go to the local primary school or a missionary school during the day. Through the help of AV volunteers Lepcha children are now achieving top marks in English at school and have gained hugely in confidence.

During the week you will help at both the village night school and at a local primary or secondary government school, depending on where you have been placed. The schools can be up to a 45 minute walk away from your house and will be attended by children from your village, but also other villages nearby. You will be teaching English, reading and writing to the children in classes ranging from as few as 10 up to 50. In the secondary school the largest class size is approximately 75. In the mornings before classes start you may spend an hour giving English lessons at the night school in your village, which are usually within a five or ten minute walk of your house. You will go over the work that the children have learnt at school and give extra help as well as teaching the adults English. After school you will return to the night school where you will learn traditional Lepcha language, dance and music with the children and village teacher. This is also an opportunity to get creative as AV volunteers have the chance to teach the children English stories, songs or plays to perform at the annual 'Lepcha English Language Day'. All of the schools' facilities and classrooms are very basic, with some benches (desks are rare), a blackboard and intermittent electricity. In the night schools there is often a stage for performances but no electricity so teaching is done by candle light.

Sport is not a strong aspect of life here, since most land is required to grow food, but it is always surprising how a cricket pitch can be created out of very little, or a football kicked about on a harvested field. This will be a very popular activity with the children but be wary of hitting sixes or you will have to retrieve the ball from a long way down the very steep hillside! The main sport is archery, you will be taught not only how to use a bow and arrow but also have the chance to make your own. The Lepcha Archery competition is an annual event which all the AV volunteers are invited to participate in and it gets very competitive!

Outside school you will help with tasks around the house. You will get to know your hosts and their children really well, and they will cook for you and your partner, making you both very much part of the family. You can help them with cooking, ploughing, milking cows and goats. You eat what they grow so this is real green living where the gentler pace of the sun and seasons dictates life. The children in your family and village will love playing games whilst the adults will enjoy spending time chatting and practising their English, usually whilst drinking lots of tea.

In the afternoons you may wish to meet up with other AVs in the neighbouring villages, meet their families and explore the local area. At weekends the Lepchas may request that you stay for teaching or village festivals which are important to attend. You might take the children to the river for a picnic and a game of cricket; or organise an AV party that includes Lepchas your own age. You will also have the chance to travel further away to visit other AVs or head to Kalimpong or Darjeeling. Kalimpong is a two - three hour jeep ride from your village and is the nearest place to catch up on emails, shop for essentials and even get a hot shower!

To find out what a typical day on project might be like take a look at our ['Day in the life of an AV'](#) feature, written by AVs who have been there and done it themselves!

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## Food + Accommodation

An important part of the AV experience is living in local accommodation and the Lepcha experience goes a step further by placing you and another AV volunteer with a host family, so that you are both at the

heart of the village. This is the best way of getting to know the people, being involved in the community and gaining an understanding of living there – you are not a bystander watching from afar. You will have your own space, living either in a separate part of the family home or in an annex close to your Lepcha family, who will feed and look after you both. There is a long and honourable tradition of hospitality among the Lepchas who have always welcomed strangers with open arms. Prepare to drink lots of tea or 'chi', a fermented millet beer drunk from a bamboo mug through a bamboo 'straw'!

There may or may not be electricity, or running water but you will have a 'loo' and private washing area outside of the main house. You will live with one other AV volunteer so you are not on your own and other AVs will be in villages nearby.

The AV representative is never far away and there whenever needed. They can be contacted by phone 24/7 and will visit you during your project.

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## Optional Independent Travel

As your project comes to an end AV gives you the chance to stay on for an additional four weeks of independent travel at the end of the venture, to ensure a good balance of volunteering and adventure. India is a vast country with lots of exciting and beautiful places to explore beyond the Lepchas and the Darjeeling district, which you won't get a chance to see on your weekends. From our experience, travelling is often when problems occur, from lost passports to getting ill – that's why we offer this extra travel time to ensure that you experience as much as possible but with the continued 24/7 support from us whilst you do so.

Different travel options India AVs have done in the past include: trekking to Kanchenjunga Base Camp, watching the dawn come up on the Ganges at the holy city of Varanasi; visiting Rishikesh, where the Beatles meditated (and there is said to be good rafting nearby); seeing a Bengal tiger in the wild; visiting the Golden Temple in Amritsar, one of the many carved temples - at Mahabelipuram, Khajurao or Ellora; floating down the backwaters of Kerala on a houseboat; being an extra in a Bollywood movie; basking on a beach in Goa? riding an elephant up the path to a castle in Jaipur, the 'Pink City'; going on a camel trek in the desert at Jaisalemeer, spending the night in the desert under the stars and of course visiting the Taj Mahal! Tendup will be on hand before you start your travels to advise you on the Indian Railway Network, the best routes to get around, and how to do so safely!

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## Dates + Costs

For current AV departure dates + costs please visit the website – [www.aventure.co.uk](http://www.aventure.co.uk)

### AV PROJECT COSTS INCLUDE:

#### Before departure:

- Pre-departure information, support and advice
- A nominated member of the UK volunteer support team
- One-to-one face to face briefing for UK applicants

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[www.aventure.co.uk](http://www.aventure.co.uk)

[info@aventure.co.uk](mailto:info@aventure.co.uk)

- Telephone briefing for non-UK applicants
- References taken up
- Comprehensive online health check
- Advice on group flight booking or individual flight arrangements
- Briefing for group departure from London airport

#### In-country:

- In-country representative
- 24/7 in-country backup
- Meet and greet at airport (if arriving with the group)
- Airport transfer (if arriving with group)
- In-country induction course
- Transfer from induction course to school/project
- Accommodation (except during independent travel)
- Food allowance (except during independent travel)
- Management of emergencies, including lost passport, illness, etc. whilst in-country

#### Upon returning home:

- Returning home advice
- Full telephone debriefing

#### **AV PROJECT COSTS DO NOT INCLUDE**

- Flights
- Travel Insurance
- Country visas
- Meeting of non-group arrivals
- Accommodation for early/late arrivals
- Medical expenses, e.g. inoculations, malaria prophylactics
- In-country medical expenses
- Drinks
- Tips/gratuities - No tips/gratuities for AV staff are necessary or expected
- Spending money
- Extra activities that you choose to do
- Food, transport and accommodation on independent travel

**Still got questions?** We're here to answer them and remember if you want to talk to an AV volunteer who has been there and done it just let us know and we'd be happy to put you in touch! Contact the AV office on +44(0)1380 729009 or [info@aventure.co.uk](mailto:info@aventure.co.uk)