

Squiz the World Goes to... Nepal

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia, and The World, on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country that's home to the tallest mountain on Earth... where colourful prayer flags flutter high above ancient temples... and where, according to legend, a mysterious creature with giant feet still roams the snowy mountains.

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Nepal.

JUST THE FACTS

Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia, tucked between the two most populous countries in the world, India to the south and China to the north. Unlike Australia, which is surrounded by oceans, Nepal doesn't have any coastline at all.

It might look quite small on a map, a little bigger than 2 Tasmanias in Australia, the size of Montana in the US, or a little bit larger than Greece in Europe, but around 31 million people call Nepal home. That's more people than live in the whole of Australia! The capital city is Kathmandu.

If you travelled from the very bottom of Nepal to the very top, you'd pass through some very different landscapes. In the south are hot, tropical jungles where one-horned rhinos, Bengal tigers and Asian elephants roam. Climb higher and you'll find fertile valleys and steep hillsides carved into giant terraces where farmers grow rice, corn and vegetables. Higher still are pine tree forests, before finally reaching snow-covered mountains, glaciers and icy peaks that seem to touch the sky.

"Those mountains belong to the Himalayas, the highest mountain range on Earth. In fact, Nepal is home to eight of the world's ten tallest mountains, including the highest of them all... Sagarmāthā [suh-GAR-maa-thaa] in Nepali, which means ""Forehead of the Sky."" Across the border in Tibet, it's called Chomolungma [CHO-mo-LUNG-ma], which means ""Goddess Mother of the World."" You thought it was Mt Everest right??? Well, surprise, it is! Most people around the world know this mighty mountain by its English name...Mount Everest!

This mountain, stands an incredible 8,849 metres above sea level. That's almost nine kilometres high! So, if you stacked nine Burj Khalifas, the world's tallest building, one on top of another, you'd only just reach the summit."

For many years Nepal was a kingdom ruled by a king. But in 2008, the country became a federal democratic republic, which means the people elect leaders to run the government instead. Today Nepal is divided into seven provinces, each helping look after different parts of the country.

So, Nepal is much more than mountains. But the country's extraordinary landscapes have shaped its people, its traditions and its festivals...And we're about to find out more...

LET'S GET CULTURAL

Nepal might be a small country, but it's home to an incredible mix of people and cultures. More than 140 different ethnic groups live here, each with their own traditions, clothing, music, customs and many with their own language. One of Nepal's best-known ethnic groups is the Sherpa people. Now, lots of people think "Sherpa" means a mountain guide... but it doesn't. Sherpa is the name of a group of people whose families have lived for hundreds of years high in the Himalayas, close to Mount Everest. They're also farmers, teachers, shopkeepers and families who simply call the mountains home.

The official language of Nepal is Nepali, but English is also taught in many schools, so lots of young people can speak at least a little English.

Religion is woven into everyday life in Nepal. Around four out of every five people follow Hinduism, while many others are Buddhist. In fact, Nepal is special to followers of both religions. It's the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the Buddha, who was born in the town of Lumbini [LOOM-bih-nee] more than 2,500 years ago. Hinduism also has a special place here, and you'll often see cows wandering freely through towns and cities. That's because cows are considered sacred by Hindus and are Nepal's national animal.

The mighty Himalayas are also considered sacred. In Hindu tradition, the mountains are believed to be the home of the gods. Many Buddhists also believe the high peaks are home to powerful deities and protective spirits, which is one reason the mountains are treated with such great respect. Wherever you travel in Nepal, you'll spot colourful prayer flags fluttering in the breeze. They're printed with prayers and symbols, and many Buddhists believe the wind carries those prayers of peace, compassion and kindness across the mountains to everyone below.

Nepal's biggest festival is Dashain [DUSH-eye], a huge celebration that lasts for 15 days. Families travel from all over the country to be together. One of its most exciting traditions is building enormous bamboo swings called 'ping', some as tall as a house! Children and adults line up for a turn, soaring high into the sky in a tradition that's been enjoyed for hundreds of years.

Tihar [tee-HAR], the Festival of Lights, is perhaps one of the world's most unique celebrations. Over five days, different animals are honoured for the important roles they play in people's lives. One day is for crows, thanking them as messengers. The next celebrates dogs for their loyalty and friendship, with flower garlands placed around their necks and tasty treats to eat. Then it's the cows' turn, honoured for their importance in Hindu culture. Families light thousands of tiny lamps and candles to brighten homes and welcome good fortune. Then oxen, and finally, the festival finishes by celebrating the special bond between brothers and sisters.

We've talked Nepal's people, languages and traditions. Now it's time to see what life is like through the eyes of the country's kids, It's...

TIME FOR SCHOOL

Just like here in Australia, children in Nepal usually start school when they're around five years old. School is compulsory until grade 8 - age 13 or 14, although many students continue through to the final years of secondary school. The school year usually begins in April and finishes in March, with breaks for festivals like Dashain and Tihar. This year in Nepal is 2083. No, they're not living in the future... Nepal uses its own calendar, called the Bikram Sambat calendar. It's 56 years ahead of the calendar used in Australia and much of the rest of the world

Lessons include maths, science, social studies, art, music and PE, and while younger children are usually taught in Nepali or another local language, English is also a very important subject. Now here's where school life can become very different from Australia...

If you live in the capital, Kathmandu, you might catch a school bus or walk with your friends. But if you live high in the mountains, getting to school can be an adventure all on its own. Some children hike for more than an hour each way along steep mountain tracks. Others cross long suspension bridges swinging high above rushing rivers. Imagine your trip to school starting hundreds of metres above the ground!

Not every school looks the same either. Across Nepal there are government schools, private schools and, in some Buddhist communities, monastery schools, where young monks and nuns learn reading, writing, maths and science alongside Buddhist teachings and meditation.

Once classes are over, it's time to play. Football, or soccer, is Nepal's most popular sport, but cricket has become hugely popular too, especially with older kids. Volleyball is the national sport, and because so many villages are built on hillsides where there's not much flat land, it's a game that's easy to set up almost anywhere.

As with any culture, Nepalese kids also learn the country's legends, and one of them has giant feet! Let's find out in...

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

High in the snowy Himalayas, the Nepalese speak about a mysterious creature known as the Yeti or Meh-teh. Some describe it as tall and hairy, walking upright on two legs, with enormous feet that leave giant footprints in the snow. Stories about it have been shared in mountain communities for hundreds of years.

Now, before you start packing binoculars and a monster-catching net, scientists have never found proof that the Yeti is real. No bones. No body. No clear photo. No Yeti selfie with Mount Everest in the background. But that hasn't stopped people searching.

Some scientists think Yeti sightings may have been bears, especially Himalayan brown bears or Tibetan blue bears, seen from a distance or in poor weather. And giant footprints in the snow can grow even bigger when the sun melts them around the edges, turning an ordinary animal track into something much more mysterious.

But in Nepal, the Yeti is more than just a monster story. It's part of the folklore of the Himalayas, a reminder that the mountains are wild, powerful and still full of secrets. For people who live among them, the mountains are not just rocks and snow. They are places of danger, wonder and respect

All this mountain climbing and Yeti spotting has made me super-hungry... but that's fine because it's...

DINNER TIME

"The country's most important meal is called dal bhat. It's so popular that many Nepalese people eat it twice every day! Dal is a thick lentil soup packed with protein, while bhat means rice. It's usually served with vegetables, spicy curry and sometimes chicken or goat. Mountain climbers love it because it gives them plenty of energy for long days on the trails.

In fact, there's even a famous saying in Nepal:

""Dal Bhat Power... 24 Hour!""

In other words, eat a good plate of dal bhat, and you'll have enough energy to keep going all day!"

Another favourite is momos. These little dumplings are filled with vegetables or meat, then steamed or fried and served with a spicy dipping sauce. They're sold by street vendors, in restaurants and at family celebrations, and they're so popular that many people call them Nepal's unofficial national snack.

Up in the highest villages, the local dairy doesn't come from cows... it comes from yaks! These giant shaggy mountain animals provide milk that's turned into cheese, butter and

yoghurt. It might sound a bit unusual... but if you're trekking through the Himalayas, a slice of yak cheese could be just what you need.

Whether you're sharing a bowl of dal bhat with your family or grabbing a plate of piping hot momos with friends, one thing's for sure... you'll never go hungry in Nepal!

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

"What is the name of The World's tallest mountain?"

- a) Mount Everest
- b) Sagarmāthā [suh-GAR-maa-thaa]
- c) Chomolungma [CHO-mo-LUNG-ma],

All Three"

"True or False... Sherpa is another word for a mountain guide.

False. Sherpa is an ethnic group."

"Nepal uses its own calendar. Around what year is it there now?"

2083"

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Nepal.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.