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The Other Side of Going Abroad: 8 Cultural Shocks Nepalis Rarely Talk About

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OCTOBER 14, 2026



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By Nepal Digest - October 14, 2026 - Nepal

For many Nepalis, going abroad begins as a plan built around possibility: a better salary, an overseas degree, a chance to support parents, or a future that feels out of reach at home. The photographs often show airports, new apartments, impressive skylines and smiling reunions. What they rarely show is the quiet work of learning how to live in a different culture.

Culture shock is not always dramatic. Sometimes it is discovering that the person next door does not expect a conversation. Sometimes it is missing a family celebration because your shift cannot be changed. Sometimes it is realizing that a larger salary and a better life are not automatically the same thing.

The experiences differ enormously. A student in Melbourne, a nurse in London, an office worker in Dubai and a factory employee in Japan will encounter different customs, protections, costs and expectations. Nepal itself is diverse, too. Still, some adjustments recur in the stories and everyday experiences of people who build lives far from home.

1. Your neighbours may not become your community

For people raised in close-knit neighbourhoods, home can mean more than the walls of a house. A neighbour notices when you return from a trip. Someone asks after your parents. Tea can turn into an hour-long conversation. Weddings, funerals and festivals become collective occasions, even when nobody issued a formal invitation.

In many overseas cities, social boundaries can be sharper. People may be courteous but protective of their time and personal space. A friendly greeting in the lift does not necessarily lead to a visit. Turning up without notice, familiar in some Nepali circles, may be considered intrusive elsewhere.

That does not mean people abroad are unfriendly. It means friendship may require a different rhythm: an invitation arranged in advance, a shared hobby, regular conversations or a community activity. The surprise is realizing that proximity and belonging are

not the same thing.

The adjustment: Learn how local social boundaries work, then build connection deliberately rather than waiting for community to form on its own.

2. Time stops being flexible when every minute is scheduled

There are plenty of punctual people and tightly managed workplaces in Nepal. The shock for some new arrivals is not that Nepal ignores time; it is the extent to which certain overseas systems are organized around fixed appointments, transport connections and recorded attendance.

A missed bus can mean arriving late for work. A delayed arrival may cost an appointment slot. In a workplace with clock-in systems, the difference between starting a shift at 8:00 and 8:07 may be recorded automatically. A service provider might refuse to see you without a booking, even when staff appear free.

The pressure varies by country and job. Some cultures are especially schedule-conscious; others are more relaxed socially but strict at work. Either way, newcomers often discover that planning backwards from an appointment becomes a survival skill.

The adjustment: Allow time for transport delays, understand cancellation rules and treat the stated starting time as a

commitment, not an arrival target.

3. Independence includes all the work nobody sees

Living independently can sound exciting until the ordinary tasks begin accumulating. Groceries do not buy themselves. Laundry, cooking, cleaning, bills, repairs, registration paperwork and transport have to fit around work or study.

In many Nepali households, domestic responsibilities are shared among relatives, although not always equally. Abroad, especially for people living alone or in shared accommodation, there may be no familiar support system to absorb a difficult week. An exhausting shift can be followed by a meal that still needs cooking and clothes that still need washing.

Shared flats introduce another cultural education: cleaning schedules, noise limits, food storage, guests, deposits and disagreements with housemates from different backgrounds. Even a person who managed a household in Nepal may encounter unfamiliar machines, contracts or routines.

The adjustment: Budget time as carefully as money. A simple meal plan, household calendar and clear agreements with flatmates can prevent small problems from becoming daily stress.

4. A bigger salary can leave surprisingly little behind

Money looks different when it is converted into Nepali rupees. An overseas pay packet can sound enormous compared with wages back home. The temptation is to focus on the headline amount rather than what remains after living costs.

Rent may take the largest share. Add groceries, transport, phone bills, insurance, taxes where applicable, visa-related expenses and the occasional unexpected payment. Students may also face tuition and course costs; workers may need to support relatives or repay borrowing connected to their move.

There is another pressure that seldom appears in departure photographs: people at home may imagine that anyone earning in foreign currency must be financially secure. Saying no to a request can feel like disappointing the very family whose future motivated the move.

None of this means migration cannot improve financial security. It often can. But the relevant number is not the salary converted into rupees; it is the amount you can reliably save after meeting your own obligations.

The adjustment: Compare net income with actual local expenses and agree on a sustainable remittance amount, rather than promising money based on the gross salary.

5. Respect can sound completely different

Communication is one of the hardest cultural habits to notice because people often assume their own style is simply polite. In some Nepali settings, age, seniority and family position influence how directly people speak. Titles and careful phrasing can signal respect.

Some overseas workplaces have flatter communication norms. A junior employee may use a manager's first name, ask for clarification or challenge a plan in a meeting. In other countries, formal hierarchy remains strong. Neither approach can be treated as a universal overseas rule.

Misunderstandings travel in both directions. A newcomer may interpret an abrupt message as hostility when it was intended as efficiency. A supervisor may interpret an indirect answer as uncertainty when the speaker was trying to be courteous. Humour, eye contact, silence and the meaning of "yes" can also shift between cultures.

The adjustment: Observe how colleagues communicate, ask when unsure and learn to be clear without abandoning courtesy. Different is not necessarily disrespectful.

6. Personal boundaries can outweigh family expectations

Questions about age, salary, marriage, children and relationships can be ordinary conversation within some Nepali families and communities. In other settings, those same questions may be considered private, particularly between coworkers or people who have just met.

People may also make choices about dating, living arrangements, careers or marriage with less involvement from extended family. For a Nepali migrant, these norms can feel liberating, uncomfortable, or both. The surprise is not simply that people make different choices; it is that the expected role of relatives and the wider community can be so different.

There is no single Western or foreign model of family life. Religious communities, migrant households and generations within the same city often have different expectations. The useful lesson is to avoid assuming that your own boundaries automatically apply to everyone else.

The adjustment: Ask before discussing sensitive personal matters, respect consent and privacy, and make room for disagreement without treating it as rejection of Nepali culture.

7. Everyday rules can be unfamiliar—and the consequences real

Learning local laws is not the same as learning local etiquette, but both shape life overseas. Depending on the destination, you may need to understand how to separate household waste, use public transport, park a vehicle, follow quiet hours, register an address or meet immigration conditions.

The rules are not identical across countries or even across cities. A practice permitted in one destination may be restricted in another. Visa conditions, employment rights and tenancy contracts deserve particular attention because mistakes can affect much more than convenience.

New arrivals sometimes rely on advice from friends or online groups. That can be useful for practical tips but risky for legal questions. A confidently repeated rumour is still a rumour, especially when immigration, employment or fines are involved.

The adjustment: Check official local guidance, keep copies of important documents and clarify your rights and responsibilities before a problem arises.

8. Loneliness can arrive after the excitement wears off

The first weeks abroad may be full of novelty. There are photographs to send, places to explore and milestones to celebrate. Then an ordinary Tuesday arrives. You return from work, heat a meal and realize there is nobody nearby who knows your childhood stories.

Festival season can make the distance especially visible. Dashain and Tihar carry the sounds of family kitchens, travel home, tika, deusi-bhailo and relatives dropping in. Abroad, a festival might fall between shifts or on a day when your friends are occupied. Video calls help, but they cannot completely replace being there.

Some Nepalis also discover an unexpected tension in their identity. They may feel like outsiders in their new country and, after years away, unfamiliar with the routines of the Nepal they return to visit. Homesickness and pride in building an independent life can exist together.

This experience is not inevitable, and it does not mean moving abroad was a mistake. For many, friendships, diaspora associations, sporting groups, cultural events and everyday rituals gradually create a second sense of home.

The adjustment: Make connection part of your routine, not an emergency measure. Keep in touch with family, seek out

community when it helps, and allow your idea of home to change.

What nobody can prepare you for completely

Lists of cultural shocks can make migration sound like a collection of inconveniences. It is more complicated than that. Moving abroad can bring safety, education, income, independence and friendships that would otherwise never have existed. It can also bring precarious employment, isolation, difficult housing situations and obligations that stretch across borders.

Preparation still matters. Research the destination beyond its salary advertisements and university brochures. Speak to people who have lived there long enough to describe an ordinary month, not just an exciting first week. Understand your visa, housing, healthcare and employment arrangements. Keep an emergency fund when possible. And remember that asking for help is a practical skill, not a failure of independence.

For Nepalis abroad, adapting does not have to mean forgetting where they came from. It can mean learning a new set of habits while carrying the old ones with care. The other side of going abroad is not always visible in photographs. Often, it is the slow, everyday work of building a life between two places.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/other-side-going-abroad-cultural-shocks-nepalis/>