

The Basuri

by Dylan R.

Communication can be difficult in another country, especially when neither of you speak the other's language. Bizarre hand motions do little to break awkward silences and wipe away confused stares. A traveler can feel helpless and eventually forced to just smile and walk away. Even for our group on the first day meeting our guide, Kalyan, there were some barriers to break down: with him, amongst our group members, and within ourselves, as we prepared for the Nepali experience to come. At that time, a passion of mine took on a whole new role and opened my eyes to its potential. Music.

I've played in band and orchestra for years, and sure it's fun to listen to, but on this trip I discovered how great of an effect music can have all around the world. On that first day I was introduced to the 'Basuri', or traditional Nepali bamboo flute, by Kalyan and was instantly intrigued. We all were! It brought us together and made us smile and loosen up. Over the next week I would be working hard to expand my knowledge and skills with this instrument.

The Basuri originated in China and Japan centuries ago, but moved into Nepal around the 1940s where it was at first only for royalty and the army. After many years, however, the Basuri took on a folk role for lonely farmers especially when played with drums and guitar. Even Kalyan had started playing at a young age when he was watching livestock on a rainy day on the top of a rock in somewhere Nepal. He would play for hours until the rain stopped just figuring out notes and tunes.

After learning the basics on Kalyan's flute, I moved on to my next ambition: making my own. For this I enlisted the help of Karma Sherpa. To make one is a relatively easy process and I hope that by the time you finish reading this you will be inspired to make and learn to play your own to spread the love and happiness wherever your travels might take you. To aid you in this, I will pass on my knowledge of flute making in a series of easy steps.



To make one is a relatively easy process and I hope that by the time you finish reading this you will be inspired to make and learn to play your own to spread the love and happiness wherever your travels might take you. To aid you in this, I will pass on my knowledge of flute making in a series of easy steps.

Step 1: Find bamboo. For some, this may be difficult, but with some perseverance anyone can locate the perfect piece. A dry and strong section about 42 cm long and 3 cm in total diameter is ideal. Cut above the joint on both sides to leave one end closed and one end open. Use a knife to scrape off the thin bark along the bamboo to make it smooth.

Step 2: Making the holes. Measure about 4 cm from the closed top and make a mark. This will be where your mouth will go. Then go 15.5 cm down from that mark and make another mark. This will be the first finger hole. From that mark, make marks 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15 centimeters from the first finger hole. Using a 8 or so millimeter diameter piece of hard metal (such as a hex wrench) burn holes on the middle of each mark after heating red hot on a gas stove or similar. Make the top hole a little larger and more oval to improve tone.

Step 3: Playing! Learning to play takes time and patience. Experiment with different lip positions and flute angles with lots of continuous and controlled air. After sound can be produced, it's really just a lot of practicing and playing around with fingerings and tonguing rhythms to create your own songs or try to match other people's. After a while playing is natural and very fun to do anytime and anywhere.

Shaving off thin bark to make a smooth finish on the bamboo.



Kalyan Gurung, the original flutist and our amazing guide. He contributed much of the information on the Basuri, taught me how to play and the songs that I learned.



Karma Sherpa taught me how to design and create my own flute.



Burning holes for my flute in the kitchen.



Sonom Sherpa and I at a waterfall.