

NEW HOPE IN NEPAL

CURING CANINES IN KATHMANDU

Story and photographs by Matthew Kruchak





It's midday and the sun shines hot over Kathmandu. There's no movement in the trash-filled lot that separates a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and the back end of a Nepalese restaurant. You can't see them, but the stray dogs are out there, lumps of filthy fur lying in the beating sun or hiding in slivers of shade. Andrea Bringmann is about to wake them.

Bringmann is the founder of Street Dogs Care Camp, a non-profit organization based in Boudhanath, a Tibetan community resting on the rough edge of Kathmandu. With a team of volunteers and a pair of veterinarians, Bringmann has been caring for the area's suffering street dogs since February of 2008.

Normally, the Care Camp team sets up a field clinic every Saturday to treat sick and injured canines at Boudha Stupa, a large bell-shaped Buddhist shrine that's circumambulated by practitioners. Since they began their rescue and rehabilitation efforts, Bringmann and her colleagues have, on average, treated 15 dogs every Saturday and have intensively cared for almost 50 so far.

But today is the Buddha's 2,553rd birthday and thousands of followers have flooded the area. Instead of bringing the dogs to the stupa, Bringmann decides to visit them on their turf.

Bringmann leads the way through the Nepalese restaurant and out onto the patio, calling for Mummy, a blind dog the colour of the golden monk shirts that hang in the sun to dry, but not nearly as clean. Following closely behind her is Franziska Oertle, a Swiss volunteer, and the pair of Nepalese veterinarians, Susmitha Gautan and Suraj Dhakal. From a spot in the shade, Mummy follows Bringmann's German accent into her outstretched arms.

"You're very lucky," Bringmann says. Mummy growls.

According to the Kathmandu Animal Treatment (KAT) Centre, there are over 35,000 street dogs in the Kathmandu Valley and Mummy is definitely one of the lucky ones. She had a softball-sized growth on her back caused by a canine transmissible venereal tumour, a sexually transmitted disease that affects the reproductive tract. With the help of Street Dogs Care Camp, Mummy's tumour was removed. But the majority of stray dogs in the area still suffer from abuse, malnutrition, and disease.

"They suffer so much and I suffer with them," Bringmann says. "If there's a possibility to help them, then why not do it?"

And she does.

Born in Germany, Bringmann worked for 10 years in Italy's advertising industry. She had a steady income and nice home, but wasn't satisfied with her career. She felt she was lying

(above)
A Boudhanath area shopkeeper sweeps the dusty sidewalk, as a street dog stands nearby.

(facing page) A pair of street dogs lounge in the shade under a table on a restaurant's patio.



“DOGS AND PEOPLE ARE JUST THE SAME, THAT’S WHY I FEED THEM. RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IS NOT JUST BEING A MONK.”

to the people she was pitching products to and it wasn’t worth the stress. So a year ago, Bringmann packed her bags and headed around the world, making stops in Europe, North America, South America, and South Asia before landing in Kathmandu. She planned to move on to Australia, but never left Nepal.

“I cancelled my flight because of the dogs,” she says, with a wide grin.

Every day, Bringmann saw distressed dogs on the streets of Kathmandu—skinny, forlorn and infected with mange, a skin disease caused by parasitic mites that produces hair loss and the formation of scabs and lesions. And every day, she felt the need to help.

Bringmann began by feeding the dogs rice and meat. Friends visiting from Germany saw the work she was doing and wanted to help. They donated money for dog food but Bringmann thought the cash could be put to better use, so she developed the idea of a weekly clinic to treat the sick and injured dogs.

The first canine clinic at Boudha Stupa drew a large crowd of curious observers. With prayer beads clenched in their hands, Buddhists broke from circling the stupa to watch Bringmann’s team soap up the street dogs. The locals had never before seen strays being washed and given vaccinations. The resident reactions were mostly positive but some thought Bringmann and her team were crazy. Many still think they are.

There’s a fear of street dogs in Nepal, Bringmann says. They’re seen as dirty and diseased. According to the KAT Centre, about 200 people die every year in Nepal after being bitten by rabid dogs.

People step around stray dogs on the street. They step over them, too. And if dogs get in the way, they’re kicked. But never loved.

(clockwise from top left) A crowd gathers as Andrea Bringmann, Suraj Dhakal, Susmitha Gautan, and Franziska Oertle examine ticks in Little Wamo’s ears.

Chiny relaxes at the side of a dusty street in Boudhanath.

Andrea Bringmann comforts Pasang as veterinarian Susmitha Gautan holds the dog’s front left leg while colleague Suraj Dhakal sutures the wound.

A mangy street dog in Bhaktapur, Nepal.

The team of canine caregivers round a dusty street corner and spot Pasang, a black and white dog, the white now the colour of the concrete he lays on.

Less than a week earlier, Pasang was scavenging for food in a garbage dump. Defending his territory, Pasang growled and barked at trash collectors. They kicked Pasang and slashed the underside of his left front leg. Monks found the suffering dog and notified Bringmann. Pasang was brought to the vet, stitched up, and pumped full of antibiotics.

Dhakal notices that the stitches came out and that the three-inch wound is now open. The vets go to work. They muzzle Pasang's mouth. Gautan holds the dog's right front leg as Bringmann comforts the dog with pats on the head.

It's easy to stitch up a dog on the street, Dhakal says, but there are many difficulties in providing health care for homeless dogs. The risk of infection is high when suturing on the street. With ownerless dogs, there's no medical history, so vets don't know how long a dog has been suffering with a certain symptom or what ailments it had in the past. Another problem is that the vets can only diagnose what they see, because lab tests are unavailable. They do the best they can, Dhakal says.

Wearing Tibetan clothing and a string of Buddhist prayer beads around her neck, Tsering Chosang watches the street-side stitching. She knows the dog well. She feeds Pasang and several other street dogs regularly and makes sure they have plenty of water.

"Dogs and people are just the same," Chosang says as Oertle hands her some medicine for Pasang. "That's why I feed them. Religious practice is not just being a monk. It's not necessary to wear a red robe."

Chosang's attitude is rare, Bringmann says, and one of her goals is to involve and educate the community. When they examine a dog or need help catching one, they ask the locals for help. Already, the team has a pair of monks cooking rice and meat for dozens of dogs every day and locals like Oertle administering medications. But before locals can touch them, the dogs must be vaccinated against rabies. The vets have yet to see any cases

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(clockwise from top left)
Members of the Armed Police Force walk past sleeping street dogs at the front gates of the former royal palace, which is now a museum.

Veterinarian Susmitha Gautan holds Oro in place as her colleague Suraj Dhakal examines the cast they put on the puppy's broken leg a couple weeks earlier.

Andrea Bringmann shakes Strubel's paw at Boudha Stupa.

“THEY SUFFER SO MUCH AND I SUFFER WITH THEM. IF THERE’S A POSSIBILITY TO HELP THEM, THEN WHY NOT DO IT?”



in Boudhanath so it’s just a precaution, Bringmann says.

She’s developing a street dog education program to take around to local schools and hands out informational brochures on Saturdays. The Care Camp doesn’t focus only on street dog care, however. They’re also educating people on how to keep canines as pets. Street dogs often live better lives than canines kept by Tibetan and Nepalese families, Bringmann says. They tend to keep house dogs on metre-long leashes or locked up in small cages.

One palm-sized black and white puppy (this time the white is actually white), luckier than many pet dogs, is held in loving hands as he waits for treatment. A Tibetan family rescued the sick puppy from the nearby stupa. This puppy is last on the list for treatment today and for an unfortunate reason. The pup has canine distemper virus, a highly contagious disease that affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and central nervous system. Bringmann stays on the ground floor as the team heads upstairs

to examine the dog; she has a puppy of her own and doesn’t want to pass the disease on to her dog.

The vets examine the dog and give the caregivers some medicine. The team bids the puppy farewell. They will see it again. Without the Care Camp the dog would surely die.

After just a few months, it’s exciting to see how much healthier and happier the street dogs are, Bringmann says; it’s the people who will be tougher to train.

“I would like to teach people that if they respect the animals and give love, they will also get love from the animals,” Bringmann says.

This can be seen when the group walks down the street. Normally, stray dogs won’t approach people like a loving house pet, but this is the reaction the group has been receiving from the street dogs they’ve met today. They’ve shown the dogs some love and it’s returned with licks and paw shakes. ■