

Destination Nepal

For many travellers, Nepal is paradise on earth, or at the very least Shangri La. Wedged between the mountain wall of the Himalaya and the steamy jungles of the Indian plains, this is a land of yaks and yetis, monasteries and mantras, snow peaks and Sherpas, temples and tigers, magic and mystery. Ever since Nepal first opened its borders to outsiders in the 1950s, this tiny mountain nation has had an almost mystical allure for travellers. Explorers and mountaineers came to conquer the highest peaks, trekkers came to test themselves against some of the most challenging trails on earth and hippies came to wander in a stoned daze through the temple-filled towns at the end of the overland trail.

You'll still see a few of the original 'freaks' meandering through the backstreets of Kathmandu, but they have been joined by legions of trekkers, clad in the latest technical gear and drawn by the rugged trails that climb to such famous destinations as Everest Base Camp and the Annapurna Sanctuary. Other travellers are drawn here by the rush of rafting down a roaring Nepali river or bungee jumping into a bottomless Himalayan gorge. Adventure addicts can get their adrenaline flowing by canyoning, climbing, kayaking, paragliding and mountain-biking through some of the world's most dramatic landscapes.

Other travellers prefer to see Nepal at a more gentle pace, gazing towards the peaks from Himalayan viewpoints, strolling through the temple-lined medieval city squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, and joining Buddhist pilgrims on a *parikrama* (ceremonial circuit) around the giant stupas scattered across the Kathmandu Valley. In Nepal's wild and wonderful national parks, nature buffs scan the treetops for exotic bird species and comb the jungles for rhinos and tigers from the backs of lumbering Indian elephants.

But big changes are afoot in Nepal. For one thing, Nepal is no longer a kingdom. A decade of Maoist uprising and civil war came to an end with the election of the Communist Party of Nepal and the declaration of the Federal Republic of Nepal on 28 May 2008. Since then the last Nepali king, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, has vacated the Royal Palace in Kathmandu and moved to a modest house in Nagarjun, and the word 'Royal' has been snipped from the signboards for Royal Nepal Airlines and Royal Chitwan National Park. After years of conflict, peace has returned to the mountains, and an air of optimism pervades the nation.

For travellers, this means Nepal is once again open for business. Trekkers are free to walk the mountain trails without fear of being stung for 'donations' or 'taxes' by Maoist cadres, and travellers can roam the countryside without having to endure the endless army roadblocks and searches that once turned bus travel into a draining ordeal. For the first time in years, the planes touching down on the tarmac at Tribhuvan Airport are packed full of GoreTex-clad trekkers and Nepal's trekking lodges, hotels and restaurants are often crammed to capacity. This is only the start of a long process of recovery, but locals are already breathing a sigh of relief.

There have been other less-obvious benefits to the end of hostilities. Soldiers have been pulled back from active duty to patrol the boundaries of Nepal's national parks – good news for wildlife, bad news for the poachers who reduced Nepal's rhino population by more than 30% during the uprising. The government has also turned its attention to improving living conditions for Nepal's workers, something that was rarely a priority under the autocratic rule of the Shah kings. One side effect of this is that guides

FAST FACTS

Population:	29.5 million
Surface area:	147,181 sq km (just larger than Greece)
UN Human Development Index:	142, out of 177 countries
Life expectancy:	62 years
Literacy rate:	48.6%
Gross national income:	US\$240 per capita
Doctors per 100,000 people:	5 (550 in Italy)
Number of seats in parliament held by women:	12 (out of 205)
Nepalis who live on less than US\$2 per day:	82%
Average age:	20 years

'Many people have spent a lifetime exploring the mountain trails and atmospheric temple towns'

and porters are charging higher fees for their services – you'll have to dig deeper into your pockets to go trekking than in years past.

However, there is definitely still work to do. Nepal's infrastructure was severely neglected during the conflict, and load shedding – a polite term for turning off the power to save the grid from meltdown – is a daily fact of life in the Kathmandu Valley. Fuel shortages are another problem: petrol stations run dry with monotonous regularity and prices for cooking kerosene are soaring, driving many locals to use firewood hacked from Nepal's dwindling forests. Hydroelectricity has been put forward as the panacea for all Nepal's power problems, but most of the hydro projects approved so far aim to channel electricity across Nepal's borders to India and China.

Getting around is also harder than it used to be, despite the easing of blockades. After decades of under-investment, the national airline has only four working aircraft for domestic flights, and some routes have been abandoned entirely. Private airlines have taken up some of the slack, but most of Nepal's rural airstrips can only receive flights in clear weather, so delays and cancellations are the rule rather than the exception. The dangers of flying in cloud were tragically illustrated in October 2008 when a plane carrying European trekkers crashed beside the runway at Lukla, killing 18 people.

It's easy to focus on the negatives. For most Nepalis, the election of a stable government and the end of armed conflict has been a massive cause for celebration. The rebels never targeted tourists during the uprising, and the new communist government is now wooing foreign travellers like never before. Visa conditions have been eased, so visitors can obtain a visa lasting up to six months on arrival, and there are plans to waive visa fees entirely in 2011 for Visit Nepal Year.

The biggest problem faced by visitors to Nepal is how to fit everything in. Many people have spent a lifetime exploring the mountain trails of the Himalaya and atmospheric temple towns of the Kathmandu Valley and the Middle Hills, and they still keep coming back for more. Our advice is to pick a handful of essential experiences and save the rest for trip two, and three, and four, and...

Getting Started

There are few countries in the world that are as well set up for independent tourism as Nepal. You can rock up to the border or Kathmandu airport, obtain a visa on arrival, organise a TIMS permit for trekking (see p335) and be up in the Himalaya in a matter of days. However, there is so much to see and do that it pays to do a bit of preparation before you arrive, not least because delays, cancellations and other unexpected obstacles to travel are part of daily life in Nepal. After a decade of civil war things are finally getting back to normal in Nepal and tourism is bouncing back with gusto. Last time we updated this book many lodges were struggling to find guests. Today, in many areas, travellers are struggling to find beds.

WHEN TO GO

The climate of Nepal can be broadly divided into two seasons. The dry season runs from October to May and the wet (monsoon) season runs from June to September. Autumn (September to November) and spring (March to May) offer warm daytime temperatures, clear skies for mountain views and perfect weather for trekking, rafting or just roaming around the Kathmandu Valley. For more information on the trekking season see p329.

The peak season for tourism runs from October to November: the landscape is green and lush from the recent monsoon rains, the air is crisp and clean, and the views of the Himalaya are crystal clear. However, competition for seats on international and domestic flights can be fierce, and lodges and hotels fill up quickly – very frustrating if you have left your bag at a particular hotel while trekking. Always book ahead at this time of year. You should also consider the disruption caused by the annual Dasain festival in October (see p25).

By early December winter is starting to creep in and most trekkers retreat from the high-altitude trekking routes. Heading for Everest Base Camp at this

See Climate Charts (p363) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A face mask against Kathmandu's air pollution, especially if you plan to rent a motorcycle or bike
- Earplugs for travel on noisy turboprop planes and local buses, and for those occasions when your hotel room faces onto a disco...
- Lip balm with sunscreen – when trekking the mountain winds and unfiltered sunlight will chap your lips in minutes
- Hiking boots or shoes – buying footwear in Nepal is a short cut to blisters
- A waterproof jacket or a solidly-built umbrella for monsoon squalls or sudden showers
- A good padlock – for closing hotel room doors and lockers at temples and museums, and locking your bag to bus baggage racks
- An LED torch for powercuts and night-time toilet trips while trekking
- Insect repellent for the Terai (plus anti-leech oil for monsoon travel)
- Swimming costume for rafting, kayaking, canyoning, elephant washing (yes, elephant washing, see p287) and, well, swimming!
- A reusable water bottle and iodine tablets – purify your own water, save money and protect the environment

time of year can be a real feat of endurance, and the Annapurna Circuit is often closed by snow on the Thorung La. Even the Kathmandu Valley can feel chilly after dark, and the morning mist can play havoc with flight schedules. Tourists start to leave Kathmandu in December like flocks of migratory birds, headed for the warmer climes of India or Thailand. However, this is a great time to enjoy the national parks of the Terai without the crowds.

Spring, from March to May, is the second-best time to visit. The weather gets steadily warmer in the run-up to the monsoon and the trekking routes are less crowded than in autumn, though cloud is more likely to roll in and obscure the views. This is also the time to observe Nepal's wonderful rhododendrons in technicolor bloom.

The pre-monsoon period in May and early June is a poor time to visit Nepal. The Terai and Kathmandu Valley become as hot and humid as a sauna, with temperatures soaring above 30°C, and the coming monsoon seems to hang over the country like a threat. Because of its lower altitude Pokhara is warmer and more pleasant than Kathmandu during winter, but hotter before the monsoon and wetter during it.

The monsoon rains lash Nepal from mid-June to September, driving all but the most dedicated tourists away. Rafting rivers become dangerously swollen, trails in the foothills turn into rivers of mud, roads are blocked by floods and landslides, national parks close, mountain views vanish behind rain clouds, and leeches come out of hiding to feast on fresh blood. If it's mountain scenery you are after, consider a trip to Tibet or Ladakh in India instead. On the other hand, there are fewer travellers around to spoil the peace and quiet, and there are plenty of colourful festivals in August and September (p24).

'It pays to monitor the political situation as you travel around Nepal.'

IS IT SAFE?

Since the end of Nepal's 10-year People's War in 2008, the simple answer to that question is yes. The Maoist rebels are now the elected government of the Federal Republic of Nepal, and the deposed former king lives as a civilian in a modest two-bedroom house in Nagarjun. Political violence still flares up occasionally – usually as a result of squabbles between the youth wing of the Maoists and the youth wing of the opposition – but travellers are rarely affected, except when there is a *bandh* (general strike) in Kathmandu.

In the event of a strike the best thing to do is to hole up in your hotel or a Thamel cafe with a good book. Huge crowds of protesters gather in the streets and things sometimes get out of hand. The mob may express its anger by smashing the windows of cars and shops – most locals pull down their shutters and wait till the storm blows over. During a strike all roads out of Kathmandu are blocked, buses stop running and taxi drivers refuse to travel; if you need to catch a flight try to travel first thing in the morning, before the crowds gather.

It pays to monitor the political situation as you travel around Nepal. The *Himalayan Times* (www.thehimalayantimes.com) and other newspapers contain advance warnings of upcoming demonstrations, and your hotel will probably warn you if there is likely to be trouble. If you have a rented motorcycle, keep it inside at your hotel until the strike is over. Do not try and run the blockades – travellers are as good a target as anyone else if the crowd feels like breaking something. See p366 for more advice on dealing with strikes and demonstrations.

During the uprising trekkers were often asked to pay unofficial 'trekking taxes' to help fund the Maoist cause. We have not heard of any such requests for money since the Communist Party of Nepal won the national elections in April 2008. However, there are still many armed people in the countryside

and there is always the chance that travellers may be asked for these sorts of 'donations' again. As elsewhere, it makes sense to check the security situation before travelling off the beaten track.

In general, crime has declined markedly as the threat of violence from Maoists and the Nepali army has subsided. However, there is still massive inequality in Nepal so it pays to heed local warnings about areas where crime is a problem. The risk is probably highest in former Maoist strongholds such as Dolpo, the area between the Kathmandu Valley and the Arniko Hwy to Tibet, and the far east and west of the country.

A more serious risk to safety in Nepal comes from public transport. Bus accidents are depressingly common, and few years pass without some kind of plane or helicopter disaster in the mountains. The best way to stay safe is to avoid travelling by road at night, when drivers speed dangerously and overtake with reckless abandon. Air travel in Nepal is as safe as it can be considering the landscape and the limited technology at Nepal's domestic airports – and flying is still safer than travelling by road. However, you can reach many trailheads by road or on foot if you prefer not to fly.

To stay abreast of the political situation in Nepal, consider the following tips:

- Follow the local news through Nepali website such as www.kan-tipuronline.com, www.thehimalayantimes.com, www.nepalnews.com, www.nepalitimes.com.np and www.nepalnews.net.
- Check out the latest postings on the Asia-Indian Subcontinent page of Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) or view the postings at www.trekinfo.com and <http://blog.com.np>.
- Always check the your government's travel advice before travelling (see boxed text Government Travel Advice, p362).
- Most travel warnings focus on administrative districts, which aren't shown on many maps; for an administrative map of Nepal go to www.ncthakur.itgo.com/map04.htm.

COSTS & MONEY

By Western standards Nepal is an amazingly cheap place to travel, though prices are creeping up as the Nepali economy recovers from the hard years of the People's War. Travelling by bus is a bargain and you can find budget accommodation almost everywhere, often for less than the price of a cup of coffee back home. Meals are also refreshingly inexpensive, except in Kathmandu where restaurants aimed at foreigners are increasingly charging Western prices.

If you go trekking food will be your biggest expense. Few lodges charge more than Rs 200 for a bed, but the bill for dinner and breakfast can easily top Rs 1000, particularly if you order alcoholic drinks. Guides and porters have also increased their rates, partly as a result of campaigns by the Maoists to ensure that rural people are properly rewarded for their labours. On one level this is righting a historical injustice, but you will have to dig deeper into your pockets than in previous years.

As a general guide you can live in Nepal for US\$5 to US\$10 a day if you stay in budget accommodation and adopt the Nepali diet of daal bhaat twice daily. However, this will not leave much left over to pay the admission fees to Nepal's national parks or historic sites. While trekking you can get by on US\$7 to US\$12 per day if you travel without porters and guides and stay in local teahouses, but budget for US\$15 per day if you want a beer with supper. The budget for organised treks will depend on the number of staff, the destination and the level of luxury that you require; bank on at least US\$25 per day.

HOW MUCH?

Budget hotel	US\$5-15
Room in a trekking lodge (per person)	Rs 50-200
Admission to a museum or historic square	Rs 100-200
Trekking porter per day	US\$8-12
Internet in Kathmandu per hour	Rs 20-40

LONELY PLANET INDEX

Litre of petrol/gas	Rs 90-100
Litre of bottled water	Rs 12-15
Bottle of Tuborg Beer (in a restaurant)	Rs 150-200
Plate of momos (steamed dumplings)	Rs 20-40
Souvenir T-shirt	Rs 400

'You can often negotiate a cheaper rate for a room if you agree to stay several days'

If you eat at traveller-oriented restaurants, stay in more comfortable budget hotels, visit museums and historic sites, and take taxis from time to time, your living costs will be around US\$15 to US\$20 a day. If you move to a midrange hotel, travel by tourist bus or chartered taxi and get involved in organised activities such as rafting, group trekking or skydiving, expect to pay US\$40 to US\$60.

The tourist centres of Kathmandu and Pokhara seem to suck money out of you by osmosis, partly because there are so many ways to spend it. Add 30% to your normal daily budget in either of these cities. Conversely, in the mountains, there are few places where you can spend your money – the costs of meals, a bed for the night and occasional cups of tea will be your only expenses.

During the Maoist uprising many hotels offered huge discounts, but this is much less widespread today. You can often negotiate a cheaper rate for a room if you agree to stay several days, but there is much less incentive for hotels to offer big discounts now that flights into Kathmandu are full. Discounts are easier to arrange in the off-season, from December to January and June to September. While trekking in the mountains you may be able to negotiate a cheaper room if you promise to eat your meals at the lodge where you stay.

Most midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants charge 13% VAT and a 10% service charge on top of published prices. Because of this, tipping is much less widespread than it used to be.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The Snow Leopard, by Peter Matthiessen, is partly an account of a trek to Dolpo in the west of Nepal in search of the elusive snow leopard. On another level, however, this moving book pursues the 'big questions' of spirituality, nature and Buddhism, with the Himalaya as a constant backdrop.

Chomolungma Sings the Blues: Travels Around Everest, by Ed Douglas, is a thought-provoking 'state-of-the-mountain' address detailing the side effects of Everest mountaineering – litter, pollution, exploitation – that are often airbrushed out of conventional mountaineering books.

To the Navel of the World, by Peter Somerville-Large, is a droll account of adventures and misadventures on a journey from Nepal to Tibet in the company of two yaks named Muster and Sod. His encounters with tourism in remote locations are very funny.

Travelers' Tales Nepal, edited by Rajendra Khadka, is an anthology of 37 interesting stories from a variety of writers including Peter Matthiessen, Jan Morris and ex-US president Jimmy Carter.

Video Night in Kathmandu, by Pico Iyer, gallivants all around Asia but the chapter on Nepal has some astute and amusing observations on the collision between Nepali tradition and Western culture.

Escape from Kathmandu, by Kim Stanley Robinson, is a collection of oddball short stories set in the Himalaya, including the engaging tale of a yeti rescued from scientific experimentation by two eccentric climbers.

The Soul of the Rhino by Hemanta Mishra, one of Nepal's leading conservationists, is an insightful introduction to the challenges facing Nepal's one-horned rhinos and the lives of the people who share their habitat.

Arresting God in Kathmandu, by Samrat Upadhyay, is a collection of nine short stories from the first Nepali writer to be published in English, offering interesting insights into how Kathmandu residents see their own city.

Beyond the Clouds: Journeys in Search of the Himalayan Kings, by Jonathan Gregson, is a portrait of the diverse royal families of the Himalaya, including the kings of Nepal and Mustang. *Blood Against*

TOP PICKS



FESTIVALS

Immerse yourself in Nepali culture by attending one of the country's thrilling festivals:

- Magh Sankranti, Devghat (January; p23)
- Losar, all Tibetan areas (February; p23)
- Maha Shivaratri, Pashupatinath (February/March; p23)
- Bisket Jatra chariot festival, Bhaktapur (mid-April; p23)
- Rato Machhendranath Festival, Patan (April/May; p24)
- Indra Jatra chariot festival, Kathmandu (August/September; p25)
- Dasain, nationwide (September/October; p25)
- Tihar and Deepawali, nationwide (October/November; p25)
- Mani Rimdu, Tengboche (November; p26)

CLASSIC EXPERIENCES

Pack your sense of adventure and hunt down the quintessential Nepali travel moment:

- Beating a path through the crowded bazaars of old Kathmandu en route to Durbar Sq (p119)
- Lighting a butter lamp in honour of the Buddha at Bodhnath (p173)
- Getting a blessing from a Hindu priest at Pashupatinath (p170) or Budhanilkantha (p179)
- Watching the sun rise over the temples and palaces of Patan (p181) or Bhaktapur (p195)
- Riding a rented motorcycle across the Kathmandu Valley to historic Panauti (p229)
- Tracking rhinos on elephant-back at Chitwan National Park (p287)
- Viewing Everest in the morning from Kala Pattar on the Everest Base Camp Trek (p340)
- Abseiling down waterfalls on a canyoning trip near the Tibetan border (p88)
- Rafting the wild white waters of the Sun Kosi (p110)
- Jumaring to the summit of Island Peak, Nepal's most accessible trekking peak (p111)
- Throwing yourself off Asia's highest bungee jump (p87) at Bhote Kosi

BOOKS

Great titles to read before setting off into the Himalaya:

- *Annapurna* by Maurice Herzog – a mountaineering classic from 1950
- *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer – the emotionally gripping story of the 1996 Everest disaster
- *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* by WE Bowman – a highly enjoyable spoof of the serious mountaineering tomes
- *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen – see opposite
- *Nepal Himalaya* by WH Tillman – delightful wit from the 1950s
- *Everest* by Walt Unsworth – the ultimate Everest reference
- *Touching My Father's Soul* by Jamling Tenzing Norgay – a moving mountaineering odyssey from the son of Tenzing Norgay
- *Fallen Giants* by M Isserman – a comprehensive guide to Himalayan mountaineering
- *Himalaya* by Michael Palin – tales of adventure on Annapurna and Everest by the charming ex-Python

the Snows by the same author focuses on the violent history of the Shah dynasty.

There are numerous coffee-table books about Nepal – look out for *East of Lo Manthang* by Peter Matthiessen and Thomas Laird, *Caravans of the Himalaya* by Eric Valli and *Nepal: The Kingdom in the Himalayas* by Toni Hagen, one of the first Europeans to visit this once-forbidden kingdom. Mustang is also covered by Michael Peissel's *Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom*, describing the author's ground-breaking trip in 1964.

You can find all the books listed in this chapter in Kathmandu.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Explore Nepal (www.explorenepal.com) Nepal portal with links grouped into useful categories. Also try www.nepalhomepage.com or www.nepaltourism.info.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Get advice from other travellers on the Thorn Tree, check out the Nepal web links and book accommodation online.

Ministry of Tourism (www.tourism.gov.np) A dry but useful official site with information on tourism, climbing and trekking regulations.

Nepal Mountaineering Association (www.nepalmountaineering.org) Everything you need to know about climbing and trekking to the top of Nepal's mountains.

Nepal Tourism Board (www.welcomenepal.com) The official government tourism site with news, a rundown of the country's sights and info on new areas being developed for trekking.

Trekinfo.com (www.trekinfo.com) You guessed it – all the trekking information that you'll need to get started, with a cracking forum board.

Visit Nepal (www.visitnepal.com) A comprehensive site with detailed information for travellers and links to loads of organisations within the country.

Yeti Zone (www.yetizone.com) An excellent day-by-day description of the big treks.

Events Calendar

Any visit to Nepal is almost certain to coincide with at least one of the country's spectacular festivals. Celebrations range from masked dances to epic bouts of tug of war, but the most impressive are the chariot processions, during which hundreds of enthusiastic devotees drag the 20m-tall chariots through the crowded city streets.

Exact festival dates change annually due to Nepal's lunar calendar (see boxed text *Nepali Calendars*, p369); the following list gives Nepal's major festivals in the months they usually occur, with the Nepali lunar months listed in brackets.

JANUARY–FEBRUARY (MAGH)

MAGH SANKRANTI

One of the few festivals not timed by the lunar calendar, this ritual bathing is dated by the movement north of the winter sun. Soon after, on the new-moon day, the Tribeni Mela (a *mela* is a fair) is held at various places including Devghat (p280) and Ridi Bazaar (p305). Devotees also bathe in the Bagmati River at Patan's Sankhamul ghat.

BASANTA PANCHAMI

The start of spring is celebrated in the middle of the lunar month by honouring Saraswati; since she is the goddess of learning this festival has special importance for students. The shrine to Saraswati just below the platform at the top of Swayambhunath is the most popular locale for the festivities, although Kathmandu is also popular. This is also a particularly auspicious time for weddings.

LOSAR

Tibetan New Year commences with the new moon in February and falls in either Magh or Falgun. In the Kathmandu Valley it is welcomed with particular fervour at the great stupa of Bodhnath (Boudha), as well as at Swayambhunath and in the Tibetan community at Jawalakhel, near Patan. Tibetan peoples from Dolpo in the west of Nepal to the Solu Khumbu region in the east all celebrate during this time.

FEBRUARY–MARCH (FALGUN)

MAHA SHIVARATRI

Shiva's birthday falls on the new-moon day of the Nepali month of Falgun. Festivities take

place at all Shiva temples, but most particularly at Pashupatinath, and hundreds of sadhus flock here from all over Nepal and India. The crowds bathing in the Bagmati's holy waters at this time are a colourful and wonderful sight.

HOLI

This exciting festival (also known as Fagu) takes place on the full-moon day in the month of Falgun. Occurring late in the dry season, the water that is sprayed around is a reminder of the cooling monsoon days to come. Also known as the Festival of Colours, coloured powder and water are also dispensed. Foreigners get special attention, so if you venture out on Holi leave your camera behind (or keep it well protected) and wear old clothes.

MARCH–APRIL (CHAITRA)

CHAITRA DASAIN

Also known as Small Dasain, this festival takes place exactly six months prior to the more important Dasain celebration. Both Dasains are dedicated to Durga and, once again, goats and buffaloes are sacrificed early in the morning in Kot Sq in central Kathmandu. The Chaitra Dasain sacrifices also signal the start of the month-long Seto (White) Machhendranath chariot festival in Kathmandu (see p136).

SETO MACHHENDRANATH

This chariot festival isn't as spectacular as the larger Rato Macchendranath festival in Patan (see p24) but it's still impressive. The festival starts with removing the image of Seto Machhendranath from the temple at Kel Tole in Kathmandu and placing it on a towering, tottering *rath* (chariot), which crowds drag through the narrow backstreets of the old town for the next four days.

APRIL–MAY (BAISAKH)

BISKET JATRA

Nepali New Year starts in mid-April, at the beginning of the month of Baisakh; the Bisket chariot festival in Bhaktapur is the most spectacular welcome for the New Year, and one of the most exciting annual events in the valley (see p206).

BALKUMARI JATRA

The small town of Thimi celebrates this exciting festival at this time (see p209). The New Year is also an important time in the valley for ritual bathing, and crowds of hill people visit the Buddhist stupas of Swayambhunath and Bodhnath.

GHORA JATRA

The Nepali army takes over the Tundikhel parade ground in Kathmandu on horse-racing day to display its equestrian (and motorcycle) skills. Legend has it that the horses are raced to trample devils who may rise from the ground to create havoc.

BALAJU JATRA

Thousands of pilgrims keep an all-night vigil at the Swayambhunath temple. The following day they trek to the 22 waterspouts at Balaju for a ritual bath.

RATO MACHHENDRANATH

Patan's biggest festival involves the month-long procession of a temple chariot, culminating in the showing of the sacred vest of the god Machhendranath (see p189). The festival begins on the full moon.

MAY–JUNE (JETH)**BUDDHA JAYANTI**

A great fair is held at Lumbini (the birthplace of the Buddha) on the date of the Buddha's birth (which is the same day as his enlightenment and passing into nirvana), and there are full-moon celebrations in Swayambhunath, Bodhnath and Patan. The Swayambhunath stupa's collection of rare thangkas is displayed on the southern wall of the courtyard only on this day each year. There are also colourful monk dances.

JULY–AUGUST (SAAUN)**GHANTA KARNA**

This festival is named after 'bell ears', a horrible demon who wore bell earrings to drown out the name of Vishnu, his sworn enemy. This festival, on the 14th day of the dark fortnight of Saaun, celebrates his destruction when a god, disguised as a frog, lured him into a deep well where the people stoned and clubbed him to death. Ghanta Karna is burnt in effigy on this night throughout Newari villages to cleanse evil from the land for another year.

NAGA PANCHAMI

On the fifth day after the new moon in the month of Saaun, *nagas* (serpent deities) are honoured all over the country. *Nagas* are considered to have magical powers over the monsoon rains. Protective pictures of the *nagas* are hung over doorways of houses and food is put out for snakes, including a bowl of rice. See p202 for more information.

JANAI PURNIMA

Around the full moon in the month of Saaun, all high-caste men (Chhetri and Brahmin) must change the janai (sacred thread), which they wear looped over their left shoulder. Janai Purnima also brings crowds of pilgrims to sacred Gosainkund lakes (p350), where they garland a statue of Shiva and throw coins at a sacred lingam, and the Kumbeshwar Temple in Patan (p188).

AUGUST–SEPTEMBER (BHADRA)**GAI JATRA**

This 'Cow Festival' takes place immediately after Janai Purnima and is dedicated to those who died during the preceding year. Newars believe that, after death, cows will guide them to Yama, the god of the underworld. On this day cows are led through the streets of the valley's towns and small boys dress up as cows. The festival is celebrated with maximum energy on the streets of Bhaktapur.

KRISHNA JAYANTI (KRISHNA'S BIRTHDAY)

The seventh day after the full moon in the month of Bhadra is celebrated as Krishna's birthday (also known as Krishnasthmi). An all-night vigil is kept at the Krishna Mandir in Patan on the night before his birthday: oil lamps light the temple and singing continues through the night.

TEEJ

The Festival of Women lasts from the second to the fifth day after the Bhadra new moon, and is particularly celebrated at Pashupatinath (p170). The festival starts on the first day with a sumptuous meal and party, until midnight when women commence a 24-hour fast. On the second day women dress in their red wedding saris and head to Shiva temples across the country to pray for a happy marriage. A ritual bathing ceremony brings the festival to a close.

GOKARNA AUNSI

The Nepali equivalent of Father's Day is celebrated by visiting fathers at their homes or honouring deceased fathers at the Shiva temple in Gokarna, in the Kathmandu Valley.

INDRA JATRA

This colourful festival at the end of the month combines homage to Indra with an annual appearance by Kathmandu's Kumari (a living goddess), paying respect to Bhairab and the commemoration of the conquest of the valley by Prithvi Narayan Shah. It also marks the end of the monsoon. The most spectacular celebrations are in Kathmandu (p138).

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER (ASHWIN)

PACHALI BHAIRAB JATRA

The fearsome form of Bhairab, Pachali Bhairab, is honoured on the fourth day of the bright fortnight in September or early October. Bhairab's bloodthirsty nature means that there are numerous animal sacrifices.

DASAIN

Nepal's biggest annual festival, Dasain, lasts for 15 days. It celebrates the victory of the goddess Durga over the forces of evil (personified in the buffalo demon Mahisasura): across the country hundreds of thousands of animals are sacrificed in Durga's honour. In the countryside, swings and primitive hand-powered Ferris wheels are erected at the entrance to villages. For information on disruptions to services during the festival see p370.

FULPATI (PHULPATI)

Fulpati ('Sacred Flowers') is the first really important day of Dasain and is called the 'Seventh Day' although it may not actually fall on the seventh day. A jar containing flowers is carried from Gorkha to Kathmandu and presented to the president at the Tundikhel parade ground. The flowers symbolise Taleju, the goddess of the former royal family. From the parade ground the flowers are transported on a palanquin to Hanuman Dhoka (the old Royal Palace) in Durbar Sq.

MAHA ASTAMI

The 'Great Eighth Day' and Kala Ratri, the 'Black Night', follow Fulpati, and mark the start of the sacrifices and offerings to Durga. The hundreds of goats you see contentedly grazing in the Tundikhel parkland prior to Maha Astami are living on borrowed time. At midnight, in a temple courtyard near Durbar Sq, eight buffaloes and 108 goats are beheaded, each with a single stroke of a sword or knife.

NAVAMI

The sacrifices continue on Kot Sq the next day: visitors can witness the bloodshed but you'll need to arrive early to secure a place. Blood is sprinkled on the wheels of cars and other vehicles to ensure

a safe year on the road. At the airport, each Nepal Airlines aircraft will have a goat sacrificed to it! The average Nepali does not eat much meat but, on this day, almost everybody in the country will find that goat is on the menu.

VIJAYA DASHAMI

The 10th day of the festival is a family affair: cards and greetings are exchanged, family visits are made and parents place a *tika* on their children's foreheads. The evening is marked by processions and masked dances across the Kathmandu Valley. The Kharga Jatra, or sword procession, features priests dressed up as the various gods and carrying wooden swords. This day also celebrates the victory of Lord Rama over the evil demon-king Ravana in the Ramayana.

KARTIKA PURNIMA

The full-moon day in September/October marks the end of Dasain. It is celebrated with gambling in many households: you will see even small children avidly putting a few coins down on various local games of chance.

OCTOBER–NOVEMBER (KARTIK)

TIHAR

Tihar (also called Diwali or Deepawali after the third day of celebrations) takes place in late October or early November. It is the most important Hindu festival in India; in Nepal it ranks second only to Dasain. The festival honours certain animals, starting with offerings of rice to the crows ('messengers of death' sent by the god Yama). Dogs (who guide departed souls across the river of the dead) are honoured on day two, with cows and bullocks following on days three and four.

DEEPAWALI (FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS)

The third day of Tihar is the most important, when Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, comes to visit every home that has been suitably lit for her presence. No one likes to turn down a visit from the goddess of wealth and so homes throughout the country are brightly lit with candles and lamps. The effect is highlighted because Deepawali falls on the new-moon day.

NEWARI NEW YEAR

The fourth day of Tihar is also the start of the New Year for the Newari people of the Kathmandu Valley.

BHAI TIKA

On the fifth day of Tihar, brothers and sisters are supposed to meet and place *tikas* on each others'

foreheads. Sisters offer small gifts of fruit and sweets to their brothers, while the brothers give their sisters money in return. The markets and bazaars are busy supplying the appropriate gifts.

HARIBODHINI EKADASHI

An *ekadashi* (the 11th day after each new and full moon) happens twice in every lunar month and is regarded as an auspicious day. The Haribodhini Ekadashi, in late October or early November (on the 11th day after the new moon), is the most important. On this day Vishnu awakens from his four-month monsoonal slumber. The best place to see the festivities is at the temple of the sleeping Vishnu in Budhanilkantha (p179).

MAHALAKSHMI PUJA

Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, and to farmers wealth is rice. Therefore this harvest festival, immediately following Haribodhini Ekadashi, honours the goddess with sacrifices and colourful dances.

MANI RIMDU

This popular Sherpa festival takes place at the monastery of Tengboche in the Solu Khumbu

region (p343) and features masked dances and dramas. The dates for the festivals are worked out according to the Tibetan lunar calendar (see www.tengboche.org for details). Another Mani Rimdu festival takes place six months later at Thame Gompa, a day's walk west of Namche Bazaar (p343).

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER (MANGSIR)

BALA CHATURDASHI

Like *ekadashi*, there are two *chaturdashis* each month. Bala Chaturdashi falls on the new-moon day in late November or early December. Pilgrims flock to Pashupatinath, burning oil lamps at night, scattering grain for the dead and bathing in the holy Bagmati River (see p173).

SITA BIBAHA PANCHAMI

On the fifth day of the bright fortnight in late November or early December, tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over Nepal and India flock to Janakpur (the birthplace of Sita) to celebrate the marriage of Sita to Rama. The wedding is re-enacted with a procession carrying Rama's image to Sita's temple by elephant (see p319).

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

One Week / Kathmandu to Kathmandu

A week will give you time to whistle around the cultural highlights of the Kathmandu Valley. Start off with the **walking tour** (p134) south from Thamel to the stunning temples and palaces of **Durbar Square** (p119).

On day two, walk to towering **Swayambhunath** (p163) and the quirky **National Museum** (p166). You can fill the afternoon with a trip to the famous **stupa** (p174) at glorious Bodhnath.

Make time for a full-day trip to Patan's spectacular **Durbar Square** (p181), combined with a slap-up **lunch** (p192). Complete the trilogy of former royal kingdoms with a full-day visit to medieval **Bhaktapur** (p194), ideally with an overnight stay.

Next get your Himalayan kick with dawn views at **Nagarkot** (p222) or **Dhulikhel** (p226) before returning to Kathmandu the next morning. Fill another day by mountain biking to the southern valley towns of **Kirtipur** (p215) and **Bungamati** (p219).

On your last day, take time for some serious **shopping** (p157) in Kathmandu or the **fair trade shops** (p193) of Patan.

Fans of culture and human creativity will find glorious palaces, sanctified stupas and towering temples scattered across the hillsides on the 40km trip exploring the Kathmandu Valley.



FROM BUDDHA TO BOUDHA**Two Weeks / Lumbini to Bodhnath**

To catch some culture as you head north from the Indian border to Kathmandu, kick off at **Lumbini** (p296), the birthplace of the Buddha, 20km from the border crossing. Take your time exploring this world map of Buddhist temples, then spend the next day at the little-visited archaeological site of **Tilaurakot** (p300), where the Buddha once ruled as a pampered prince.

From Lumbini make a beeline for **Chitwan National Park** (p281), taking two or three days to get up close and personal with the wildlife. You can't get more up close and personal than helping out at **elephant bathtime** (p287).

From Chitwan take the day-long tourist bus to **Pokhara** (p253) for your first proper peek at the mountains. While in the Pokhara area, take a few days to hike up to the **World Peace Pagoda** (p258), to enjoy the views at lofty **Sarangkot** (p272) or plummet past the peaks on a **tandem paraglide** (p88).

Another long bus trip will take you to **Kathmandu** (p113), where you can fill a week with the pick of the Kathmandu Valley itinerary (p27). Make time to explore the backstreets of Bhaktapur on a **walking tour** (p198), gain a deeper understanding of Buddhist art at **Patan Museum** (p186) and enjoy the views over the city at dusk from **Swayambhunath** (p163).

There should just be time for an overnight sortie to experience wild adventure activities at the **Last Resort** (p232) or **Borderlands Resort** (p231), which are both a half-day drive from Kathmandu towards the Tibetan border.

On your last day, give thanks for a head-spinning trip at **Bodhnath** (p173) where you can hit the **shops** (p178) and pick up a statue, Buddha or bundle of prayer flags to take home.

Mixing contemplative temple tours, ancient pilgrimage sites and ruins with wilderness adventures, this 500km route is one part meditation with two parts adrenaline.



ROAMING HIGH & LOW

One Month / Kathmandu to Kathmandu

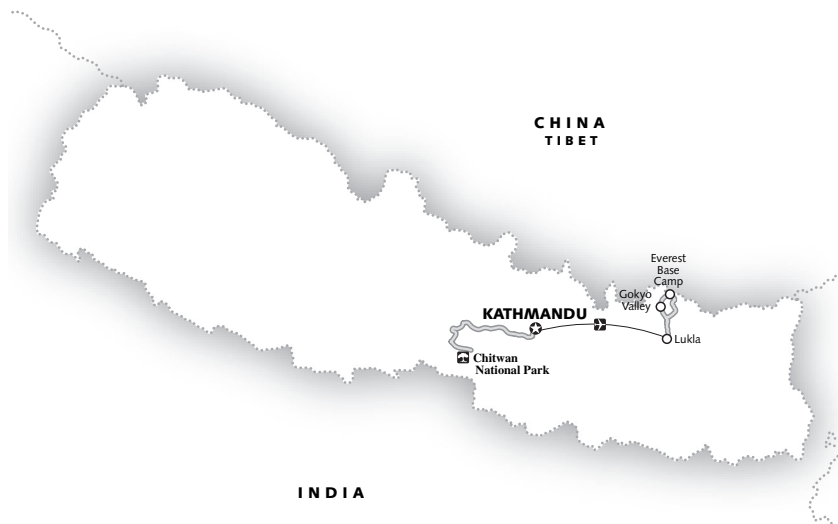
With a month to spare, you can explore the Kathmandu Valley and fit in a trek into the mighty Himalaya. To truly experience Nepal and its people you have to do it on foot, but you don't have to give up all creature comforts. There are lodges along the major trail routes offering simple bedrooms, solar-powered showers, hot tea, high-carb meals, sanity-restoring chocolate and heated *chang* (rice beer).

From Kathmandu, fly east to **Lukla** (book return flights from Lukla to Kathmandu before arriving in Nepal). From here you can embark on a trek through truly wild scenery to **Everest Base Camp** (p340). This is perhaps the definitive Himalayan trek, climbing among snow peaks to the base of the tallest mountain on earth, but the trek takes at least two weeks because of the gain in altitude.

With a month to play with, consider doing an Everest loop, returning from Base Camp via the spectacular **Gokyo Valley** (p345) for a total trek of around 21 days. Because of the changeable weather in Nepal, it's wise to leave yourself a buffer at the end of the trip in case flights are cancelled. Do your Kathmandu Valley sightseeing *after* the trek, not before.

After the thrills and chills of the mountains, go southwest from Kathmandu to warm your toes in steamy **Chitwan National Park** (p281) while you scan the jungle for rhinos and tigers. Finish off by exploring the highlights of the Kathmandu Valley itinerary (p27). Go **shopping** (p157) for a singing bowl in Kathmandu before you board the plane home.

Experience Nepal's 'peaks and troughs' on a trek to the highest peak on earth and a ramble around the fascinating Kathmandu Valley. Take your time and pause at teahouses en route.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

ONCE AROUND THE MIDDLE

Many of the most interesting attractions are scattered like pearls around the impenetrable hills in the middle of Nepal. Start with Kathmandu's **temples and stupas** (p119), then book a **rafting trip** (p106) east along the Trisuli. After a few days churning on the rapids enjoy a smoother ride on the **Manakamana cable car** (p237) to experience the strange atmosphere of a Tantric temple.

Next stop is **Bandipur** (p241), a little-visited gem of a village where you can stroll to eerie caverns and relax among some wondrous Newari architecture. From here, roll on to Pokhara for a **row-boat ride** (p260) around the lake and a quick jaunt across to **Begnas Tal** (p274).

Take the winding Siddhartha Hwy south to charming **Tansen** (p302), the base for some great day hikes. Continue south to peaceful **Lumbini** (p296) to amble around the Buddhist monasteries by bicycle.

Having come this far, it would be a shame to miss **Chitwan National Park** (p281). If budget allows, stay at one of the lodges deep inside the park. You might also consider an uphill tramp to the **Chepang hills** (p238) or a thoughtful stroll to the sacred village of **Devghat** (p280).

The logical return route would be to follow the snaking Tribhuvan Hwy north to **Daman** (p306), but you could also travel east to the new highway from Bardibas to **Dhulikhel** (p226), allowing time for a detour to the temple-town of **Janakpur** (p316).

Ditch the crowds on a 400km loop around Nepal's cultural heartland, picking the best from the hills and plains. Take an excellent day hike that won't require trekking boots or muscles of steel!

CHINA
TIBET



INDIA

TAILORED TRIPS

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

The entire Kathmandu Valley is a World Heritage area made up of seven individual sites. Most visitors to the country are floored by the architectural wonders of the **Durbar Squares** (Kathmandu, p119; Patan, p181; Bhaktapur, p201).

There is a hierarchy to these three medieval sites – Patan’s Durbar Sq is the most impressive, while Kathmandu’s is the busiest and Bhaktapur’s is the most peaceful, especially if you arrive there at first light, before the tourist crowds descend.

Swayambhunath’s swooningly beautiful Buddhist **stupa** (p164) is matched by the impressive **Bodhnath stupa** (p174), and both are on the heritage list, as is the revered Hindu **Pashupatinath temple complex** (p170), set beside the dirty but divine Bagmati River.

The last two cultural heritage sites are the statue-filled **Changu Narayan Temple** (p210), an open-air museum of priceless stone sculpture, and the **birthplace of the Buddha** (p297) at Lumbini, which is building itself a new heritage in the form of gleaming temples constructed by every Buddhist nation.

Nepal also has two natural World Heritage sites: the breathless, mountain scenery of **Sagarmatha National Park** (p343), surrounding Mt

Everest and accessible on the Everest Base Camp Trek, and the steamy, rhino-rumbling, tiger-striped jungles of **Chitwan National Park** (p281).

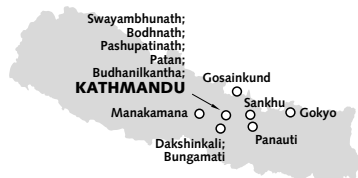
A SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

There’s soul in them thar hills, and this is where to find it. Start your quest for inner knowledge with a dawn ceremonial circuit around **Swayambhunath hill** (p163) and a sunset trip to **Bodhnath** (p173) – come during full moon when the stupa is lit up by thousands of flickering butter lamps. Contemplate the meaning of life and death on the **cremation ghats** (p171) of Pashupatinath or the **sacrificial altars** of Dakshinkali (p218) or Manakamana (p237).

For less gruesome rituals, head north across the valley to **Budhanilkantha** (p179), where devotees pile offerings onto a giant floating statue of Narayan, the creator of the universe. Nepal’s spiritual side goes into overdrive for its vivid festivals – visit in April or May when devotees haul a sacred image of Rato Machhendranath around Patan in a towering, medieval chariot at the **Rato Machhendranath festival** (p189).

Often the most spiritual places are away from the crowds. Find space for reflection on the uplifting trek to the sacred lake at **Gosainkund** (p350) or pay your respects at Tengboche Monastery before crossing the Cho La pass from the Khumbu Valley to the sacred lakes at **Gokyo** (p345).

Lastly, see how ordinary people blend spirituality into their daily lives at **Sankhu** (p214), **Bungamati** (p219) or temple-filled **Panauti** (p229).



The Authors



JOE BINDLOSS **Coordinating author, Around the Kathmandu Valley, Kathmandu to Pokhara**

Joe made his first trip to Nepal as a fresh-faced backpacker in the early 1990s and something clicked. Since then, he's been back numerous times to walk the trekking trails of the Khumbu and explore the Kathmandu Valley by rented motorcycle. His favourite moment while researching this book was climbing the 5420m Cho La pass on a blanket of freshly fallen snow. The lowlight was having emergency root canal surgery after cracking a tooth on a tough piece of buffalo jerky. When not researching guidebooks for Lonely Planet, Joe lives in London with a growing collection of Buddhist paraphernalia picked up on his travels.



TRENT HOLDEN **Pokhara, the Terai & Mahabharat Range**

In all the countries he's travelled, Trent has found that nowhere compares to the craziness and serendipity of the subcontinent. Hence it's to Trent's great pleasure that *Nepal 8* is his first assignment for Lonely Planet. He first visited Nepal in 2001, during the tragedy of the royal massacre, and (despite this shock) it is a country he has felt passionate about ever since. Working as an editor at Melbourne's Lonely Planet office for the past five years, he figured it was about time to escape the nine-to-five grind for the more exciting adventures of authoring. Trent lives in Melbourne, and loves the Ramones and reading Charles Bukowski.



BRADLEY MAYHEW **Kathmandu, Trekking**

A self-professed mountain junkie, Bradley has been travelling to Nepal and the Himalaya for over 15 years, including several months each in north Pakistan, Ladakh, Tibet and Bhutan. Never happier than when he's above 4000m, British-born Bradley currently lives under the big skies of Yellowstone County, Montana.

He coordinated the last two editions of this Nepal guide and is the coauthor of Lonely Planet's *Tibet*, *Bhutan* and *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*, as well as a dozen other titles. Bradley is currently filming a five-part documentary retracing the route of Marco Polo.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at lonelyplanet.com.

