



The Terai & Mahabharat Range

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

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Why Go?

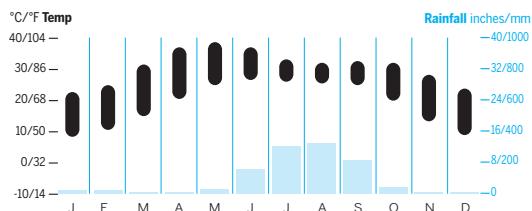
Hear the word 'Nepal' and an image of the flat, hot plains of the Terai is probably not the first to come to mind. However, this narrow strip of land wedged between the Indian border and the Himalaya holds some of Nepal's most fascinating and varied attractions, including its famous national parks, Chitwan and Bardia – home to tigers, rhinos and elephants.

The Terai is also home to over half Nepal's population, a colourful mix of cultures showcased through the thatched mud-hut villages of the Tharu and the vibrant art of the Mithila. Lumbini is renowned as the birthplace of the Buddha and attracts pilgrims from around the world. Likewise, Janakpur, an important Hindu pilgrimage town, pulsates with religious fervour.

Rising from the Terai are the Chure Hills, followed by the Mahabharat Range, a region of dramatic gorges, awe-inspiring terracing and enduring mountain towns.

When to Go

Bhairawa



Oct–March

Ideal climate to visit the Terai; best wildlife viewing from January.

Nov–Dec

See Sita Bibaha Panchami, celebrating Sita's marriage to Rama.

Late Dec

Chitwan Festival is known for its elephant race; it also has food stalls.

History

In 563 BC, the queen of the tiny kingdom of Kapilavastu gave birth to a son named Siddhartha Gautama. Thirty-five years later, under a Bodhi (pipal) tree at Bodhgaya in India, Buddhism was born. The Indian Buddhist emperor Ashoka made a famous pilgrimage here in 249 BC, leaving a commemorative pillar at the site of the Buddha's birth in Lumbini.

Nepal also played a pivotal role in the development of Hinduism. Sita, the wife of Rama and heroine of the Ramayana, was the daughter of the historical king Janak, who ruled large parts of the plains from his capital at Janakpur. Janak founded the Mithila kingdom, which flourished until the 3rd century AD when the Guptas from Patna seized its lands.

The depopulation of the Terai began in earnest in the 14th century, when the Mughals swept across the plains of northern India. Hundreds of thousands of Hindu and Buddhist refugees fled into the hills, many settling in the Kathmandu Valley, which later rose to prominence as the capital of the Shah dynasty. Aided by legions of fearsome Gurkha warriors, the Shahs reclaimed the plains, expanding the borders of Nepal to twice their modern size.

Although the British never conquered Nepal, they had regular skirmishes with the Shahs. A treaty was signed in 1816 that trimmed the kingdom to roughly its current borders. Nepal later regained some additional land (including the city of Nepalgunj) as a reward for assisting the British in the 1857 Indian Uprising.

Most of the Terai was heavily forested until the late 1950s. There were scattered settlements and the indigenous Tharu people were widely dispersed through the region. In 1954, drainage programs and DDT spraying markedly reduced the incidence of malaria, enabling mass migration from India and the hills. Fertile soils and easy accessibility led to rapid development.

Today, the Tharu are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Nepal, and huge areas of the forest have been cleared for farmland. Nevertheless, patches of wilderness remain, conserved in a series of national parks and community forests.

Despite the end of the Maoist insurgency, the Terai is still not entirely free of political instability. The region has seen the emergence of Madhesi insurgent groups that have

launched an often-violent campaign for greater equality. It's advisable to stay informed of the situation if travelling in the region.

Climate

The Terai has a similar climate to the northern plains of India: hot as a furnace from May to October and drenched by monsoon rains from June to September. Try to visit in winter (November to February) when skies are clear and temperatures are moderate.

i Getting There & Away

The Terai is easily accessible from Kathmandu and Pokhara in Nepal and from West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India. The Indian rail network passes close to several of the most important border crossings and there are frequent bus and air connections from the Terai to towns and villages across Nepal.

i Getting Around

The annual monsoon rains can severely affect transport in the region – dirt roads turn to mud, dry streambeds become raging torrents, and roads and bridges are routinely washed away.

BICYCLE

On the face of it, the Terai is well suited to cycling: much of the terrain is pool-table flat and there are villages every few kilometres. However, the condition of the roads, the traffic density and unpredictable driver behaviour require riders to be super-alert and highly cautious. If you run out of steam or courage along the way, you can usually put your bike on the roof of a bus. See p296 for details of biking routes from Kathmandu to Hetauda and Hetauda to Mugling, as well as general biking information.

BUS

Buses and minibuses are the main form of transport around the Terai. However, road safety can be an issue, particularly for night travel. To maximise safety, travel in daylight hours and avoid the front seats.

Roof riding is prohibited in the Kathmandu Valley, but there is no such restriction in the Terai. Riding on the luggage rack with the wind in your hair can be an exhilarating experience, but you will need to protect yourself from the elements. See p379 for more details on bus travel.

CENTRAL TERAI

The Central Terai is the most visited part of the plains. The highway from Mugling to Narayangarh is the principal route south from Kathmandu and Pokhara, and the border crossing at Sunauli is the most popular