

Gateway Cities

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Which City?

Given the complicated logistics of getting into Tibet, it's advisable to at least overnight in a gateway city en route to Lhasa, either to pick up your TTB permit, meet up with your fellow travellers or to buffer potential delays in your international flights. Most travellers reach Lhasa from Chéngdū or Kathmandu, though it's equally feasible to fly or train in from Běijīng, Xíníng, Guǎngzhōu or a half-dozen other Chinese cities.

Kathmandu

Crowded, colourful and chaotic Kathmandu has been a popular destination for travellers since the Hippy Trail in the '60s and '70s, but there are a couple of drawbacks to entering Tibet from here. Prime among these is the time needed to get a Chinese visa (group visas only; see p346) and the hassle that this group visa brings if you plan to travel onwards inside China. However, if you're looking for a cheap overland tour to Lhasa (or even Mt Kailash) and plan to return to Nepal, it's a fairly good choice. It's also a great way to end a trip to Tibet.

Chéngdū

Sichuān's huge capital city has long been the main logistical gateway to Tibet. With ever-increasing international air connections and excellent hostels well used to helping travellers headed to Tibet, it's still a logical choice (unless you want to travel by train, then Xíníng is better). It's also a great starting point for overland trips to Lhasa or into the ethnically Tibetan areas of western Sichuān.

KATHMANDU

201 / POP 822,000 / ELEV 1300M

Kathmandu is a fascinating, sometimes maddening city that seems to straddle both the 15th and 20th centuries. Most people head straight for the Thamel district, a travellers' mecca and the place to get a yak steak, buy a cut-priced down jacket, shop for Buddhas or hard-to-find books on Tibet. But it's also a bit of a zoo, with too many vehicles, Tiger-balm peddlars and trekking touts all sharing the same narrow, footpath-less roads. A few days here is plenty. For more info, see Lonely Planet's *Nepal* guide.

During the June to August monsoon season (when most visitors travel to or from Tibet) it is usually humid and rainy in Kathmandu.

Dangers & Annoyances

Public disturbances have been standard in Nepal for years now and can turn ugly.

Check news reports and your own country's travel warnings for the current situation.

City-wide strikes (*bandh*) occasionally paralyse the city, shutting down businesses and making transport and getting to the airport difficult. The Nepal Tourism Board often runs tourist buses to the airport at this time, or ask your hotel whether taxis can run to the airport.

Kathmandu is currently plagued by power strikes lasting up to 16 hours a day – choose a hotel with a generator (and a room at the other end of the building). Congestion and pollution are crippling problems in Kathmandu and many people wear a face mask when moving around town.

Sights

Durbar Square

SQUARE

(admission Rs 200) Kathmandu's royal collection of Newari-styled buildings has been designated a World Heritage Site. An early morning walk here through the maze-like

Central Kathmandu

