

Gateway Cities

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Best Places to Stay Kathmandu

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Best Places to Stay Chéngdū

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Which City?

Given the complicated logistics of getting into Tibet, it's advisable to at least stay overnight in a gateway city en route to Lhasa, either to pick up your Tibet Tourism Bureau (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, Xīníng, 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) and the hassle that this group visa brings if you plan to travel further inside China. However, if you want to get a taste of both sides of the Himalaya and plan to return to Nepal, it's an interesting choice. It's also an extremely satisfying way to end an overland trip through China and 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 that are very much used to helping travellers headed to Tibet, it's still a logical choice (unless you want to travel by train, then Xīníng is better). It's also a great starting point for exploring the ethnically Tibetan areas of western Sichuān.

KATHMANDU

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Kathmandu is an endlessly interesting, and 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, a cut-price down jacket, buddhas and hard-to-find books on Tibet. But it's also a bit of a tourist zoo, with too many vehicles, Tiger-balm pedlars and trekking touts all sharing the same narrow, footpath-less roads. A few days here is plenty. For full details, 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, with average highs peaking at 28°C.

Dangers & Annoyances

There are far fewer political demonstrations and strikes in Nepal than there were a few years ago but it's still possible that you might be affected by a disturbance. Check news reports and your own country's travel warnings for the current situation.

During the monsoon months landslides can affect travel from Tibet; in 2014 a massive landslide blocked the Kathmandu–Tibet road for days.

Kathmandu is 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

HISTORIC SITE

(Royal Square; foreigner/SAARC Rs 750/150, no student tickets; ☎ ticket office 7am–7pm) Kathmandu's Durbar Sq was where the city's kings were once crowned and legitimised, and from where they ruled ('durbar' means palace). As such, the square remains the traditional heart of the old town and Kathmandu's most spectacular legacy of traditional architecture.

It's easy to spend hours wandering around the square and watching the world go by from the terraced platforms of the towering **Maju Deval**; it's a wonderful way to get a feel for the city. Although most of the square dates from the 17th and 18th centuries (many of the original buildings are much older), a great deal of rebuilding hap-

pened after the great earthquake of 1934. The entire square was designated a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1979.

The Durbar Sq area is actually made up of three loosely linked squares. To the south is the open Basantapur Sq area, a former royal elephant stables that now houses souvenir stalls and off which runs Freak St. The main Durbar Sq area, with its popular watch-the-world-go-by temples, is to the west. Running northeast is a second part of Durbar Sq, which contains the entrance to the **Hanuman Dhoka** and an assortment of temples. From this open area **Makhan Tole**, at one time the main road in Kathmandu and still the most interesting street to walk down, continues northeast.

A good place to start an exploration of the square is with what may well be the oldest building in the valley, the unprepossessing **Kasthamandap**.

Durbar Square (Patan)

HISTORIC SITE

(foreigner/SAARC Rs 500/150) The ancient Royal Palace of Patan faces on to a magnificent Durbar Square. This concentrated mass of temples is perhaps the most visually stunning display of Newari architecture to be seen in Nepal. Temple construction in the square went into overdrive during the Malla period (14th to 18th centuries), particularly during the reign of King Siddhi Narsingh Malla (1619–60).

Swayambhunath Stupa

BUDDHIST STUPA

(foreigner/SAARC Rs 200/50) The Swayambhunath stupa is of the crowning glories of Kathmandu Valley architecture. This perfectly proportioned monument rises through a whitewashed dome to a gilded spire, from where four faces of the Buddha stare out across the valley in the cardinal directions. The nose-like squiggle below the piercing eyes is actually the Nepali number *ek* (one), signifying unity, and above is a third eye signifying the all-seeing insight of the Buddha.

Bodhnath Stupa

BUDDHIST STUPA

(foreigner/SAARC Rs 150/40) The first stupa at Bodhnath was built sometime after AD 600, when the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, converted to Buddhism. In terms of grace and purity of line, no other stupa in Nepal comes close to Bodhnath. From its whitewashed dome to its gilded tower painted with the all-seeing eyes of the Buddha, the monument is perfectly proportioned.