

Kathmandu



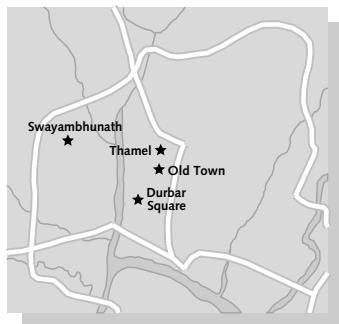
For many, stepping off a plane into Kathmandu is a pupil-dilating experience, a riot of sights, sounds, colours and smells that can quickly lead to sensory overload. Whether you're barreling down the atmospheric winding streets of the old town in a rickshaw, marvelling at the exquisite medieval temples of Durbar Sq or dodging the tiger balm sellers and trekking touts in Thamel, Kathmandu can be an intoxicating, amazing and exhausting place.

As the largest city in the country, Kathmandu is regularly paralysed by political ferment, electricity cuts and traffic seizures on a scale that is almost apocalyptic. Town planning is not Kathmandu's greatest strength. The fact that the city keeps moving at all is a testament to the patience and equanimity of its people. Take a walk through the backstreets, however, and the capital's rich cultural and artistic heritage reveals itself in hidden temples overflowing with marigolds, courtyards full of drying chillies and rice, and tiny hobbit-sized workshops.

Since the 1960s Kathmandu has been supplying the closest thing backpackers have to Disneyland and, with over 2500 tourist-related business in 5 sq kilometres, Thamel boasts a collection of hotels, restaurants, trekking agencies, bakeries and shops that is rivalled only by Bangkok's Khao San Rd. This endlessly fascinating, sometimes infuriating, city is well worth a week of your time, but it's easy to spend too much time stuck in touristy Thamel. Enjoy the internet cafes, the espresso and the lemon cheesecake, but make sure you also get out into the 'real Nepal' before your time runs out.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Follow our walking tours through the labyrinthine backstreets of the **old town** (p134), bursting with hidden courtyards and little-known temples
- Soak up the amazing architectural monuments of **Durbar Square** (p119), an artistic and architectural tradition that rivals the great cities of Europe
- Dine on momos and wild boar to the beat of *madal* drums and *bansari* flutes at one of the city's superb **Newari restaurants** (p152)
- Ensure the enduring love of friends and family by snapping up the bargains in Thamel's excellent **shops** (p157)
- Chill out in one of Thamel's rooftop garden **restaurants** (p149), with a good book, a pot of masala tea and a slice of chocolate cake
- Take a day trip to the nearby Unesco World Heritage site of **Swayambhunath** (p163)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 01

■ POPULATION: 1 MILLION

■ ELEVATION: 1337M

