

KATHMANDU IN SEPTEMBER

As the blistering summer ends and with winter to set in, autumn in Nepal is one of the most pleasant seasons to explore the Kathmandu Valley.



ABOVE:
Mt. Everest as
seen from the
Everest Flight

RIGHT:
Boudhanath
Stupa built
during the 5th
century AD

BOTTOM:
Arya Ghat, the
location for
cremations

With clear skies, deep green landscapes, sculptured white caps of the Himalayan Range and red brick and terracotta structures that surround the city, Kathmandu offers visitors an array of breath-taking panoramas, mystical temples, wandering sadhus and UNESCO World Heritage Sites coupled unfortunately, with the reality of a nation struggling with poverty and chaos.

Nestled amidst the magnificent peaks of the Himalayan range and at an elevation of approximately 1,400 metres in a bowl shaped valley in central Nepal, Kathmandu is a kaleidoscope of colours. Rich tapestries of crop lands, rivers and brown-thatched houses encircle the commercial areas of Thamel, Basantapur, and Boudha. The dust filled streets are bustling with activity at every turn. Touts and beggars line the touristy areas and learning to ignore them is a key element in an enjoyable trip.

For most people, Nepal invokes images of snow clad mountains and mountaineers. While that is indeed a true picture with Kathmandu itself being surrounded by four great peaks – Shivapuri, Phulchoki, Nagarjun and Chandragiri, there is a lot more to Nepal than the mountains. It is the seat of two ancient religions of

Hinduism and Buddhism and therefore a great melting point for the two great cultures of India and China with whom it shares its borders.

This is an ancient land caught up in the throes of modern age, trying hard to find a balance between its rich culture and the trappings of the 21st century. Any visitor to this great land experiences awe and annoyance in equal measure. The rag tag airport with corrupt and inept immigration officials, chaotic traffic jams, overflowing garbage, stench of animal faeces, utter poverty and unpaved roads are the ugly side which is bound to at times outshine the beautiful.

But those with a stomach to take this into stride are in for some fascinating and thrilling experiences, for there are lots of beauty on offer in terms of landscape and the people who inhabit this land.





Accommodation in Kathmandu Valley

The key to enjoying Kathmandu is getting a decent accommodation. It is important to note that your hotel in more ways than one acts as your sanctuary whenever you need to take a break from the maddening crowds and snarling traffic of the city. With the exchange rate at NPR 88 to a US Dollar, one can find some pretty decent accommodation indeed. Kathmandu struggles with electric power cuts known as power shedding on a daily basis where 12 hour power cuts is a way of life for

the average Nepali. It does not take too much imagination to visualize a power cut in the midst of a bath or while using the internet or amidst many other important things that require electricity.

A reliable hotel with a generator set will ease these problems immensely. And one of the best places to stay in Kathmandu that transports its visitors into a luxurious experience of first class accommodation is the Dwarika Hotel in Battisputali.

Located at just a 10 minute drive from the International Airport,



ABOVE:
10% of sages
in Kathmandu
are women.
They are called
sadhvis

RIGHT:
Pashupatinath
Temple, Nepal's
most sacred
Hindu shrine

BOTTOM:
The palaces
of the Malla
& Shah kings
are within the
Kathmandu
Durbar Square

the hotel is an amalgamation of Nepali heritage, architecture and hospitality. Dwarika Hotel also houses an extensive collection of artefacts from the 13th century onwards with its buildings and courtyards housing some of the country's best craftsmanship, capturing the beauty and spirit of an ancient city. With only 87 rooms in the hotel, the service you will experience is truly personalised.

Exploring the Three Kingdoms

Kathmandu has three ancient Kingdoms. Do not however expect that you would be visiting huge sprawling palaces with gardens and fountains. What you see are much smaller structures located within a bazaar of houses and human populace.

The three ancient medieval kingdoms, namely Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan, previously walled fortresses known as Durbar (Palace) Squares are among the region's revered World Heritage Sites. Home to the Malla and Shah Kings of old, these palatial squares are filled with guardian deities looking out from their sanctuaries and intricate wood carvings in every lintel, upright, tympanum, gateway and window, forming a well-orchestrated symphony of Newari architecture.

The most popular location within the Kathmandu Durbar Square is the Kumari Ghar that houses the living goddess of Kathmandu. Built in 1757, the temple is known for its magnificent carvings as well as its divine inhabitant. There is a tradition of worshipping a young pre-pubescent girl whom devotees believe is the reincarnation of the demon-slaying Hindu goddess Durga. Locals and travellers alike visit the Kumari to receive her blessings. With a little bit of patience, discovering the hidden beauty of these palace squares are worth the effort if ancient architecture is of interest.

Boarding a Mountain Flight

The highlight of a trip to Kathmandu is the opportunity to set your eyes up-close on majestic Mount Everest.

Trekking to the Everest Base Camp isn't for everybody. It requires patience, high endurance and the ability to adapt to truly basic amenities while outdoors. The mountain flight on the other hand offers passengers the ability to soak in the beauty of the snow covered peaks on a one hour flight above the Himalayas.

Board a Beechcraft 1900c pressurized twin-engine aircraft for an experience of a lifetime. Guna Airlines is one of many airlines that offer the mountain flight operating out of the Domestic Airport in Kathmandu. Tickets at USD200 can be acquired online or through a travel agent. The best flight to be on is the first flight of the day that departs at 6.30am as the skies are much clearer.

As the plane reaches closer to the Himalayan range, you will be able to see a total of 20 peaks with Mount Everest or Sagarmatha as it is known to locals being peak number sixteen. Each passenger will have the opportunity to head to the cockpit to get a better view of the colossal sculptured garden of jagged white and greys.

Visiting Religious Sites in the Valley

Nepal is a deeply religious place boasting 2000 year old temples. Pashupatinath, a temple on the banks of the Bagmati River dedicated to Lord Shiva is



considered the holiest Hindu pilgrimage destination in the country. On the river banks, the Hindus cremate their dead in a place called the Arya Ghat.

Entrance into the main temple courtyard is permitted only to those of the Hindu faith but visitors are allowed to



take pictures of the temple entrance. Photographing Sadhus and Tantriks covered in ash will cost you a fee, so avoid photographing them if you are not in the mood to spend a few dollars.

Budhanilkantha is a temple located at the base of the Shivapuri Hills known for its fascinating statue of Lord Vishnu reclining on a bed of coiled snakes in the middle of a small pond. The statue is said to be sculpted from a single block of stone. Photography is not allowed inside the temple but you could take a few snapshot through the wooden fencing.

Climb 365 ancient steps up to the Swayambhunath complex that consists of a stupa and some holy Buddhist shrines. The golden tower on top of the white stupa has the famous Buddha eyes gazing from

all four sides to symbolise the all-seeing Primordial Buddha.

A centre for Tibetan culture, Boudhanath Stupa is located on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu. It is considered the holiest Buddhist stupa outside of Tibet. Built approximately in the 14th century, the temple is an important centre of Tibetan Buddhism. Standing on a massive three-levelled Mandala styled platform, the stupa is considered the cleanest religious site in the whole of Kathmandu Valley.

Shopping in Darkness

Renowned for their silver jewellery, copper and brass statues, felt products, hand-made paper, and traditional hand-painted Tibetan paintings, Kathmandu is a shopper's paradise for those with a keen sense for haggling. Though Bhaktapur is known for pottery and Patan is known for woodwork and carpets, Thamel is a one-stop-shop for all items found throughout Nepal. But what makes shopping in Thamel so unique is the experience of shopping in the dark.

With constant extended power cuts, the locals carry on business as usual, unfazed and busy ushering you into their stores that sit in complete darkness. The shops in Thamel are often narrow, long and without windows hence making it very difficult to shop. If luck is on your side, what you want might just be on display outside the shop.

The Kathmandu Charm

Kathmandu is an ancient city which offers a symbiosis of Hinduism, Buddhism and Tantrism. Its ancient kingdoms, temples and courtyards over hundreds of years have shaped the imagination of many a visitor, be it a poet, a writer or a commoner. The city grips you and shakes your soul. It may shake you spiritually or perhaps change your social opinion but you will depart from it with some deep impression indeed. ^{AS}

TRAVEL TIPS

Autumn in Nepal starts from the month of September to November with an average temperature of 20 to 26°C (59 to 75 Degree Fahrenheit). You won't need any warm clothing but instead bring along a raincoat for it does rain every now and then in the evenings. Autumn is when Nepal has the highest influx of tourist activity as it is a peak season for trekking.

When entering or exiting the airport terminal, make sure to hold on to your luggage firmly and assertively decline any touts from whisking your bags away. If they manage to do so, you will be obliged to pay them for services you didn't need in the first place.

Moving around in Kathmandu's tiny white taxis can be a pretty tricky feat. If haggling for a price from one destination to another is not your forte, choose to get a car and driver from a reputable tour company for your entire stay. It turns out to be cheaper, more convenient and much safer.

Do not consume water in restaurants unless it comes from a sealed bottle which is opened in front of you. Kathmandu Valley suffers a severe drinking water supply crisis and travellers often fall ill from drinking contaminated water.

It is impossible to get a prepaid Blackberry or iPhone data service unless you sign up for an expensive post-paid service that requires too much paperwork. Your best bet is to get a simple sim card that supports both local and international calls and text messaging from Ncell. You will require a photocopy of your passport and one passport photograph.

Changing your remnant Nepalese Currency back into USD at the end of the trip can be tricky and a big chore. Ensure that you either use all of it or pay part of your hotel bill with it.