



Kathmandu CALLING

Nepal's sprawling capital isn't just a backpacker or hiker's dream—it's a culture-rich step back in time filled with ancient temples, mythical stories and views to make your jaw drop.

Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna

The air was thick with the smell of smoke. The Sadhu Babas, adorned in their colourful clothing, theatrical white makeup and long, twisted beards, smiled and beckoned me over, warmly inviting me to take a photo with them. This was their normal hangout: these men are often seen in the area near Pashupatinath Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the oldest Hindu temple in Kathmandu. As for the smoke? It was coming from the banks of the Bagmati River down below, where hundreds of local people had gathered to cleanse, wrap and say goodbye to their loved ones. The area is one of the most well-known cremation sites in Nepal, and it's not for the faint-hearted. This wasn't my first brush with death, but personally, I didn't consider the site family-friendly—despite the fact that in Nepal, people seem to easily accept the idea of death, embracing it as a part of the circle of life, where I come from it isn't

commonly discussed, especially among children. But as for the rest of Kathmandu—that's another case entirely.

We had arrived the evening before, greeted by the smiling driver from our new home for the next several nights, The Dwarika's Hotel. The streets were a flurry of activity, filled with whizzing vehicles, muddy roads and the occasional hilarious off-take on a Western brand, such as the "McDonald Food Cafe." It was chaotic, to say the least—until we arrived at The Dwarika's. Just a 10-minute drive from Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport, the heavy, dark gates swung open and inside, an oasis of calm greeted us. Just beyond the courtyard—complete with flower- and candle-strewn fountains—a beautifully-dressed woman performed a traditional Nepalese dance, the only sound a tinkling, instrumental song she danced to. It was as if the hectic world beyond had melted away and we had arrived in a pocket of calm amidst the storm.

We had come to Kathmandu for various reasons: Firstly, everyone I knew who had ever been here had raved about it, some describing it as their favourite place in the world. Secondly, having heard several friends fret over whether they could take their kids there or not, I was determined to find out if it really was a family-friendly destination. And finally, I needed a break from the shiny, modern lifestyle of Dubai. Don't get me wrong, I love my life in Dubai, but every now and then my sense of adventure takes over, I get itchy feet, and I need to experience somewhere a world away from my everyday norm.

I found everything I had been looking for. Once described as the mystical Shangri-La, this city tucked into and all around the stunning Kathmandu Valley is a fascinating blend of urban growth and ancient sites. Here, the old and the new exist harmoniously, most clearly exhibited in one of the three Durbar Squares. Once the central gathering place for royal



Kathmandu Valley

palaces in the Kathmandu Valley’s Newar Kingdoms—Durbar means “Palace” in Nepalese—these squares are still a bustling hub among the now-unified sub-cities of Kathmandu Valley. We first headed to the most famous, Kathmandu Durbar Square. What seemed at first like a crowded, almost run-down marketplace was, upon closer inspection, a hotbed of architectural marvels, from the Hanuman Dhoka Palace Complex to the Kumari Che, the home of the Royal Kumari. A young, prepubescent girl typically between the ages of 4-12, she is chosen based on a number of physical, emotional and astrological attributes and is said to be the living embodiment of the divine. By the time she reaches her first menstruation, a new girl is chosen. While foreigners are not allowed into the Kumari Che, we are permitted to enter the courtyard of the temple. We are lucky, as during our visit the Kumari comes to the window—which she typically does twice a day—and looks

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upon us before swiftly retreating. As she casts her eyes over us, the crowd goes silent: Even the children, fascinated by a girl their own age, seem inexplicably humbled by her presence, their reverential whispers carrying across the courtyard.

Over in Patan Durbar Square, we find a more well-preserved vision of the past. Filled with outstanding examples of Newa architecture, here you’ll find everyone from foreign families to local Nepalese children marvelling at the temples, idols, museums and homes around the square. We head to a nearby rooftop cafe, where the sight of the entire square, heavy with

red brick and set against the mountains and crisp blue sky, blows us away. Our guide, Rabindra, a genteel young man with a Masters in Archaeology, History & Culture, is practically a walking encyclopaedia, and points out that while in the rest of the world ancient artefacts are usually taken to museums, in Nepal they are left where they originated so people can use them, for worship or otherwise.

I’m even more glad to have Rabin as our guide when we get to Bhatktapur Durbar Square. We’d been warned that this square was so vast and complex that it would be a pity to go without a guide, and I’m relieved that we took heed. For vast it is—aside from the enormous 55-window palace (which has now been converted into a museum), the complex encompasses four sub-squares within it, each filled with their own relics, not to mention the serene nearby Siddha Pokhari lake. I was once told that Nepal has more temples than people, and at this point I’m almost →

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inclined to agree. What surprises me most, however, is just how much these squares are still in use today: in Pottery Square, artisans whirl away on their wheels, shaping wet clay into smooth vases that are later sold in the centre of the square, while amorous young couples are curled up and relaxing among the various heights of Vatsala Devi Temple, whiling away the hours on a hot, sunny day.

After we've visited more temples than we can count, we're ready for a change of pace and Rabin promises to take us to two more unmissable sights: Kathmandu's two most famous stupas. Boudhanath Stupa is one of the largest in the world, and despite the immensely calming ambiance, there is life all around it. Families feast at one of the many surrounding rooftop cafes while enjoying the view, children skip across the

FAST FACTS

- **Visas and Vaccinations:** Citizens of most countries can obtain a visa on arrival. You will require one passport-sized photograph and a fee (they accept Dollars, Euros and Sterling Pounds, among others), which ranges from \$5-100 depending on length of stay. While you can take a photo there if you forget one, it's less hassle and less time-consuming if you bring your own.

Routine vaccines are recommended, including those for Hepatitis A & B, Typhoid, Polio, Rabies and Tetanus.

- **When to Go:** Nepal has two dry seasons: October to November, and February to April. December to January can get very cold, and while it is monsoon season during the warm summer, the rain usually only comes in short bursts a couple of times a day, so it won't really hinder a visit to Kathmandu.

- **Tour Guides:** If you're seeking a guide, driver or tours, we suggest Kathmandu Travel & Tours (www.kathmandutravelsandtours.com). A sister company of The Dwarika's, they can help organise everything from city guides to mountain flights and treks in the mountains, or even out to Tibet and Bhutan.

- **Mountain Flights:** For an excellent view of the Himalayas, mountain flights are common. This may take several attempts, as the flights may have to be cancelled or rescheduled depending on the weather. Buddha Air offers some of the best options, and can be booked from around USD \$195 per person.



“The Swayambhunath complex is high atop a hill, giving us a truly breathtaking view of the Kathmandu Valley down below”

stupa's surface, their laughter darting between the rainbow prayer flags draped all around, and yogis practice their sun salutes. The atmosphere is quite different from that of Swayambhunath: Also known as the Monkey Temple, this complex hosts a stupa, shrines and temples, as well as the mischievous monkeys that give it its nickname. It's also high atop a hill, giving us a truly breathtaking view of the Kathmandu Valley down below—in my opinion, this is its greatest asset. There are two ways to get to Swayambhunath: One is a staircase of 365 steps (one for each day of the year, which I surmise is probably how long it would take me to climb it, considering how steep it looks) and the other, a car ride that requires you to walk 5-10 minutes uphill to reach the top. By the time we're at the top of the seemingly never-ending staircase, watching people climb up, sweating and breathless, I'm relieved that we opted for the car ride instead. Foreign tourists and local Nepalese visitors jostle gently at each other, trying to get a better view. As the sun breaks through the clouds, lighting up the mountains and lush, green valley beneath us, it's as if the heavens have

opened and I can see how this place has inspired such feelings of spirituality for thousands of years.

All of this sightseeing has made us hungry, and back at the hotel, we're lucky to have a quintessential Nepalese dining experience right at our fingertips in their speciality restaurant, Krishnarpan. As we walk in and are asked to remove our shoes, I'm impressed to see photos of people like Demi Moore and Hillary Clinton enjoying a meal here. “How many courses will you be having tonight?” our waitress asks pleasantly. Thankfully, we're going for the minimum—six. The restaurant offers meals of anything from six to 22 courses, giving diners a chance to sample flavours from all across Nepal, and while it is all absolutely delicious, by the time we are finished we're almost ready to burst. We retreat to our room, a cosy and spacious hideaway, and promise ourselves that we'll take a dip in the hotel's gloriously beautiful swimming pool the next day. A family-run institution, the founders are passionate about art, decor, and sharing the beauty of Nepali culture. Even a quick tour of the grounds will reveal restored old woodwork

Photography by Yi-Hwa Hanna and Shutterstock. With thanks to Kathmandu Travel & Tours for our super-savvy guide, Rabintra Tuladhar.



and traditional Nepalese handicrafts, like a living, breathing museum that's been turned into a home—complete with staff providing impeccably friendly service.

It's no wonder, then, that The Dwarika's other ventures are equally as formidable. Craving a more contemporary meal one evening, we head to the Garden of Dreams, where The Dwarika's Group runs a well-reputed restaurant called the Kaiser Café. Since the garden is on the outskirts of Thamel, one of the city's most popular tourist areas, we decide to make an afternoon of it by first heading out to explore before a lavish dinner. It's a tourist shopping haven in these busy streets, and here, hippies, backpackers and families rub shoulders with hawkers, artists and young Nepalese friends enjoying the buzz. As we settle into a rooftop café, I can't resist but order a plateful of my favourite local dish, momo dumplings. Much to my chagrin, they are spicy beyond belief and I decide to seek solace in shopping. From silks and hemp clothing to hiking gear, DVDs, handicrafts and jewellery, Thamel is a souvenir hunter's dream—and a haggler's playground. A couple of hours later, with our wallets a little lighter and bags bulging with goodies, we make our way to the Garden of Dreams. Couples young and old are sprawled across the grass, awaiting the sunset. There's hardly a sound save for the birds in the trees. As we settle in for dinner—a lip-lickingly good selection of dishes like grilled fish, stuffed eggplant and juicy lamb chops—I feel a deep inner peace. This is my Kathmandu, I think contentedly—pockets of spirituality, beauty and tranquillity amidst the chaos, and I wouldn't have it any other way.



A Nepalese trumpet



Momo dumplings

WHERE TO STAY

An oasis in the heart of Kathmandu, The Dwarika's Hotel (www.dwarikas.com) is one of the city's best hotels. This

award-winning five-star heritage hotel boasts 87 luxurious, comfortable rooms, several renowned restaurants (including Nepalese restaurant Krishnarpan & Japanese favourite Mako's), a swimming pool and library. Their Pancha Kosha Himalayan Spa offers everything from Ayurvedic treatments such as massages, facials and body soaks to more unique treatments such as the locally-celebrated Singing Bowl Therapy. With a commitment to the preservation of nature, the hotel uses fresh produce from their own eco-organic farms (www.ecoorganicfarms.com) where possible.

After your stay in Kathmandu, we suggest you visit The Dwarika's latest venture, The Dwarika's Himalayan Resort (www.dwarikas-dhulikhel.com). Set high in the lush mountain area of Dhulikhel, it's set to open this August and is a holistic wellness retreat built in harmony with nature. With everything from organic food in its kitchens to solar power, recycling and the use of local materials in play, it's set to be a blissful place to recharge.

The Dwarika's Hotel is offering a fantastic package deal for the summer: For just USD \$525 + taxes for 3 nights, or USD \$749+ taxes for 5 nights from now until September 15th, you can enjoy a double Heritage Deluxe Room, airport pick-up and traditional Nepali welcome, daily breakfast, one complimentary Himalayan massage per person, and daily yoga sessions. Alternatively, if you'd like to combine a stay in Kathmandu followed by an escape to the mountains, from August 1st to September 30th you can enjoy a 3 night stay at The Dwarika's Hotel Kathmandu, followed by a 2 night stay at The Dwarika's Resort Dhulikhel for USD \$999 including additional benefits such as meals and transfers. Contact them at +977 1 447 9488 for more details.

