

Clockwise from top left:
a temple in Kathmandu's
Durbar Square; bunting on
Swayambhunath Stupa;
a Sadhu holy man in
traditional dress; the Tibetan
Boudhanath Stupa; a woman
sells marigold garlands; a
colonnaded terrace at The
Dwarika's Hotel; stone taps
feed one of the hotel's
ponds; architectural detail

KATHMANDU

The bustle of Nepal's capital is balanced by soulful temples and lush gardens, while its fragrant cuisine gives memories to last a lifetime. Sarah Reid takes a trek

Why go? Myth, mist and *momos* – Kathmandu is a city shrouded in spiritualism and fuelled by street food. For anyone planning a trek into the Himalayas or to traverse Nepal, the capital is the obvious staging post and more than worth exploring for a night or two. Following the devastating earthquake in 2015, the city is back on its feet and ready to give visitors its emblematic friendly, warm embrace. There's never a bad time to visit Kathmandu, but the city has a special buzz in April, when mountaineers from around the globe arrive to plan their ascent of the world's highest peak.

What to do Durbar Square and its Hanuman Dhoka (royal palace) is Kathmandu's most spectacular architectural legacy. Now essentially a suburb of the main city, the former city-state of Patan's Durbar Square is also a must-see – its own royal palace a beautiful monument and worth a visit in its own right. Don't miss the Patan Museum patanmuseum.gov.np housed inside, which showcases one of Asia's finest collections of religious art. A 30-minute walk west of Thamel, Kathmandu's tourist hub, Swayambhunath Stupa offers panoramic views reached by a steep staircase ruled by macaque monkeys. Or, swerve the crowds at Swapna Bagaicha (Garden of Dreams) gardenofdreams.org.np which, while close to Thamel, feels a million miles away from the hustle. On the banks of the Bagmati River, Pashupatinath is Nepal's most important Hindu site. Non-Hindus may not enter the main *mandir* (temple), but wandering the complex – where bodies are cremated on platforms – is a powerful experience and key to understanding the locals' culture. A ten-minute drive north-east lies the vast Boudhanath Stupa, where you can observe Tibetan pilgrims making their *koras* (circumambulations) under the tower painted with the all-seeing eyes of the Buddha. For souvenirs, don't miss Woven Nepal wovennepal.com and the Women's Skill Development Organisation wsdonepal.com for ethically made crafts. Or join the throng of locals winding through Asan Tole to discover fragrant spices, market stalls and teahouses galore.

Travel information

Currency is the Nepalese rupee (NPR). Time is 5.45 hours ahead of GMT. Flight time from London is around 11.5 hours. A taxi from the airport to the city centre takes 20-30 minutes (£5).

Getting there

Emirates flies from London Gatwick to Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport with one stop in Dubai. emirates.com

Turkish Airlines also offers flights from London Heathrow to Kathmandu via Istanbul. turkishairlines.com

Where to stay Recuperate after a trek (or simply spoil yourself) at luxurious The Dwarika's Hotel 00 977 1 447 9488, dwarikas.com – Kathmandu's finest heritage hotel. On Thamel's southern fringe, the charming Kantipur Temple House 00 977 1 425 0131, kantipurtemplehouse.com – also built in traditional style – is a stand-out eco-friendly option, with no TVs or baths in its 40 rooms to help limit energy consumption. In the centre of Thamel, the pale yellow Kathmandu Guest House 00 977 1 470 0632, ktmgh.com is an institution. The first hotel to open in the area in the 1960s, it remains among the best. The Tibetan-run Dalai-La Boutique Hotel 00 977 1 470 1436, dalailaboutiquehotel.com is one of the city's newest, with 32 elegant rooms overlooking an airy courtyard.

Where to eat and drink For a true taste of Nepal without leaving the capital, indulge in a six-course degustation at Krishnarpan 00 977 1 447 9488, dwarikas.com – The Dwarika's restaurant. Expect the likes of roasted mushrooms in spice, chicken curry with pickles and, to finish, carrot pudding. Top continental restaurants include Patan Museum Café 00 977 1 552 6271 and Kaiser Café 00 977 1 442 5341, kaisercafe.com – the latter in a pavilion in the grounds of Swapna Bagaicha. Of Thamel's many budget options, try Fire and Ice fireandicepizzeria.com which has been turning out Italian-style pizzas since 1995. Himalayan Java Coffee on Mandala Street is the place for a latte, while New Everest Momo on Leknath Sadak serves the best cheap eat in town: ten steamed buffalo *momos* (dumplings) in a spicy sauce for just 90 rupees (60p). After, sink a Gorkha beer at Sam's Bar on Chaksibari Marg or, for cocktails, try Mezza roadhouse.com.np – a buzzing rooftop bar.

Time running out? For a vision of Kathmandu's heritage and a look to how it sees its future, drop into Siddhartha Art Gallery, the city's best for contemporary Nepali art. siddharthaartgallery.com

Trip tip Just a 45-minute taxi ride from Thamel, the ancient city of Bhaktapur is much larger than Kathmandu and Patan's old towns, and despite the quake damage, is still well worth a visit.

Resources

Naturally Nepal is the official tourism board and its website is a solid resource for trip planning, with particularly comprehensive information on trekking permits and fees. welcomenepal.com

Further reading

Kathmandu by Thomas Bell (Haus Publishing, £12.99), offers an unflinching examination of modern Nepal – from its Maoist insurgency to the 2015 quake – centred around the ever-complex capital.

AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Min C	4	6	10	13	17	20	21	21	19	15	9	5
Max C	15	17	21	25	26	26	26	26	25	23	20	16
mm	0	0	1	1	3	6	12	11	6	2	0	0

