

Getting Started

In many ways, Nepal is a dream destination. Travel can be as cheap as you want, but all the comforts are there for when you want to spend a little more and there's not much advanced required. Pick up a visa on arrival and just rock up to Thamel to join a rafting trip leaving the next day. Still, spending some time leafing through this book and browsing the web will guarantee you don't miss any of the fantastic things on offer and ensure you are on top of the frequently changing security situation (see opposite for more information).

WHEN TO GO

Nepal has a typical monsoonal, two-season year. The dry season runs from October to May and there's the wet (monsoon) season from June to September. Autumn (September to November) and spring (March to May) bring almost perfect weather and are definitely the best times to come to Nepal. For more on the best months for trekking see p324.

October to November, the start of the dry season, is in many ways the absolute best time. With the monsoon only recently finished, the countryside is green and lush, the air is sparkling clean and the Himalayan views are near perfect. Furthermore, the weather is still balmy. There are some important and colourful festivals to enjoy, though the Dasain festival in October can be disruptive if you are on a tight schedule (see p367). For obvious reasons this is also the high tourist season but in recent years, due to the political problems, even Nepal's 'high season' has been pretty quiet.

In December and January the climate and visibility are still good, though it can get very cold at high altitudes. Heading for the Everest Base Camp at this time of year can be a real feat of endurance and the Annapurna Circuit is often closed by snow on the Thorung La. Down in Kathmandu, the cheaper hotels – where there is no heating – are chilly in the mornings and evenings. Tourists start to leave Kathmandu in December like flocks of migratory birds, headed for the warmer climes of India or Thailand. October to February are considered the best times to visit the Terai and Royal Chitwan National Park.

February to April, the tail end of the dry season, is the second-best time to visit. The weather gets warmer so high-altitude treks are not as arduous. Visibility is not as good as earlier in the dry season, but Nepal's wonderful rhododendrons and other flowers are in Technicolor bloom.

May and early June are not the best times to visit as it is extremely hot and dusty, with temperatures often above 30°C, and the coming monsoon seems to hang over you like a threat.

Mid-June to September, when the monsoon finally arrives, is the least popular time to visit Nepal. Although it doesn't rain all day it usually rains every day, and the trails and roads are muddy and plagued by leeches; the Himalaya disappear behind rain clouds; most rivers are too high to raft; and landslides often hold up transport. The latter part of the monsoon (August and September) is a time of festivals, which will certainly enliven a visit to Kathmandu, and this is also the best time to visit neighbouring Tibet.

Because of its lower altitude, Pokhara is warmer and more pleasant than Kathmandu during winter, but hotter before the monsoon and wetter during it.

See climate charts (p357) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the security situation – see p359
- A face mask against Kathmandu's air pollution, especially if you have a respiratory problem or plan to ride a bike
- Sunglasses, a hat and high-factor sunscreen
- Hiking shoes – fine for light trekking and one of the few things you can't rent or buy in Kathmandu
- A fleece if visiting Pokhara, Kathmandu and the Terai between October and March
- A down sleeping bag, fleece hat and down vest or coat if visiting the mountains, even in summer
- Earplugs, a padlock, a torch (flashlight) for trekking and power cuts, insect repellent for Royal Chitwan National Park or other places in the Terai, tampons
- An umbrella, raincoat and antileech oil for monsoon travel
- Swimming costume for rafting, kayaking, canyoning, elephant-washing (yes, elephant washing – see p280), and, well, swimming

IS IT SAFE?

The seven-year Maoist 'people's war' has cost nearly 12,000 Nepali lives so far (for reasons behind the violence see p36). That said, the Maoists are more of a threat to the tourist industry as a whole, rather than to individual tourists, who have never been specifically targeted.

In March 2002 the Maoists chief ideologue, Dr Baburam Bhattarai, published an 'open letter to foreign tourists'. In it he stated that the Maoists welcomed tourism and tourists, but he also warned that 'the unassuming traveller can be caught between the crossfire of the contending armies'.

Maoist violence is generally concentrated in rural areas not frequented by tourists and is normally focussed against police stations, communications towers and other government infrastructure. Public buses carrying army personnel, even off-duty army personnel, have been targets, adding to the already significant danger of travelling by bus in Nepal, see p385 for more information.

In general the heavy army presence in the Kathmandu Valley means that it has been little affected. That said, minor bombs were detonated in 2004 in areas of Kathmandu, Pokhara and Patan frequented by tourists, including two top-end hotels. In June 2005, Maoists blew up a bus travelling between Madi and Narayangarh killing 40 people. The only tourists so far injured by the Maoists, as far as we know, were two Russian mountaineers, whose vehicle was attacked by grenades while travelling the road to the Tibetan border in April 2005 in defiance of a Maoist blockade.

Blockades, curfews, and strikes have affected all areas of Nepal, especially Kathmandu, which has come under a few dawn to dusk curfews in 2006. See p360 for advice on dealing with strikes and demonstrations. Another indirect risk comes from the general lawlessness created by the struggle.

Trekkers in the far west and east of the country and the Jiri to Lukla trek have had 'donations' extorted from them by Maoists, though they have received a receipt and some have even enjoyed the interaction, keeping their Maoists receipts as a souvenir. Others have had cameras stolen by hoodlums (*kaobadhi* in Nepali) pretending to be Maoists (*maobadhi*). Even Michael Palin came up against some Maoists during the filming of

his *Himalaya* BBC documentary. As demands for money get higher so the potential for violence increases (some Israeli groups have already started fighting back!). If threatened, you'd be wise to pay up and then get a receipt. See the boxed text, p324 for more on trekking in Maoist areas.

Various governments offer advice on the areas they deem unsafe; most of these are remote and in midwestern Nepal. The Maoists are strongest in rural areas in the southwest, Dolpo, the mid-east (east of the Kathmandu Valley and Arniko Hwy to Tibet) and far east. At the time of research, the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, Chitwan, Langtang, Mustang and the Everest area north of Lukla were largely unaffected. The Annapurna region is considered fairly safe, though there have been some incidents along the southern half of the circuit, specifically around Beni, Gorepani and Ghandruk. The Mahendra Hwy in the Terai is normally unaffected, except for the occasional tedious checkpoint, though you should avoid night-time travel along this road. The Dolpo, Jumla, Jiri and Kanchenjunga trekking regions have largely been off limits in recent years. The US pulled all of its Peace Corps volunteers out of the country in September 2004.

Nepal is not the war zone portrayed by the foreign press and Maoist activity does not directly target tourists or tourist vehicles, but there's always the danger of being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Your best way of keeping out of trouble is to keep yourself aware of the situation.

- Follow the news on the ground through Nepalese news website such as www.kantipuronline.com, www.thehimalayantimes.com, www.nepalnews.com, www.gorkhapatra.org.np, www.nepalitimes.com and www.nepalnews.net.
- Check out the 'Is Nepal Safe?' posts on the Thorn Tree forum (www.lonelyplanet.com), at www.trekinformation.com and at <http://isnepalsafe.blogspot.com>.
- The UN in Nepal has an excellent up-to-date security page at www.un.org.np/security.php, which includes a useful map of recent security incidents.
- Before travelling, always check the government travel advisories listed in the boxed text 'Government Travel Advice' on p360.
- Most travel warnings focus on administrative districts, which aren't shown on many maps – for an administrative map of Nepal go to www.ncthakur.itgo.com/map04.htm.

HOW MUCH?

- Budget hotel US\$5-10
- Midrange hotel US\$20-60
- Rafting trip per day US\$35
- Trekking porter per day US\$7-10
- Internet in Kathmandu per hour Rs 20-40

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- Litre of petrol/gas Rs 67
- Litre of bottled water Rs 10-15
- Bottle of Tuborg Beer (in a restaurant) Rs 140-170
- Souvenir T-shirt Rs 400
- Plate of momos (steamed dumplings) Rs 20-40

COSTS & MONEY

If you stay in budget accommodation and survive on a predominantly Nepali diet you could live in Nepal for US\$5 to US\$7 a day. On an independent 'village inn' or 'teahouse' trek your living costs are likely to be around that level.

If you stay in comfortable, upper budget or lower midrange hotels, sit down to eat in popular tourist-oriented restaurants, rent bicycles and take taxis from time to time your living costs could be around US\$14 to US\$20 a day. Move to a midrange hotel, hire a car between towns and spend much time rafting or on an organised trek and you are looking at US\$40 to US\$50 per day. The tourist centres of Kathmandu and Pokhara seem to suck money out of you by osmosis, primarily because there are so many ways to spend it. Kathmandu's Thamel district is aiming itself more at the upper budget range these days.

The current slump in tourism has resulted in widespread discounting and the rates at midrange hotels in particular are currently a steal (see p356).

Most hotels and restaurants in the mid to upper ranges charge 13% VAT on top of published prices.

TOP TENS

Festivals

- Magh Sankranti, Devghat (January; p363)
- Losar, all Tibetan areas (February; p364)
- Maha Shivaratri, Pashupatinath (February/March; p364)
- Balkumari Jatra, Thimi (mid-April; p209)
- Bisket Jatra chariot festival, Bhaktapur (mid-April; p203)
- Rato Machhendranath Festival, Patan (April/May; p191)
- Indra Jatra chariot festival, Kathmandu (August/September; p134)
- Dasain, nationwide (September/October; p365)
- Tihar/Deepawali, nationwide (October/November; p366)
- Mani Rimdu, Tengboche (November; p366)

Adventures

- Raft the scenic Sun Kosi (p98), the perfect combination of white water, scenic villages and quiet evenings
- Hike the Tamang Heritage Trail near the Tibetan border (p235)
- Track rhinos on elephant-back at Royal Chitwan National Park (p281)
- Trek along a classic teahouse trek, like the Annapurna Circuit (p347) or the Everest Base Camp treks (p334)
- Climb to the top of Island Peak, one of Nepal's trekking peaks (p100)
- Throw yourself off Asia's highest bungee jump (p77) at Bhoite Kosi
- Mountain bike through untouched villages and trails (p83)
- Abseil down waterfalls on a canyoning trip near the Tibetan border (p78)
- Soar with the eagles while paragliding or even perhaps parahawking over picturesque Phewa Tal (p79)
- Beat the crowds and do a teahouse trek in the Langtang region (p341)

Top 10 Books for Reading in the Mountains

- *Annapurna* by Maurice Herzog – a mountaineering classic from 1950
- *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer – an emotionally gripping story of the disastrous Everest expeditions of 1996
- *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* by WE Bowman – a highly enjoyable spoof of these often all-too-serious tomes
- *Chomolungma Sings the Blues: Travels Around Everest* by Ed Douglas – see p22
- *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen – see p22
- *Himalayan Traders* by Von Fürer-Haimendorf – see p43
- *High Religion* by Sherry Ortner – see p43
- *Everest* by Walt Unsworth – the ultimate Everest reference
- *Tenzing Norgay and the Sherpas of Everest* by Tashi Tenzing – Everest and climbing from the Sherpa perspective
- *Nepal Himalaya* by WH Tillman – delightful wit from the 1950s

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen is, on one level, an account of a trek to Dolpo in the west of Nepal, keeping an eye open for snow leopards on the way. On another level, however, this moving and beautiful book pursues the 'big questions' of spirituality, nature and Buddhism, with the Himalaya as a constant background. This is one of our favourite books.

Chomolungma Sings the Blues: Travels Around Everest, by Ed Douglas, is an interesting portrait of the communities that live in the shadow of Everest and how they continue to deal with the social and environmental problems brought by trekkers and mountaineers attracted to the world's most enigmatic peak. A 'state of the mountain' address, it's a good alternative to the blinding testosterone of most climbing books.

To the Navel of the World, by Peter Somerville-Large, is an amusing account of a saunter around Nepal and Tibet. The author does some deep-winter trekking in the Solu Khumbu region and up to the Everest Base Camp. His encounters with tourism in remote locations are very funny.

Shopping for Buddhas, by Jeff Greenwald, is a wry, astute book about the author's travels in Nepal, motivated by the obsessive and metaphorical pursuit of a perfect statue of the Buddha. Greenwald's earlier book *Mr Raja's Neighbourhood* is also worth a read.

Travelers' Tales Nepal, edited by Rajendra Khadka, is an anthology of 37 interesting stories from a variety of writers, including Peter Matthiessen.

Video Night in Kathmandu, by Pico Iyer, gallivants all around Asia, but the single chapter on Nepal has some astute and amusing observations on the collision between Nepali tradition and Western culture.

The Waiting Land: A Spell in Nepal, by Dervla Murphy, is an interesting account of a visit to Nepal at a time when great changes were at hand. The author tells of her time spent in a Tibetan refugee camp near Pokhara, and of her travels in the Langtang region.

Travels in Nepal, by Charlie Pye-Smith, is a travel account with an interesting theme; the author travelled Nepal studying the impacts and benefits of foreign aid to the country, and his conclusions are incisive and thought-provoking, though a little dated now.

Beyond the Clouds: Journeys in Search of the Himalayan Kings, by Jonathan Gregson, is a portrait of the royal kings of the Himalaya, including the kings of Nepal and Mustang, as well as Bhutan and Sikkim.

Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom, by Michael Peissel, is a wonderful travelogue describing the famous explorer's 1964 trek to Lo Manthang, as one of the first Westerners to enter the remote Tibetan kingdom.

You can find all of the books listed in this chapter in Kathmandu.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Explore Nepal (www.explorenepal.com) A good gateway information site with many links set up by category. Also try www.nepalhomepage.com or www.nepaltourism.info.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Get advice on the security situation from other travellers on the Thorn Tree, check out the Nepal web links and book accommodation online.

Ministry of Tourism (www.tourism.gov.np) Tourism information and news, plus climbing and trekking regulations.

Nepal Tourism Board (www.welcomenepal.com) The official site with tourism news, a rundown of the country's sights and some glossy photos.

Trekinfo.Com (www.trekinfo.com) You guessed it – all the trekking information about the region that you'll need to get started, plus a good forum board.

Visit Nepal (www.visitnepal.com) A comprehensive site with detailed information for travellers and many links to organisations and companies within the country.

Yeti Zone (www.yetizone.com) An excellent day-by-day description of the big treks.

The Tutor of History, by Manjushree Thapa, is a Nepali novel written in English, set in the backdrop of political campaigning in a small town in Nepal on the eve of the Maoist rebellion

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

One Week / Kathmandu to Kathmandu

With a week you could get to grips with the cultural highlights of the Kathmandu Valley, though you'd have to prise yourself away from Thamel's culinary delights first. Take the **walking tour** (p129) south from Thamel to the impressive Malla architecture of **Durbar Sq** (p114).

On day two, walk to the Monkey Temple of **Swayambhunath** (p162) and then visit the quirky **National Museum** (p162).

A day trip to the impressive **Patan** (p186) is a must. Top off your trilogy of former royal kingdoms with a full day visit to medieval **Bhaktapur** (p199), where you should seriously consider overnighting.

Next get your Himalayan kick from the dawn views at **Nagarkot** (p223) or **Dhulikhel** (p227) before returning to Kathmandu the next morning.

Burn off all that Thamel comfort food by mountain biking out to the sacred Hindu and Buddhist sites around **Pharping** (p218), or to the traditional Newari village **Bungamati**, p220).

Finally, head to the Hindu temples of **Pashupatinath** (p166) before continuing on foot to the Tibetan community at **Bodhnath** (p169). Lastly return to Kathmandu for some serious **shopping** (p153) in Thamel.

Surprisingly few visitors discover the impressive sites of the Kathmandu Valley. From the squares in Patan and Bhaktapur to the stupas of Swayambhunath and Bodhnath, these world-class sites should not be missed.



FROM BUDDHA TO BOUDHA**Two Weeks / Lumbini to Bodhnath**

Kick off at **Lumbini** (p291), the birthplace of the Buddha, just 22km from the border town of Bhairawa. The site is spread out, so hire a bike to get between temples in this Buddhist United Nations, overnight and then spend the next day detouring out to the archaeological site of **Tilaurakot** (p297) or riding/hiking out to surrounding Tharu villages.

From Lumbini make a beeline for **Royal Chitwan National Park** (p275) for a two- or three-day stay. Take a bath with an elephant and learn the easy way which Nepali animals gave us the English word 'mugger'. Track rhinos and tigers on an elephant-back safari and for a truly memorable experience, spend the night atop a wildlife viewing tower, in the nearby Kumrose community forest, surrounded by the roars and hoots of the jungle.

From Chitwan take the day-long tourist bus to Pokhara or Kathmandu. In **Pokhara** (p255), hike up to the World Peace Pagoda, sign up for a tandem **paraglide** (p79) or just stare mesmerised at the near-perfect views of Annapurna and Machhapuchhare mirrored in lovely Phewa Tal.

Kathmandu will easily keep you busy for four days (see Kathmandu Valley itinerary, p23). Check out the elephant Kama sutra carvings at **Bhaktapur**, gain a deeper understanding of Buddhist art at **Patan Museum** (p189) and enjoy the views over the city at dusk from **Swayambhunath** (p162).

Try to fit in a couple of days to try some **canyoning** (p78), **rafting** (p95) or **kayaking** (p92) at **The Last Resort** (p233) or **Borderlands**, (p233), half a day's drive from Kathmandu, up near the Tibetan border.

On your last day head out to **Bodhnath** (p169) to take in a taste of Tibet. Make thanks for your successful journey at one of the Tibetan monasteries and follow the Tibetan exiles around the stupa as the sun sets.

Taking in a great combination of historical and natural sights, artistic treasures and religious centres, this great overland route mixes one part meditation with two parts adrenaline.

**MOUNTAIN & VALLEY****One Month / Kathmandu to Kathmandu**

One month is a perfect amount of time to get a good feel for Nepal. The **Kathmandu Valley** is really worth a week (see The Kathmandu Valley itinerary p23) but to truly experience Nepal and its people you have to do it on foot, along some of the world's most scenic trails.

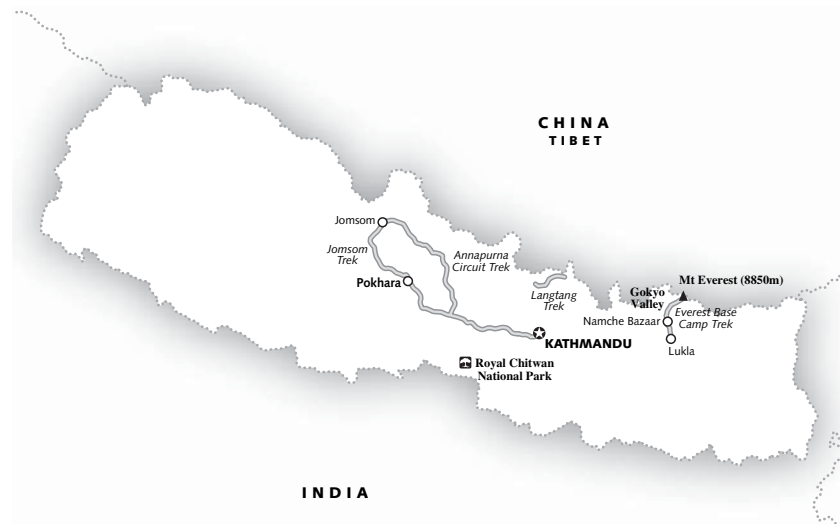
The circular nature of the 17- to 19-day **Annapurna Circuit** (p347) gives you a nice sense of completion, takes you over the high Thorung La into the Trans-Himalaya around Jomsom and offers excellent quality lodges. It's not called the 'Apple Pie Trail' for nothing!

The **Everest Base Camp trek** (p334) costs a bit more because most people fly in and out of Lukla (US\$180 return), but it offers an insight into Sherpa culture and the kind of outrageous high altitude scenery normally reserved for mountaineers, plus the strangely irresistible draw of the world's highest peak. Even better, add on a side trip to the spectacular **Gokyo Valley** (p339) for a total trek of around 21 days. It's a good idea to book your Lukla flights before you arrive in Nepal.

If you are flying back from Lukla or Jomsom, it's wise to leave yourself a few days buffer at the end of the trip in case flights are cancelled due to bad weather. Do your Kathmandu sightseeing *after* the trek, not before.

An alternative is to do a shorter trek, such as the **Langtang** (p341) or **Jomsom** (p345) trek, and then slot in a few days at **Royal Chitwan National Park** (p275). Other shorter trek options include flying to Jomsom for a few days of day hikes, or flying to Lukla for seven to nine days' of walking to monasteries around **Namche Bazaar** (p339).

Get fit on this classic combination of teahouse trek and the wonders of the Kathmandu Valley. Don't rush these treks, as you need time to acclimatise to the high altitudes.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE CENTRAL LOOP

From Kathmandu follow the rushing Trisuli River east along the Prithvi Hwy. Take the **Manakamana** (p237) cable car up to watch the hilltop blood sacrifices to the goddess Kali (and perhaps spend the night). One option is to kick off the trip with a **rafting trip**, (p95), great fun in September.

Next stop is **Bandipur** (p242), a little-visited gem of a village with a cohesive culture and traditional Newari architecture. From here, continue to **Pokhara** (p246) for some mountain views, good food, some R&R and a trip out to Begnas Tal.

When you want to lose the traffic again, bus south along the winding Siddhartha Hwy through the hills to charming **Tansen** (p298), the site for some great day hikes, including to the serene palace of **Ranighat** (p301).

Continue south to the main highway at Butwal and change buses south to Bhairawa and on to peaceful **Lumbini** (p291), which is worth a full day (see From Buddha to Boudha, p24).

Next comes **Royal Chitwan National Park** (p275), and some superb wildlife spotting (see From Buddha to Boudha, p24). For something a bit different, try out the new **hike and homestay programme** (p288) in the hills north of the park.

From the Terai we suggest continuing east to Hetauda to take the snaking Tribhuvan Hwy up to **Daman** (p305), to savour the spectacular dawn views of the Himalaya. Head back down to **Kathmandu Valley** (p159).

Lose the crowds with this central loop through the Nepali heartland to experience both Pahari (hill) and Terai culture. There's great hiking here, as opposed to the multiday trekking of the mountain further north. Discover Nepal's undiscovered gems.



TAILORED TRIPS

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

The entire Kathmandu Valley is a World Heritage Site made up of seven individual sites. Most impressive are the valley's three Durbar Squares, at **Kathmandu** (p114), **Patan** (p186) and **Bhaktapur** (p199). Of these, Patan's is the most impressive, Kathmandu's is the busiest and Bhaktapur's is the quietest.

The Buddhist stupas of **Swayambhunath** (p162) and **Bodhnath** (p169) have been attracting pilgrims for over 1000 years and both are heritage sites. The Hindu complex at **Pashupatinath** (p166), by the sacred and filthy Bagmati River, is the holiest Hindu site in Nepal. Finally, the **Changu Naryan Temple** (p210) is an open-air museum of priceless stone sculpture, a few kilometres outside Bhaktapur.

The only other cultural heritage site is the Buddha's birthplace at **Lumbini** (p291), now an archaeological and Buddhist peace park.

Nepal has two natural World Heritage sites, the high altitude scenery of **Sagarmartha National Park** (p334), centred around the world's highest mountain, and the steamy tiger-inhabited jungles of **Royal Chitwan National Park** (p275), one of the subcontinent's best places to spot one-horned rhinos and Bengal tigers.



BACK TO NATURE

The bulk of Nepal's visitors are drawn to the scenic wonders of its mountains and jungles.

Royal Chitwan National Park (p275) is the most popular place for wildlife watching, either on elephant-back, on foot or in a 4WD.

Royal Bardia National Park (p308) sees far fewer visitors (check the security situation here), which makes it an even quieter spot to view rhinos, tigers, sarus cranes and gharials.

Nepal's birding paradise is the **Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve** (p316), where bird species outnumber humans 400:1 on the floodplains and grasslands of the Sapt Kosi river.

One of the best ways to experience Nepal's wilderness is on a multiday rafting trip down the **Sun Kosi** (p98) or **Karnali** (p98) rivers. The riverside camps, total lack of roads and expedition camaraderie make these two of the world's best rafting trips.

For a quick break from Kathmandu, head up to **Borderlands** (p233) or **The Last Resort** (p233), two relaxing riverside camps, far from the bustle of the capital, near the Tibetan border.

Our vote for the best mountain views is the **Gokyo Valley** (p334), but if you don't have time for a long trek try **Daman** (p305) or **Nagarkot** (p223), where you can enjoy breakfast in bed while eyeing an unbroken chain of Himalayan peaks.



Snapshot

Nepal has been on a real rollercoaster ride over the last couple of years. The capital has been the scene of curfews, mass demonstrations, clouds of tear gas, the surge of people power and finally, jubilation in the streets. As the dust settled, the world watched its only Hindu kingdom turn its back on its autocratic king and turn itself into a secular state, ending powers enjoyed by the Shah kings for over 230 years. It's been quite a year...

The process started against the backdrop of the brutal, decade-long conflict between the Maoist and the King that continued through 2005 without sign of resolution, despite the loss of 13,000 lives. Development stalled, tourism was down and large parts of the country were paralysed.

On 1 February 2005 the King of Nepal dismissed the government, assumed executive control and declared a three-month long state of emergency. The palace introduced a news blackout on military action in the countryside and placed a ban on public assemblies in central Kathmandu. News editors were arrested and intimidated.

In May 2005 10,000 protestors took to the streets of Kathmandu demanding a return to democracy. The Maoists and seven main political parties joined in a loose alliance, further pressuring King Gyanendra.

Things came to a head in April 2006 when, after days of mass demonstrations, curfews and the deaths of 16 protestors, the King finally agreed to restore democracy. Jubilation erupted in Kathmandu. Two weeks later parliament stripped the king of his immunity from prosecution and taxation and his position as head of the army. It assumed the power to set the king's budget and even to choose the next heir (a clear jab at the unpopular Prince Paras). The word 'Royal' was whitewashed from government and army signboards across the country and the king awoke to find himself a figurehead. Suddenly Nepal seems a different country, even to Nepalis, and a new mood of optimism is tangible across the country.

Serious problems remain, however. The sustained political chaos has led tourism, a major foreign currency earner and employer of 200,000 Nepalis, to collapse and the development challenges facing Nepal remain immense. After 40 years and over US\$4 billion in aid (60% of its development budget), Nepal remains one of the world's poorest countries, with seven million Nepalis lacking adequate food or basic health and education. Nepal has one of the lowest health spending levels and the third highest infant mortality rate in the world. Political violence, extortion, executions, abductions and food shortages have led to the internal displacement of up to 200,000 Nepalis, many of whom continue to stream into the Kathmandu Valley, placing strain on an already shaky infrastructure.

But there is good news for the optimists out there. The number of people in Nepal living under the poverty line has dropped by 11% (over 2.5 million people) in the last decade, thanks largely to the US\$650 million a year sent home by Nepalis working abroad. Today there are over 40,000 schools in Nepal and the potential for hydro-electricity remains huge.

A dozen corrupt and ineffectual governments have squandered Nepal's development over the last 15 years, setting a precedent that does not bode well for the future. Moreover, the Maoist problem remains and life for most Nepalis is unlikely to improve until a peaceful solution is resolved.

Nepal's politicians have resolutely failed Nepal in the past. The popular revolution of May 2006 has handed them a second chance and Nepal's people are watching them closely to deliver this time.

FAST FACTS

Population (2005): 26.3 million

Surface Area: 147,181 sq km – just larger than Greece

Human Development Index: 136, out of 177 countries (2005)

Life expectancy: 61 years

Literacy rate: male 63%, female 28% (average 49%)

Gross National Income(GNI): US\$240 per capita

Doctors per 100,000 people: 5 (606 in Italy)

Proportion of seats in parliament held by women: 6%

Percentage of Nepalis who live on less than US\$2 per day: 82%

Average age: 20

The Authors



BRADLEY MAYHEW

Coordinating Author, Kathmandu, Around Kathmandu Valley

Drawn to big snowy mountains and Tibetan Buddhist communities like a moth to a flame, Bradley has been travelling to Nepal for a decade now, often en route to and from Tibet. He owes over 80% of his CD collection to Thamel's music shops. British born, Bradley currently lives under the big skies of Montana.

He is the coauthor of Lonely Planet guides to *Tibet*, *Central Asia*, and *China* among others. He has lectured on Central Asia at the Royal Geographical Society. Bradley also wrote the front chapters and Directory and Transport.

My Favourite Trip

The best part of this research trip was my three-week trek around the Everest region (p334). The crowds came as a bit of a shock, as did the bakeries and bookstores of bustling Namche Bazaar (p337), but by staying at smaller lodges, in between the main halts, it's surprisingly easy to lose the Gore-Tex crowd. My favourite part was the Gokyo Valley (p339); second favourite was watching people see Cho La (p339) for the first time – everyone without exception responding with a squint and an appalled look on their faces. 'Up there?! You've got to be ****ing kidding me!'. Priceless.

The worst part of the trip was arriving back in the thick, syrupy air of noisy, polluted Kathmandu (p108) – am I really the only person who gets low-altitude sickness?



JOE BINDLOSS Kathmandu to Pokhara, Pokhara, Terai & Mahabharat

Joe has been coming to Nepal for more than a decade, lured here by the sense of peace and quiet, both inner and outer. He was born in Cyprus, grew up in England and has since lived and worked in various countries, though he currently calls London home. He first developed a severe case of wanderlust on family trips through Europe in the old VW Kombi. A degree in biology eliminated science from his future choice of careers, and Joe moved through a string of occupations before finally settling on journalism. Joe's big area for Lonely Planet is India, but he has also contributed to more than 20 Lonely Planet guidebooks covering Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe and Australia.

My Favourite Trip

Taking the slow local bus from Kathmandu to Pokhara and over-nighting in a village guest house in Bandipur (p242), followed by a dawn walk up to Thani Mai (p244) for a prebreakfast view of the Himalaya. Then riding on the bus roof from Dumre to Pokhara (p245), with Mt Machhapuchhare looming overhead like a beacon. In Pokhara (p246), I always make space for a two-inch-thick steak and a stroll up to the World Peace Pagoda (p255). Hiring motorcycles is an essential part of any trip and the hair-raising ride from Pokhara down to Tansen (p298) is one of the best in the country. Then back to Kathmandu for a final circumnavigation of Bodhnath (p169). *Fait accompli.*



CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Stan Armington wrote the Trekking chapter for this edition of Nepal. He has been organising and leading treks in Nepal since 1971. A graduate engineer, he has also worked for the US National Park service in the Yellowstone National and Olympic Parks, and served as a guide on Mt Hood in Oregon. He was one of Lonely Planet's first authors. His guide *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*, first published in 1979, won the 2002 PATA Gold Award for its eighth edition.

Stan lives in Kathmandu and is the director of the American Himalayan Foundation, a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Explorers Club, and a member of the American Alpine Club and the Alpine Stomach Club.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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