

# Kathmandu Essentials

THE MUST-SEES AND MUST-DOS IN NEPAL'S EXCITING CAPITAL

By MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA



At the top of the long flight of steps to the Swayambhunath stupa, pilgrims and visitors are treated to views of the Kathmandu Valley. The 13-tiered spire atop the stupa represents the many levels of knowledge that must be acquired on the path to enlightenment.

Nepal's capital assumes different avatars for different kinds of travellers. To some, it's a gateway town for trekking in the Nepal Himalayas. To many, it's a backpacker

haven, a hotbed of cheap accommodation, lively bars, and expat-friendly cafés reminiscent of Kathmandu's once-thriving hippy culture. For others, it's a deeply spiritual experience, an ancient city with a

living goddess and some of the most sacred temples and monasteries in the world.

It's easy to get caught up in a whirl, visiting Durbar Square, Pashupatinath, and checking them off your sightseeing list, or getting lost in the maze of cafés and kitschy stores in Thamel.

It's also possible to indulge in both the spiritual and the sybaritic. Mezze platters for lunch, an afternoon listening to the solemn chanting of Buddhist monks, and an evening busting out 1980s dance moves in a retro funk bar—it's all possible in Kathmandu.

## DAY 1

### MORNING Sunrise Views

An early morning mini-trek up to **Swayambhunath** ensures that you'll catch fewer tourists, fresher air, and, on a clear day, some spectacular views of Kathmandu. It's best to climb the 365 stairs to the *stupa* before the sun really starts beating

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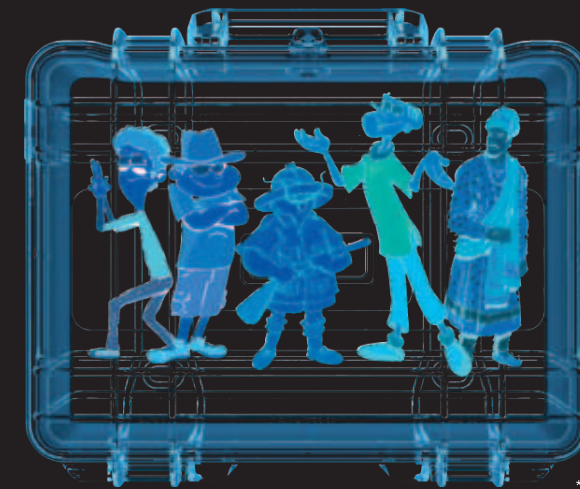
down. Alternatively, you could ask your taxi to drop you off further up the hill, from where it's just a short ascent. Stop along the way for views of trees strung with fluttering prayer flags and wrestling monkeys.

Atop the hill, Buddha's eyes on the main stupa look down at monkeys bounding among the prayer wheels, shrines, and temples below. For a quick bite and morning coffee with a view, stop by **Café de Stupa** near Swayambhunath Temple, from where you can see the sprawling splendour of the Kathmandu Valley, a carpet of green interspersed with stubby houses that look like little toys (*entry ₹32 for SAARC nationals*).

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Comb the tiny bylanes of Kathmandu (top left) for a glimpse of everyday life and the striking, if crumbling, brick and woodwork of traditional Newari architecture; Among the huge variety of spices and condiments Kathmandu's spice sellers peddle (top right) is timur, a variety of Sichuan pepper that is unique to the region; Besides Kathmandu's bustling Durbar Square (bottom), there are also Durbar Squares in Patan and Bhatkpur. The plazas are UNESCO World Heritage Sites that were once the precincts of Nepali royalty.

**AFTERNOON** *On two wheels*  
**Thamel** can be overwhelming in the evenings, but in the afternoon, the crowds are smaller and the roads are easier to navigate. Hire a cycle from one of the many rental stores in the area for a more convenient journey through this web of budget hotels, shops, cool cafés, and bars. Thamel is traveller central, and here you will find lanes crammed with stores selling everything from trekking equipment to

thangka paintings. If you suddenly find yourself in need of a *khukri* or a singing bowl, Thamel is the place to go.  
 Rejuvenate yourself with a freshly brewed cup of coffee at the **Coffee Shop Chikusa**, and though you'll be spoilt for choice with dining options, **OR2K** in Thamel is a great Middle Eastern restaurant filled with tourists dining on falafel and *shakshuka*.  
*(Himalayan Single Track in Thamel rents*



out mountain bikes starting at ₹940 per day; himalayansingletrack.com. Bikes for city use can be hired from local shops starting from ₹312 per day.)

**EVENING** *Dance the night away*  
 Get an early start in the evening, because Kathmandu's nightlife shuts down early. Catch a band outside of the tourist-overrun bars to experience how locals like to kick back. Tuesday and Friday nights at **Moksha** in Lalitpur (11 a.m.-11 p.m.) are raucous fun with their house band What The Funk belting out eminently danceable tunes. **Jazz Upstairs** in residential Lazimpat is a more intimate venue that generally flies under the radar. Here, up a dark flight of stairs, local and expat jazz aficionados sip their whisky while soaking in the music on Wednesday and Saturday nights. The wood-panelled bar is adorned with posters of Miles Davis and other jazz greats, the drinks menu is scrawled on a blackboard above the bar, the pork curry and rice is simple and wholesome—just like the establishment.

**DAY 2**  
**MORNING** *Healing touch*  
 Kathmandu's history is written in its durbar squares, museums, and palaces, but it's nearly impossible to see all of these in a day. Pick one site—either the **Patan** or **Kathmandu Durbar Square**, both of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and house ancient monuments, plinths, and shrines built in the indigenous Newari style.  
 Indulge in a therapeutic Nepali massage at **Himalayan Healers**, a non-profit

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With stores selling everything from high-end trekking gear and Chinese knock-offs to puppets and brass idols (top left), Kathmandu is a shopper's heaven; Street vendors (top right) cater to all tastes selling food items like sel roti, a deep-fried, doughnut-shaped breakfast item, momos stuffed with pork, and squares of churpi, a hard local cheese that can be chewed for hours; Thamel is more than a foreign tourist hotspot packed with thousands of signboards vying for business (bottom left). It is also where young locals hang out in the evenings and over the weekend; Thangkas are scroll paintings depicting Buddhist religious themes (bottom right). They were traditionally used for meditation and teaching.

boutique spa with outlets throughout the city. This social organisation, founded by a former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer, trains underprivileged women as masseuses for Ayurvedic therapies and hot stone treatments (*Himalayan Healers, Lazimpat*).

**AFTERNOON** *Sounds of silence*  
Spend a sunny afternoon exploring Kathmandu's star attraction—**Boudhanath**. As you circumambulate the stupa clockwise, the norm in Buddhist tradition, chants of "Om Mane Padme Hum" rise all around.

Grab lunch at the nearby Japanese restaurant **Sakura**, savouring sushi, miso soup, and green tea as you look out upon the large Buddhist stupa. After 3 p.m., the

**Guru Lhakhang monastery** near the stupa reopens. Rows of monks chant mantras in a deep, throaty tone while hitting their prayer drums. The Buddhist enclave around Boudhanath has approximately 20 smaller, quieter, hidden *gompas* (Tibetan monasteries and nunneries). If you have to pick only one, visit the monastery of **Shechen Tennyé Dargyeling** for its wide courtyards, friendly residents and large library. Pop into the adjacent **Tsering Art School**, where young artists and monks are taught the art of making *thangkas*. If you're lucky, you might witness one being painted. (Boudhanath entry fee ₹25 for SAARC nationals).

**EVENING** *Fast food*  
Getting a taste of Newari cuisine is well

worth an early dinner dash. **The Village Café** at Pulchowk in Lalitpur (10 a.m.-8 p.m.) promises an authentic experience in a traditional setting. Run by women from nearby villages, the restaurant with floor seating, serves otherwise hard-to-find Nepali dishes, such as *yomaree*, a sweet dumpling stuffed with condensed milk or raisins, and *chatamari*, a rice crêpe topped with meat and vegetables. Note that they close by 8 p.m.

If you'd rather dine at a place with more options, **Café Cheenos** in Lalitpur (10 a.m.-8 p.m.; near Bhat Bhateni supermarket) is lovely for a meal in a leafy garden, with a mixed menu offering Indian, Nepali, and Continental dishes. Their speciality is the stuffed chicken; they also do a good prawn curry and rice. ■

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