

This article first appeared in the May 2000 issue of On The Hill magazine, ahead of the political troubles that engulfed the country in the first decade of the 21st Century.

Nepal

Vital Statistics

- It's a land-locked country nestled between two emerging world super-powers.
- It has four of the five highest mountains in the world.
- In just 100 miles you can travel from an altitude of 700 feet to almost 30,000ft.
- Tourism is a vital part of it's economy, yet it was closed to foreigners until 1949.

This is Nepal. And if you've always wanted to go, then start here...

When To Go

Nepal can be divided into four seasons: winter (December - February); pre-monsoon (March-May); monsoon (June - August); and post-monsoon (September-November). The overwhelming majority of visitors arrive in the pre- or post-monsoon seasons which offer pleasant trekking weather, the best chance of viewing and climbing the mountains and acceptable temperatures in the jungles of the Terai. Consequently, Nepal is nearly deserted of tourists in the monsoon and this is when the country comes alive much as it was before her borders were opened to tourists in 1949. Visiting Nepal in the summer is a fantastic opportunity to see the country at a very special time of year, when the weather alternates between blazing heat and awesome thunderstorms. The views of the mountains in the monsoon are however sporadic when compared to the pre- and post-monsoon seasons.

What To Take

Nepal has one of the most diverse climates in the world. Long-sleeved cotton shirts and trousers are de rigeur in the jungle, whilst trekking in the mountains demands fast-wicking base layers and fleece clothing. Mountaineers require duvet jackets. Try to chose clothing and equipment that is versatile, light and

quick-drying. Dehydration is a big problem both in the Terai and at altitude, so large water bottles and a means of purifying water is essential for all visitors. As is protection from the sun.

Don't Leave Without...

1. A comprehensive insurance policy, including helicopter search & rescue and repatriation. All rescues in Nepal have to be paid for in advance.
2. Your Nepalese visa. British Passport holders can get theirs from the Nepalese Embassy before departure (tel: 020 7229 1594) for £20 or on arrival at Kathmandu airport for \$30. You will need two passport-sized photos.
3. A medical kit, preferably including a general antibiotic prescribed by your GP.
4. An armful of injections. Your GP will hold the most up-to-date list of recommended vaccinations. Some of these need to be taken weeks or even months in advance, so plan ahead.

Getting There

The quickest way of getting to Nepal is to fly to its capital, Kathmandu. Flights from the UK are operated by a number of airlines including Qatar Airways, Gulf Air, Austrian Airlines, Pakistan International Airlines and Biman Bangladesh Airlines. Flights vary in price depending on carrier and time of year, but expect to pay between £400 and £650. If you have time on your hands, then perhaps an overland expedition is for you? You can take in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iran, Pakistan and India en route Alternatively, independent travellers can arrive overland from India or Tibet.

Getting Around

Once you arrive in Nepal your transport options are limited. In the flat plains of the Terai, a road network and public bus services do exist. Kathmandu has a heavily-polluted ring road and roads do stretch out to popular trekking areas including Pokhara, as well as one of the starting points for the Everest trek at Jiri. However, in the hills your only option is to travel by foot. Visitors with more

money than time can cut down on the walking by flying to one of 16 airstrips dotted all over the country. These have in many respects become the lifeblood of the country, bringing tourists and much-needed revenue to remote mountain communities. The most famous of all these is the short take-off and landing (STOL) runway at Lukla in the Khumbu Region. Originally built as an emergency evacuation airstrip for patients at the Himalayan Trust's hospital in Khunde, it has now become over-run with trekkers in the busy pre- and post-monsoon seasons. However, people on a tight timetable be aware; bad weather can shut down these airstrips for days at a time resulting in frustrating delays.

Kathmandu

Places To Stay

Kathmandu offers a vast choice of accommodation, from friendly guest houses to 5-star international-standard hotels. Many people leave their hotel arrangements until arrival. That's fine as new hotels seem to be springing up all the time. But you are likely to be accosted by taxi drivers at the airport who will want to whisk you off to a hotel of their choice, for which they will earn a small commission should you decide to check-in. On the subject of money, the currency of Nepal is the Nepalese rupee. It is not valid outside of Nepal. UK£ or US\$ can be taken in cash or traveller's cheques and exchanged in Kathmandu. Credit cards are being increasingly accepted. Outside of Kathmandu, Nepalese currency in small denominations is preferred.

Check This Out

Nepal, Lonely Planet, ISBN 0-86442-704-2

Cultural Kathmandu

The Kathmandu Valley is a rich bed of history and culture. Highlights in the city include: The House Of The Living Goddess; Kasthamandap (a temple built from a single tree and from which the city derives its name); and the oldest Buddhist shrine in the world, Swayambunath. The nearby town of Patan is an ancient city of art and architecture, renowned for its fine work in bronze, silver and copper. It is also home to a Tibet Handicraft Centre. Bhaktapur, also known as the 'City of Devotees', is home to medieval art and architecture. The lovely Royal Game

Sanctuary of Gokarna includes Spotted Deer, Hog Deer and Sambar.

Budhanilkantha is a focal point of Hindu pilgrimage, and features a magnificent image of the sleeping Lord Vishnu in a pond. According to legend the King of Nepal is a reincarnation of Vishnu and so cannot visit this shrine.

Kathmandu Cuisine

Here are our favourite restaurants. A knowledgeable taxi or rickshaw driver should know their location - but make sure they do know where it is before you get in, or you may well end up spending the next 30 minutes driving around aimlessly in an attempt to find out where to go.

1. Bukhara (Soaltee Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza); the best Tandoori food in the city, based on a North West Frontier menu.

2. Bhanchha Ghar (Kamaladi); traditional Nepali food in an old restored Newari House.

3. Fire & Ice (Thamel); the best pizza and ice cream east of Italy. A concise menu but quick service.

4. Koto (Durbar Marg); Japanese food in a casual setting.

5. Krishnarpan (Dwarika's Village); certainly the most beautiful decor in town, with traditional Newari food served by staff wearing spectacular Newari outfits.

6. Mike's Breakfast (Naxal); one of the most famous restaurants in town. A relaxed garden setting serving great American and Mexican food.

7. Simply Shutters (Thamel); an elegant bistro that serves French cuisine in a chic, intimate setting.

8. The Garden Restaurant (Hotel Shangri-La); a most delightful and tranquil garden serving a range of Eastern and Western dishes - perfect for relaxed lunches.

9. Yin Yang (Thamel); great Thai and continental food. Their chocolate mousse is the best-kept secret in Nepal.

10. KC's; has retained some of the ambience which made it a favourite in the 1970's. Their sizzling steaks really do sizzle!

Trekking

Other mountain areas may have increased in popularity in recent years but there's no getting away from it; Nepal is the home of trekking. Even the word 'trekking' was coined here by the late Jimmy Roberts. In the 1960s he set up the world's first trekking agency, Mountain Travel. There are treks for all ages and abilities, from single day treks in the Kathmandu Valley to multi-week adventures in wild and remote country such as the Barun Glacier in the east of the country. However, Nepal's most rewarding trekking lies in the middle range; two or three week-long treks amongst the villages which dot the foothills of the Himalaya. Most treks, particularly the ones offered by commercial operators, use footpaths that for centuries have been trading routes for the local people. So trekking in Nepal is rarely about a true wilderness experience, but more a mix of village life and cultural exchanges all set against a backdrop of the highest mountain range on earth.

Before departure, take the time to read up on Acute Mountain Sickness, and don't try to ascend too quickly, especially if you only have a short amount of time. With the exception of the Annapurna, Everest and Langtang regions, all mountainous areas of Nepal require permits which can be obtained in Kathmandu. Note that some areas (such as Dolpo, Mustang, and Manaslu) require special permits that require you to be accompanied by an official. Some areas, including the Annapurna and Everest regions, require you to pay environmental fees of one sort or another.

Check This Out

The Trekking Guide to Nepal. Bezruchka. The Mountaineers. ISBN 0-898865-352
Trekking In The Nepal Himalaya. Armington. Lonely Planet. ISBN 0-86442-511-2

Altitude Illness, Prevention & Treatment. Bezruchka. The Mountaineers. ISBN 1-871-890-578

Mountaineering

For mountaineers, Nepal is a country of superlatives. The country is home to eight of the world's 14 8000m peaks, including four of the 'Big 5'; Everest, Kangchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu. Only the world's second highest mountain, K2, lies outside of Nepal.

Everest will always be the jewel in Nepal's crown. But even amateur mountaineers of modest ability can find 20,000ft peaks that should be within their grasp. Recognising this, the Nepalese Government has labelled a number of mountains under the unfortunate misnomer of 'Trekking Peaks'. These mountains, better described as 'Alpine Peaks', can be climbed by mountaineers with the minimum of bureaucratic hassle (other mountains require special permits and teams need to be accompanied by government liaison officers). There are still plenty of unclimbed peaks waiting to be scaled; indeed Sir Chris Bonington is attempting a virgin peak in Nepal this Spring.

Check This Out

www.bonington.com

The Trekking Peaks of Nepal. O'Connor. ISBN 1-85223-651-5

Over The Himalaya. Ohmori. Diadem. ISBN 0-906371-15-5

Rafting

Nepal offers a diverse and challenging set of Himalayan rivers for rafters and kayakers. Not all rivers offer the white-water experience that experienced paddlers might expect - so choose your river with care! On the other hand, visitors who want a (relatively) gentle mode of transport linking a trek with a jungle experience will also be rewarded. The main rivers are listed here. (Rivers are graded 1 through 5, with 1 being gentle).

Bheri: a remote river in the far west of Nepal. Grade 3, three or four days.

Kali Gandaki: the river flows through the huge gorges of the Annapurna massif, and can include visits to temples, villages and an old Rana palace. The rapids on this river are some of the most thrilling in the kingdom. Grade 5, five days.

Seti: the Seti river rises from the slopes of Machapuchare. This river is very scenic, with no big rapids. It's a beautiful two day trip all the way to Gaighat. This river is accessible from Kathmandu and Pokhara. Grade 2/3, two or three days.

Sun Kosi: beginning life near the Tibetan Plateau, the river is fed by the tributaries drained from Mount Everest. The major rapids are huge and similar to those in the Grand Canyon. Along the river are white sandy beaches for camping. The lower section of the river is covered with thick vegetation which hide monkeys, leopards and an abundance of bird life. Grade 4+, nine or ten days.

Trisuli: for people with only a limited amount of time the Trisuli offers short rafting trips out of Kathmandu. It is even possible to take in the best section of the river in a single day and return to Kathmandu the same evening. Grade 3, one to five days.

Karnali: this is a remote river that requires two days of trekking just to reach its banks. The whitewater rapids with names like 'Jailhouse Rock' and 'Inversion' are difficult and sustained. This is the river for adrenaline addicts! Grade 5, eight days.

Check This Out

White Water Nepal. Knowles & Allardice. ISBN 0-9519413-0-5

Safari

Nepal has two main national parks in the Terai. The Royal Chitwan National Park is the most popular. So much so that a town has sprung up on its perimeter, offering cheap accommodation and day trips by four-wheel drive into the park. A few operators have been granted licences to build accommodation inside the park itself. These are of course more expensive to stay in but allow the visitor to immerse themselves in the jungle for 24 hours a day. Some of the operators even have their own 'fleets' of Indian elephants. Surely there is no better way to see

rhino, birds and monkeys than from the back of one of these magnificent animals. At least one operator (Tiger Mountain) also offers horse riding from one of its lodges in Chitwan. Royal Bardia National Park is more remote with fewer operators. With that exclusivity comes an increased chance to view wildlife including tiger, which has all but disappeared from Chitwan.

Mountain Biking

There are plenty of quiet roads and rough trails in the Kathmandu Valley to satisfy mountain bikers, and if you don't want to fly your own bike out, they can be hired on arrival. Actually, hiring a bicycle is a great way of seeing Kathmandu itself. Outside of the valley, there are marvellous biking opportunities, and descents of over 2000 vertical metres are possible.

Check This Out

Insight Pocket Guides. Kathmandu: Bikes & Rides, Giambrone. ISBN 0-887294-340

Airborne Action

One of the most exciting ways to see Kathmandu is from the air, allowing people who do not have enough time to trek an opportunity to see the world's highest mountains. Here are some of the choices available:

Ballooning; lifting off from Kathmandu at first light it is possible to experience a 360° panorama of the Himalaya from a wicker basket suspended below a hot air balloon.

Mountain flight; an early morning flight to Mount Everest with views of other 8000m giants including Makalu, Kanchenjunga, Cho Oyu and Lhotse, as well as literally hundreds of other peaks.

Helicopter excursions; private flights to the mountain or region of your choice. Everything from a small Ecureuil to the mighty MI-17 helicopter is available for hire in Kathmandu.

Check This Out

www.nepalhomepage.com

Marathons & Championships

The famous Everest marathon takes place each autumn. If the prospect of running around at 4000m is too much, why not sign up for the inaugural Chitwan Jungle full and half-marathon that is taking place on 21st January 2001? The Himalayan Mountain Bike Championships are held in Kathmandu each March. An international event, it attracts both world-class and local riders.

Check This Out

Everest Marathon: Bufo Ventures (tel: 01539 445445/email: bufo@btinternet.com)

Chitwan Marathon: Tiger Mountain (00 9 771 411225/www.tigermountain.com).

Mountain Bike Championship: Himalayan Mountain Bikes

(bike@hmb.wlink.com.np)

Environmental & Ethical Responsibilities

The size of the Himalaya belies its fragility. You have an environmental responsibility to ensure that no trace of your passing is left. If using a commercial tour operator, quiz the company on its environmental policy. Do they dispose of litter correctly? Do they cook on oil-burning rather than wood-burning stoves? Do they site lavatories properly? If you are travelling independently please minimise the amount of packaging that you take with you and make sure that you bring your batteries back home. Contrary to popular belief, there are no recycling centres in Kathmandu. For more information on environmental concerns, contact the Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP) at: tour@keep.wlink.com.np

It is a legal requirement that companies in Nepal insure their staff, so if you are trekking with a reputable company this should be OK. However, if you are travelling independently and employ a local to carry your rucksack, you are morally responsible for his or her welfare. Remember this when hiring staff. Whether or not you are on a commercial trip, there are sadly many examples of local labour being left to fend for themselves when the going gets tough. This

disgraceful attitude by Westerners has led to a series of avoidable deaths. As a result the International Porter Protection Group (IPPG) has been set up. Its guidelines are:

- 1 Ensure that adequate clothing is available for protection in bad weather and at altitude.
- 2 Never send a sick porter down alone.
- 3 Provide sufficient funds to cover the cost of rescue and treatment.
- 4 Ensure porters are never paid off due to illness without the trek leader or trekkers' knowledge.
- 5 Ensure porters are provided with the same level of medical care as themselves.

Cultural Sensitivity

It seems ironic that whilst the vast majority of western visitors return from Nepal marvelling at Nepalese hospitality and culture, some stomp through the country with scant regard for traditions and customs. Showing bare arms and legs, exchanging items with the left hand, and public displays of affection are just three of the many ways to insult your host. Some westerners are so arrogant as to believe that they should make no effort to respect local traditions. That attitude will eventually destroy the beauty of Nepal and reduce the country to yet just another 'Coca-Cola' culture. So please, think and act sensitively.

Check This Out

Culture Shock! Nepal. Burbank. Kuperard. ISBN 1-85733-025-0

The People of Nepal

Contrary to popular belief, not all Nepalis are Sherpas! Sherpas have become world-famous because they have been used to carry loads and more recently look after western clients on almost every Everest expedition. But Sherpas are just one of a great many ethnic groups in Nepal. Some of the other ethnic groups include Thakalis, Tamangs, Tibetans, Rai, Limbu, Newars, Magars, Gurungs, Bahuns, Chetteris and Tharus. Many non-Sherpas also work as mountain guides and porters. As a result, the word 'sherpa' (spelt with a small 's') has become

synonymous with any Nepali who works in mountain tourism. Nepal has a caste system, and the two primary religions are Buddhism and Hinduism. The universal greeting of 'Namaste' (said whilst smiling with both hands pressed together as if in prayer) is an excellent ice-breaker.

Check This Out

Nepali Phrasebook, Lonely Planet, ISBN 0-86442-345-4

What To Give

Many people arrive in Nepal unaware of the tremendous warmth and generosity of the Nepali people. As a result, visitors want to give something to their hosts but are unsure what is appropriate. For trekkers, items of clothing and equipment are always appreciated - don't worry if they already have an item for they will be able to sell the extra one in Kathmandu. Money of course is always appreciated.

People on organised trips may choose to pool their tips and divide on a sliding scale between the sherpa leader (Sirdar), sherpa guides, porters and yak drivers. It is always tempting to give sweets and/or pens to local children, but this can actually encourage begging as well as contributing to tooth decay in a country with poor dental facilities. Better perhaps to give donations of pens and paper to local schoolteachers in villages, or to one of the many aid organisations either in the west or in Nepal itself.

Contacts

Tiger Mountain, the oldest operator of trekking, rafting and jungle adventures can be contacted directly in Nepal. www.tigermountain.com. tel: 00977 1 411225.

fax: 009 771 414075

Exodus offers overland expeditions from London to Kathmandu. tel: 020 8675 5550. www.exodustravels.co.uk

Royal Nepalese Embassy. tel: 020 7229 1594

World Expeditions offer a wide range of treks in Nepal, including expeditions led by Everest mountaineers such as Rebecca Stephens and Peter Hillary. tel: 020 8870 2600. www.worldexpeditions.co.uk

Most of the books listed in this article can be obtained from Stanfords, 12-14 Longacre, London WC2E 9LP. Tel: 0171 836 1321.

Useful websites

The following two websites are good places to start looking for companies who offer specific services, airline contact details, hotels and the latest info on permits etc.

www.nepalhomepage.com

www.visitnepal.com

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