

History

The history of Nepal began in, and centres on, the Kathmandu Valley. Over the centuries Nepal's boundaries have extended to include huge tracts of neighbouring India, and contracted to little more than the Kathmandu Valley and a handful of nearby city-states. Though it has ancient roots, the modern state of Nepal emerged only in the 18th century.

Squeezed between the Tibetan plateau and the plains of the subcontinent – the modern-day giants of China and India – Nepal has long prospered from its location as a resting place for traders, travellers and pilgrims. A cultural mixing pot, it has bridged cultures and absorbed elements of its neighbours, yet retained a unique character. After travelling through India for a while, many travellers notice both the similarities and differences. 'Same, same', they say, '...but different'.

THE KIRATIS & BUDDHIST BEGINNINGS

Nepal's recorded history kicks off with the Hindu Kiratis. Arriving from the east around the 7th or 8th century BC, these Mongoloid people are the first known rulers of the Kathmandu Valley. King Yalambar (the first of their 29 kings) is mentioned in the Mahabharata, the Hindu epic, but little more is known about them.

In the 6th century BC, Prince Siddhartha Gautama was born into the Sakya royal family of Kapilavastu, near Lumbini, later embarking on a path of meditation and thought that led him to enlightenment as the Buddha. The religion that grew up around him continues to shape the face of Asia.

Around the 2nd century BC, the great Indian Buddhist emperor Ashoka (c 272–236 BC) visited Lumbini and erected a pillar at the birthplace of the Buddha. Popular legend recounts how he then visited

A History of Nepal by John Whelpton is one of the few available titles covering Nepal's history. It concentrates on the last 250 years and is good at explaining not only political events but also changes in real people's lives throughout the period. It's available inside Nepal at a discounted price.

WARNING ABOUT FACTS & FIGURES

References for anything in Nepal are often inconsistent. For example, we've seen several different figures for the amount of square kilometres Nepal occupies. When temples were built is also a matter of speculation: some sources give a date of construction for a certain temple and the period of reign for the king who built it, and the two only sometimes coincide.

Many temples in Nepal have alternative names. For example, Vishnu Temple in Patan's Durbar Square is referred to as Jagannarayan or Charnarayan Temple. Where possible we have provided alternative names that are commonly used.

Further confusion results from different systems of transliteration from Sanskrit – the letter 'h', or the use of the double 'hh' appears in some systems, but does not appear in others, so you may see Manjushri and Manjusri, Machhendranath and Machendranath. This difference only occurs during translation – the Nepali script is always consistent. The letters 'b' and 'v' are also used interchangeably in different systems – Shiva's fearsome manifestation is Bhairab or Bhairav; Vishnu is often written as Bishnu; and the Nepali word for the Tibetan thunderbolt symbol can be a *bajra* or a *vajra*.

Finally, texts differ in their use of the words Nepali and Nepalese. In this book we use Nepali for the language and for other terms relating to the country and the people.

TIMELINE 100,000 BC

Kathmandu Valley formed, as the former lake bed dries

c 563–483 BC

Life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

the Kathmandu Valley and erected four stupas (pagodas) around Patan, but there is no evidence that he actually made it there in person. In either event, his Mauryan empire (321–184 BC) played a major role in popularising Buddhism in the region, a role continued by the north Indian Buddhist Kushan empire (1st to 3rd centuries AD).

Over the centuries Buddhism gradually lost ground to a resurgent Hinduism and by the time the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Fa Xian (Fa Hsien) and Xuan Zang (Hsuan Tsang) passed through the region in the 5th and 7th centuries the site of Lumbini was already in ruins.

LICCHAVIS, THAKURIS, THEN DARKNESS

Buddhism faded and Hinduism reasserted itself with the arrival from northern India of the Licchavis. In AD 300 they overthrew the Kiratis, who resettled in the east and are the ancestors of today's Rai and Limbu people.

Between the 4th and 8th centuries, the Licchavis ushered in a golden age of cultural brilliance. The *chaityas* (stupas) and monuments of this era can still be seen at the Changu Narayan Temple (p210), north of Bhaktapur, and in the backstreets of Kathmandu's old town. Their strategic position allowed them to prosper from trade between India and China. It's believed that the original stupas at Chabahil, Bodhnath and Swayambhunath date from the Licchavi era.

Amsuvarman, the first Thakuri king, came to power in 602, succeeding his Licchavi father-in-law. He consolidated his power to the north and south by marrying his sister to an Indian prince and his daughter Bhrikuti to the great Tibetan king Songsten Gampo. Together with the Gampo's Chinese wife Wencheng, Bhrikuti managed to convert the king to Buddhism around 640, changing the face of both Tibet and, later, Nepal.

From the late 7th century until the 13th century Nepal slipped into its 'dark ages', of which little is known. Tibet invaded in 705 and Kashmir invaded in 782. The Kathmandu Valley's strategic location, however, ensured the kingdom's growth and survival. King Gunakamadeva is credited with founding Kantipur, today's Kathmandu, around the 10th century. During the 9th century a new lunar calendar was introduced, one that is still used by Newars to this day.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE MALLAS

The first of the Malla kings came to power in the Kathmandu Valley around 1200. The Mallas (literally 'wrestlers' in Sanskrit) had been forced out of India and their name can be found in the Mahabharata and in Buddhist literature. This period was a golden one that stretched over 550 years, though it was peppered with fighting over the valuable trade routes to Tibet.

The first Malla rulers had to cope with several disasters. A huge earthquake in 1255 killed around one-third of Nepal's population. A devastating Muslim invasion by Sultan Shams-ud-din of Bengal less than a century later left plundered Hindu and Buddhist shrines in its wake, though the invasion did not leave a lasting cultural effect here (unlike in the Kashmir Valley which remains Muslim to this day). In India the damage was more widespread and many Hindus were driven into the hills and mountains of Nepal, where they established small Rajput principalities.

Apart from this, the earlier Malla years (1220–1482) were largely stable, reaching a high point under the third Malla dynasty of Jayashithi Malla (r 1382–1395), who united the valley and codified its laws, including the caste system. The mid-13th century saw the de facto rule of Queen Devaladevi, the most powerful woman in Nepal's history.

After the death of Jayashithi Malla's grandson Yaksha Malla in 1482, the Kathmandu Valley was divided up among his sons into the three kingdoms of Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon), Kathmandu (Kantipur) and Patan (Lalitpur). They proceeded to fight with each other over the right to control the rich trading routes with Tibet.

The rest of what we today call Nepal consisted of a fragmented patchwork of almost 50 independent states, from Palpa to Jumla, and the semi-independent states of Banepa and Pharping, most of them minting their own coins and maintaining standing armies.

One of the most important of these was the Nepali-speaking Khasa empire (Western Mallas), based in the far west in the Karnali basin around Sinja and Jumla. The kingdom peaked in the 13th and 14th centuries, only to fragment in the 15th century. Its lasting contribution was the Nepali language that is spoken today as the unifying national language.

Nepal's most profound export was perhaps its architecture; in the 13th century the Nepali architect Arniko travelled to Lhasa and the Mongol capital in Beijing, bringing with him the design of the pagoda, thus changing the face of religious temples across Asia.

The rivalry between the three kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley found its expression in the arts and culture, which flourished in the competitive climate. The outstanding collections of exquisite temples and buildings in each city's Durbar Square are testament to the huge amounts of money spent by the rulers to outdo each other.

The building boom was financed by trade, in everything from musk and wool to salt, Chinese silk and even yak tails. The Kathmandu Valley stood at the departure point for two separate routes into Tibet, via Banepa to the northeast and via Rasuwa and the Kyirong Valley near Langtang in the northwest. Traders would cross the jungle-infested Terai during winter to avoid the virulent malaria and then wait in Kathmandu for the mountain passes to open later that summer. Kathmandu grew rich and its rulers converted their wealth into gilded pagodas and ornately carved royal palaces. In the mid-17th century Nepal gained the right to mint Tibet's coins using Tibetan silver, further enriching the kingdom's coffers.

In Kathmandu King Pratap Malla (1641–74) oversaw that city's cultural highpoint with the construction of the Hanuman Dhoka Palace, the Rani Pokhari pond and the first of several subsequent pillars that featured a statue of the king facing the protective Temple of Taleju, who the Mallas had by that point adopted as their protective deity. The mid-17th century also saw a highpoint of building in Patan.

Around 1750 King Jaya Prakash Malla built Kathmandu's Kumari Temple. Not long afterwards came the Nyatapola Temple in Bhaktapur, the literal highpoint of pagoda-style architecture in Nepal.

The Malla era shaped the religious as well as artistic landscape, introducing the dramatic chariot festivals of Indra Jatra and Machhendranath. The Malla kings shored up their position by claiming to be reincarnations of the

Nepal's flag is totally unique, consisting of two overlapping red triangles, bearing a white moon and a white 12-pointed sun (the first mythological kings of Nepal are said to be descendents of the sun and moon).

Nepal's founding father, Prithvi Narayan Shah, referred to Nepal as 'a yam between two boulders' – namely China and India – a metaphor that is as true geologically as it is historically.

You can visit the archaeological site of Kapilavastu, where Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) lived for first 29 years of his life, at Tilaurakot (p297).

c 250 BC

Ashoka (ruled 268–231 BC) visited Lumbini

57 BC

Nepal's official Vikram calendar starts

AD 464

Nepal's earliest surviving inscription is carved into the beautiful Changu Narayan Temple in the Kathmandu Valley

879

Start of Newari calendar

Hindu god Vishnu and establishing the cult of the *kumari*, a living goddess whose role it was to bless the Malla's rule during an annual celebration.

The cosmopolitan Mallas also absorbed foreign influences. The Indian Mughal court influenced Malla dress and painting, presented the Nepalis with firearms and introduced the system of land grants for military service, a system which would have a profound effect in later years. Persian terminology was introduced to the court administration and in 1729 the three kingdoms sent presents to the Qing court in Beijing, which from then on viewed Nepal as a tributary state. In the early 18th century Capuchin missionaries passed through Nepal to Tibet, giving the West its first descriptions of exotic Kathmandu.

But change didn't only come from abroad. A storm was brewing inside Nepal, just 100km to the east of Kathmandu.

UNIFICATION UNDER THE SHAHS

It took more than a quarter of a century of conquest and consolidation, but by 1768 Prithvi Narayan Shah, ruler of the tiny hilltop kingdom of Gorkha (halfway between Pokhara and Kathmandu), stood poised on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley, about to realise his dream of a unified Nepal.

Prithvi Narayan had taken the strategic hilltop fort of Nuwakot in 1744 and had blockaded the valley, after fighting off reinforcements from the British East India Company. In 1768 Shah took Kathmandu, sneaking in while everyone was drunk during the Indra Jatra festival. A year later he took Kirtipur, finally, after three lengthy failed attempts. In terrible retribution his troops hacked 120 pounds of noses and lips off Kirtipur's residents; unsurprisingly, resistance throughout the valley quickly crumbled. In 1769 he advanced on the three Malla kings, who were quivering in Bhaktapur, ending the Malla rule and unifying Nepal.

Shah moved his capital from Gorkha to Kathmandu, establishing the Shah dynasty, which rules to this day, with its roots in the Rajput kings of Chittor. Shah died just six years later in Nuwakot but is revered to this day as the founder of the nation.

Shah had built his empire on conquest and his insatiable army needed ever more booty and land to keep it satisfied. Within six years the Gurkhas had conquered eastern Nepal and Sikkim. The expansion then turned westwards into Kumaon and Garhwal, only halted on the borders of the Punjab by the armies of the powerful one-eyed ruler Ranjit Singh.

The kingdom's power continued to grow until a 1792 clash with the Chinese in Tibet led to an ignominious defeat, during which Chinese troops advanced down the Kyirong Valley to within 35km of Kathmandu. As part of the ensuing treaty the Nepalis had to cease their attacks on Tibet and pay tribute to the Chinese emperor in Beijing; the payments continued until 1912.

The expanding Nepali boundaries, by this time stretching all the way from Kashmir to Sikkim, eventually put it on a collision course with the world's most powerful empire, the British Raj. Despite early treaties with the British, disputes over the Terai led to the first Anglo-Nepali war, which the British won after a two-year fight. The British were so impressed by their enemy that they decided to incorporate Gurkha mercenaries into their own army.

The 1816 Sugauli treaty called a halt to Nepal's expansion and laid down its modern boundaries. Nepal lost Sikkim, Kumaon, Garhwal and much of the Terai, though some of this land was restored to Nepal in 1858 in return for support given to the British during the Indian Mutiny (Indian War of Independence). A British resident was sent to Kathmandu to keep an eye on things but the Raj knew that it would be too difficult to colonise the impossible hill terrain, preferring to keep Nepal as a buffer state. Nepalis to this day are proud that their country was never colonised by the British, unlike the neighbouring hill states of India.

Following its humiliating defeat, Nepal cut itself off from all foreign contact from 1816 until 1951. The British residents in Kathmandu were the only Westerners to set eyes on Nepal for more than a century.

On the cultural front, temple construction continued impressively, though perhaps of more import to ordinary people was the introduction, via India, of chillis, potatoes, tobacco and other New World crops.

The Shah rulers, meanwhile, swung from ineffectual to seriously de-ranked. At one point the kingdom was governed by a twelve-year-old female regent, in charge of a nine-year-old king! One particularly sadistic ruler, Crown Prince Surendra, expanded the horizons of human suffering by ordering subjects to jump down wells or ride off cliffs, just to see whether they would die.

THE RANOCRACY

The death of Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1775 set in motion a string of succession struggles, infighting, assassinations, feuding and intrigue that culminated in the Kot Massacre in 1846. This bloody night was engineered by the young Chhetri noble, Jung Bahadur; it catapulted his family into power and sidelined the Shah dynasty.

Ambitious and ruthless, Jung Bahadur organised (with the queen's consent) for his soldiers to massacre several hundred of the most important men in the kingdom – noblemen, soldiers and courtiers – while they were assembled in the Kot courtyard adjoining Kathmandu's Durbar Square. He then exiled 6000 members of their families to prevent revenge attacks.

Jung Bahadur took the title of Prime Minister and changed his family name to the more prestigious Rana. He later extended his title to maharajah (king) and decreed it hereditary. The Ranas became a second 'royal family' within the kingdom and held the reins of power – the Shah kings became listless figureheads, requiring permission even to leave their palace.

The hereditary family of Rana prime ministers held power for more than a century, eventually intermarrying with the Shahs. Development in Nepal stagnated, although the country did manage to preserve its independence. Only on rare occasions were visitors allowed into Nepal.

Jung Bahadur Rana travelled to Europe in 1850, attended the opera and the races at Epsom, and brought back a taste for neoclassical architecture, examples of which can be seen in Kathmandu today. To the Ranas' credit, *sati* (the Hindu practice of casting a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) was abolished in 1920, 60,000 slaves were released from bondage and a school and a college were established in Kathmandu. But while the Ranas and their relations lived lives of opulent luxury, the peasants in the hills were locked in a medieval existence.

Visit the birthplace and launching pad of Nepal's unifier Narayan Prithvi Shah at Gorkha (p239).

Jung Bahadur Rana broke a religious taboo by becoming the first Nepali ruler to cross the *kalo pani* (black water, or ocean) and thus temporarily losing his caste, when he travelled to Europe in 1850.

1349

Muslim armies of Sultan Shams-ud-Din plunder the Kathmandu Valley, looting Swayambhunath

1428–82

Rule of Yaksha Malla, high point of Malla kings

1480

Kathmandu splits into the three kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur

1531–34

Sherpas settle in the Solu Khumbu region from Eastern Tibet

Modernisation began to dawn on Kathmandu with the opening of the Bir Hospital, Nepal's first, in 1889, the first piped water system, limited electricity and the construction of the huge Singha Durbar palace. In 1923 Britain formally acknowledged Nepal's independence and in 1930 the kingdom of Gorkha was renamed the kingdom of Nepal, reflecting a growing sense of national consciousness.

The arrival of the Indian railway line at the Nepali border greatly aided the transportation of goods but sounded a death knell for the caravan trade that bartered Nepali grain and rice for Tibetan salt. The transborder trade suffered another setback when the British opened a second, more direct trade route with Tibet through Sikkim's Chumbi Valley (the real nail in the coffin came in 1966, when the Chinese closed the border to local trade).

Elsewhere in the region dramatic changes were taking place. The Nepalis supplied logistical help during Britain's invasion of Tibet in 1903, and over 300,000 Nepalis fought in WWI and WWII, garnering a total of 13 Victoria Crosses – Britain's highest military honour – for their efforts.

After WWII, India gained its independence and the communist revolution took place in China. Tibetan refugees fled into Nepal in the first of several waves when the new People's Republic of China tightened its grip on Tibet, and Nepal became a buffer zone between the two rival Asian giants. At the same time King Tribhuvan, forgotten in his palace, was being primed to overthrow the Ranas.

The first cars were transported to the Kathmandu Valley in parts, on the backs of porters, before there were even any roads or petrol in the kingdom.

THE LURE OF MT EVEREST

During the 1920s and '30s, reaching the top of Mt Everest came to dominate the Western imagination. Apart from the difficulties inherent in reaching such heights, the political constraints further upped the ante. Nepal continued to be totally isolated, and all attempts on Everest had to be made from the Tibetan side.

British assaults were made in 1921, 1922 and 1924. The 1922 expedition used oxygen to reach 8326m, while the 1924 expedition fell just 300m short of the top, reaching 8572m without the use of oxygen. Apart from numerous climbers and support staff, the 1924 expedition utilised at least 350 porters. Such massive numbers of porters and support staff set a pattern that was to continue until recent years.

The discovery in 1999 of the body of British climber George Mallory, frozen near the summit, was a new chapter in one of the enduring mysteries of mountaineering history. In 1924, Mallory and his climbing partner, Andrew Irvine, disappeared within sight of the top. Did they reach the summit? No-one can be sure. However, Mallory did leave behind his famous explanation of mountaineering: when asked why he was climbing Mt Everest, he said 'Because it's there'.

Further expeditions followed through the 1920s and '30s, but no real progress was made, although the 8000m level was achieved a number of times. Maurice Wilson added his name to the Everest legend, and to the Everest death roll, when he died during a bizarre solo attempt on the mountain in 1934.

In 1951, a climber who would soon become very famous took part in an exploratory expedition to the mountain – the climber was New Zealander Edmund Hillary. Another name, soon to be equally famous, appeared on the list of climbers on the Swiss Everest expedition of 1952 when Sherpa climber Norgay Tenzing reached 7500m. The conquest of Everest finally took place in 1953 when the British team led by John Hunt put those two climbers, Tenzing and Hillary, atop the world's highest peak.

RESTORATION OF THE SHAHS

In late 1950 King Tribhuvan was driving himself to a hunting trip at Nagarjun when he suddenly swerved James-Bond-style into the expecting Indian embassy, claimed political immunity and was flown to India. Meanwhile, the recently formed Nepali Congress party, led by BP Koirala, managed to take most of the Terai by force from the Ranas and established a provisional government that ruled from the border town of Birganj. India exerted its considerable influence and negotiated a solution to Nepal's turmoil, and King Tribhuvan returned in glory to Nepal in 1951 to set up a new government composed of demoted Ranas and members of the Nepali Congress party.

Although Nepal gradually reopened its long-closed doors and established relations with other nations, dreams of a new democratic system were not permanently realised. Tribhuvan died in 1955 and was succeeded by his cautious son Mahendra. A new constitution provided for a parliamentary system of government and in 1959 Nepal held its first general election. The Nepali Congress party won a clear victory and BP Koirala became the new prime minister. In late 1960, however, the king decided the government wasn't to his taste after all, had the cabinet arrested and swapped his ceremonial role for real control (much as King Gyanendra would do 46 years later).

In 1962 Mahendra decided that a partyless, indirect *panchayat* (council) system of government was more appropriate to Nepal. The real power remained with the king, who chose 16 members of the 35-member National Panchayat, and appointed the prime minister and his cabinet. Political parties were banned.

Mahendra died in 1972 and was succeeded by his 27-year-old British-educated son Birendra. Nepal's hippy community was unceremoniously booted out of the country when visa laws were tightened in the run-up to Birendra's coronation in 1975. Simmering discontent with corruption, the slow rate of development and the rising cost of living erupted into violent riots in Kathmandu in 1979. King Birendra announced a referendum to choose between the *panchayat* system and one that would permit political parties to operate. The result was 55% to 45% in favour of the *panchayat* system; democracy had been outvoted.

Nepal's military and police apparatus were among the least publicly accountable in the world and strict censorship was enforced. Mass arrests, torture and beatings of suspected activists are well documented, and the leaders of the main opposition, the Nepali Congress, spent the years between 1960 and 1990 in and out of prison.

During this time there were impressive movements towards development, namely in education and road construction, with the number of schools increasing from 300 in 1950 to over 40,000 by 2000. But the relentless population growth (Nepal's population grew from 8.4 million in 1954 to 26 million in 2004) cancelled out many of these advances, turning Nepal from an exporter to a net importer of food within a generation. It is also widely accepted that a huge portion of foreign aid was routinely creamed off into royal and ministerial accounts.

During this time over one million hill people moved to the Terai in search of land and several million crossed the border to seek work in

1719

20,000 die of plague in the Kathmandu Valley

1768/69

Nepal unified under Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723–1775) to form the Shah dynasty – Kathmandu becomes the capital

1814–16

Anglo-Nepalese War, Nepal's modern boundaries established

1846

Kot Massacre ushers in the Rana era (1846–1951)

India (Nepalis are able to cross the border and work freely in India), creating a major population shift in favour of the now malaria-free Terai.

PEOPLE POWER

In 1989, as communist states across Europe crumbled and pro democracy demonstrations occupied China's Tiananmen Square, Nepali opposition parties formed a coalition to fight for a multiparty democracy with the king as constitutional head; the upsurge of protest was called the Jana Andolan, or People's Movement.

In early 1990 the government responded to a nonviolent gathering of over 200,000 people with bullets, tear gas and thousands of arrests. After several months of intermittent rioting, curfews, a successful strike, and pressure from various foreign-aid donors, the government was forced to back down. The people's victory did not come cheaply; it is estimated that more than 300 people lost their lives.

On 9 April King Birendra announced he was lifting the ban on political parties. On 16 April he asked the opposition to lead an interim government, and announced his readiness to accept the role of constitutional monarch. Nepal was a democracy.

DEMOCRACY & THE MAOIST UPRISING

In May 1991, 20 parties contested a general election for a 205-seat parliament. The Nepali Congress won power with around 38% of the vote. The Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) won 28%, and the next largest party, the United People's Front, 5%.

In the years immediately following the election, the political atmosphere remained uneasy. In April 1992 a general strike degenerated into street violence between protesters and police, and resulted in a number of deaths.

In late 1994 the Nepali Congress government, led by GP Koirala (brother of BP Koirala) called a midterm election. No party won a clear mandate, and a coalition formed between the CPN-UML and the third major party, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), the old *panchayats*, with the support of the Nepali Congress. This was one of the few times in the world that a communist government had come to power by popular vote.

Political stability did not last long, and the late 1990s were littered with dozens of broken coalitions, dissolved governments and sacked politicians.

In 1996 the Maoists (of the Communist Party of Nepal), fed up with government corruption, the failure of democracy to deliver improvements to the people, and the dissolution of the Communist government, declared a 'people's war'. The insurgency began in the poor regions of the far west and gathered momentum, but was generally ignored by the politicians. The repercussions of this nonchalance finally came to a head in November 2001 when the Maoists broke their ceasefire and an army barracks was attacked west of Kathmandu. After a decade of democracy it seemed increasing numbers of people, particularly young Nepalis and those living in the countryside, were utterly disillusioned.

When Nepal's present King Gyanendra was crowned in 2001 he may well have experienced a feeling of déjà vu — he had already been crowned once before, aged three, and ruled as king for three months, after his grandfather Tribhuvan fled to India. He had to wait half a century to be crowned king for the second time.

For background on the Maoist rebellion try *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, edited by Michael Hutt.

PEOPLE'S WAR

Since 13 February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has been waging a People's War against the Nepali state in the hills of Nepal. Formed in 1995 after innumerable splits in the country's communist movement, the extremist party advocates the establishment of a communist republic in place of the existing constitutional Hindu monarchy.

The 'war' itself started after the Maoists presented the then prime minister with a 40-point charter of demands that ranged from favourable state policies towards backward communities to an assertive Nepali identity, an end to public schools and better governance.

With an ideology owing more to Peru's Shining Path than Chairman Mao (China disowns the group), the two main leaders are the shadowy Chairman Pashpa Kumar Dahal, better known as Prachanda ('the Fierce'), and Dr Baburam Bhattarai; they are both high-caste intellectuals.

The initial Maoist forces were armed with little more than ancient muskets and *khukuris* (traditional knives) but they quickly obtained guns looted from police stations, home-made explosives and automatic weapons, all bankrolled by robbery and extortion and helped by an open border with India. After labelling Nepal's Maoists a terrorist group, the USA handed over millions of dollars to Kathmandu to help fight its own version of the 'war on terror'.

Initial army heavy-handedness only succeeded in alienating the local people. Political disenfranchisement, rural poverty, resentment against the caste system, issues of land reform and a lack of faith in squabbling and self-interested politicians has swelled the ranks of the Maoists, who now number between 10,000 to 15,000 fighters, with a further militia of 50,000. The Maoist heartland is the Rolpa region of midwestern Nepal, but attacks have occurred in almost every one of Nepal's 75 districts, including Kathmandu. Maoists effectively control around 40% of the country, including two protected areas in the far west.

Recent moves seem to suggest that the Maoist leadership is moving towards a political role, with an alliance with the seven main political parties. The Maoists have suggested UN mediation to end the dispute, a plan the government has rejected.

ROYAL TROUBLES

On 1 June 2001 the Nepali psyche was dealt a huge blow when Crown Prince Dipendra gunned down almost every member of the royal family during a get-together in Kathmandu (see the boxed text, p38). A monarch who had steered the country through some extraordinarily difficult times was gone. When the shock of this loss subsided the uncertainty of what lay ahead hit home.

The beginning of the 21st century saw the political situation in the country turn from bad to worse. Prime ministers were sacked and replaced in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005, making a total of nine governments in 10 years. The fragile position of Nepali politicians is well illustrated by Sher Bahadur Deuba, who was appointed prime minister for the second time in 2001, before being dismissed in 2002, reinstated in 2004, sacked again in 2005, thrown in jail on corruption charges and then released! Against such a background, modern politics in Nepal has become more about personal enrichment than public service.

Several Maoist truces, notably in 2003 and 2005, offered some respite, though these reflected as much a need to regroup and rearm as they did any move towards a lasting peace. By 2005 nearly 13,000 people, including many civilians, had been killed in the insurgency, more than half of them since the army joined the struggle in 2001. Amnesty International

1934

Massive earthquake destroys much of the Kathmandu Valley, killing 7000

1951–55

Rule of King Tribhuvan

1953

Everest summited by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay on the 29 May

1955–72

Rule of King Mahendra

Massacre at the Palace: The Doomed Royal Dynasty of Nepal, by Jonathan Gregson, takes a wider look at Nepal's royal family and reveals that assassination and murder have been part of royal life for centuries; it also examines the recent massacre in gripping detail. Sometimes published as *Blood Against the Snows*.

accused both sides of horrific human-rights abuses, including executions, abductions, torture and child conscription.

The Maoist insurgency has, ironically, only worsened the plight of the rural poor by diverting much-needed government funds away from development and causing aid programmes to suspend activity due to security concerns. Until there is real social change and economic development in the countryside, the frustrations fuelling Nepal's current insurgency look set only to continue.

Nepal's 12-year experiment with democracy faced a major setback in October 2002 when the sour-faced King Gyanendra, frustrated with the political stalemate and the continued delay in holding national elections, dissolved the government. Gyanendra again dissolved the government in February 2005, amid a state of emergency, promising a return to democracy within three years. The controversial king has not been helped by his dissolute son (and heir) Paras, who has allegedly been involved in several drunken hit-and-run car accidents, one of which killed a popular Nepali singer.

Entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2004 and the creation of the regional South Asian free trade agreement in 2006 may offer some long-term economic advances but the country remains deeply dependent

THE ROYAL MASSACRE – FOR THE LOVE OF A WOMAN?

It was meant to be a pleasant family gathering at Narayanhiti Royal Palace but the night of 1 June 2001 turned into one of Nepal's greatest tragedies.

That night, in a hail of bullets, 10 members of Nepal's royal family including King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya were gunned down by a deranged, drunken Crown Prince Dipendra, who eventually turned a weapon on himself. Dipendra did not die straight away and, ironically, despite being in a coma, was pronounced the king of Nepal. His rule ended two days later, when he too was declared dead. The real motive behind the massacre will never be known, but many believe Dipendra's murderous drug-fuelled rage was prompted by his parents' disapproval of the woman he wanted to marry.

The object of his love was Devyani Rana, a beautiful aristocrat. The pair had often been seen together in public. However, the king and queen had allegedly told him that were he to ever marry Devyani, he would be stripped of his title and money and the crown would go to his younger brother Nirajan.

In the days that followed the massacre, a tide of emotions washed over the Nepali people – shock, grief, horror, disbelief and denial. A 13-day period of mourning was declared and in Kathmandu impromptu shrines were set up for people to pray for their king and queen. About 400 shaven-headed men roamed the streets around the palace on motorbikes, carrying pictures of the monarch. Half a million stunned Nepalis lined the streets during the funeral procession. All over the city, barbers were shaving the heads of other men, a mark of grief in Hindu tradition.

The initial disbelief and shock gave way to suspicion and a host of conspiracy theories, many concerning the new king, Gyanendra (who was in Pokhara at the time of the massacre), and his son Paras (who emerged unscathed from the attack). None of this was helped by an official enquiry which initially suggested that the automatic weapon had been discharged *by accident* (killing nine people!), or the fact that the victims were quickly cremated without full post mortems. Other theories included that old chestnut, a CIA or Indian secret-service plot. Doubtless the truth will never be known.

A ROYAL PAIN IN THE ARSE

At the time of going to press Nepal was in the process of removing references to the royal family from many official titles. You can expect some of the names in this book to change over time, including references to the Kingdom of Nepal and anything with royal in it, perhaps even including Royal Nepal Airlines.

on foreign aid, which makes up 25% of the state budget and over two-thirds of Nepal's total development budget. The aid industry has come under increased criticism for failing to generate the economic and social development that had been expected. Recent years have seen a move away from the megaprojects of the 1960s and '70s to smaller-scale community cooperation and microfinancing.

Everything changed in April 2006, when parliamentary democracy was grudgingly restored by the king, following days of mass demonstrations, curfews and the deaths of 16 protestors. The next month the newly restored parliament reduced the king to a figurehead, ending powers the royal Shah lineage had enjoyed for over 200 years. A new chapter in Nepal's political history looks set to unfold.

Fatalism & Development – Nepal's Struggle for Modernization, by Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista, is an often-controversial analysis of Nepali society and its dynamics.

1959

Nepal's first general elections

1972–2001

Rule of King Birendra

2001

Royal massacre, June 1

2006

King Gyanendra's powers drastically curtailed by parliament, May

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Nepal's location between India and Tibet, the diversity of its ethnic groups, its isolating geography and myriad languages have resulted in a complex pattern of customs and beliefs that make it hard to generalise about a 'Nepali people'.

Perhaps the dominant cultural concepts are those of caste and status, both of which contribute to a strictly defined system of hierarchy and deference. Caste determines not only a person's status, but also their career and marriage partner, how that person interacts with other Nepalis and how others react back. This system of hierarchy extends even to the family, where everyone has a clearly defined rank. The Nepali language has half a dozen words for 'you', each of which conveys varying shades of respect.

When it comes to their religious beliefs, Nepalis are admirably flexible, pragmatic and, above all, tolerant – there is almost no religious tension in Nepal. Nepalis are generally good humoured and patient, quick to smile and slow to anger, though they have a reputation as fierce fighters (witness the famous Gurkha forces).

The Nepali view of the world is dominated by puja; prayer and ritual and a knowledge that the gods are not remote, abstract concepts but living, present beings, who can influence human affairs in very direct ways. Nepalis perceive the divine everywhere, from the *namaste* greeting that literally means 'I greet the divine inside of you', to the spirits and gods present in trees, sacred river confluences (*dhoban*) and mountain peaks.

The notions of karma and caste, when combined a tangled bureaucracy and deep-rooted corruption, tend to create an endemic sense of fatalism in Nepal. Confronted with problems, many Nepalis will simply respond with a shrug of the shoulders and the phrase *khe garne?* ('what is there to do?'), which Westerners often find frustrating.

TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE

The cornerstones of Nepali life are the demands (and rewards) of one's family, ethnic group and caste. To break these time-honoured traditions is to risk being ostracised from one's family and community. While

PUJA & SACRIFICE

Every morning Hindu women all over Nepal can be seen walking through the streets carrying a plate, usually copper, filled with an assortment of goodies. These women are not delivering breakfast but are taking part in an important daily ritual called puja. The plate might contain flower petals, rice, yogurt, fruit or sweets, and it is an offering to the gods made at the local temple. Each of the items is sprinkled onto a temple deity in a set order and a bell is rung to let the gods know an offering is being made. Once an offering is made it is transformed into a sacred object and a small portion (referred to as *prasad*) is returned to the giver as a blessing from the deity. Upon returning home from her morning trip, the woman will give a small portion of the blessed offerings to each member of the household.

Marigolds and sweets don't cut it with Nepal's more terrifying gods, notably Kali and Bhairab, who require a little extra appeasement in the form of bloody animal sacrifices. You can witness the gory executions, from chickens to water buffalo, at Dakshinkali (p219) in the Kathmandu Valley and the Kalika Mandir at Gorkha (p239), or during the annual Dasain festival, when these temples are literally awash with blood offerings.

NEPALI NAMES

You can tell a lot about a Nepali from their name, including often their caste, profession, ethnic group and where they live. 'Gurung' and 'Sherpa' are ethnic groups as well as surnames. The surname Bista or Pant indicates that the person is a Brahman, originally from western Nepal; Devkota indicates an eastern origin. Thapa, Pande and Bhasnet are names related to the former Rana ruling family. Shrestha is a high-caste Newari name. The initials KC often stand for Khatri Chhetri, a mixed-caste name. The surname 'Kami' is the Nepali equivalent of 'Smith'.

Sherpa names even reveal which day of the week the person was born – Dawa (Monday), Mingmar (Tuesday), Lhakpa (Wednesday), Phurbu (Thursday), Pasang (Friday), Pemba (Saturday) and Nyima (Sunday).

young Nepali people, especially in urban areas, are increasingly influenced by Western values and lifestyle, the vast majority of people live by traditional customs and principles. The biggest modernising influences are probably satellite TV, roads and tourism, in that order.

In most ethnic groups, joint and extended families live in the same house, even in Kathmandu. In some smaller villages extended families make up the entire community. Traditional family life has been dislocated by the large numbers (literally millions) of Nepali men forced to seek work away from home, whether in Kathmandu or the Terai, or abroad in India, Malaysia or the Gulf States.

Arranged marriages remain the norm in Nepali Hindu society and are generally between members of the same caste or ethnic group, although there are a growing number of 'love marriages'. Child marriages have been illegal since 1963 and today the average age of marriage for girls is just under 19 years old. Family connections generated by marriage are as much a social contract as a personal affair, and most families take the advice of matchmakers and astrologers when making such an important decision.

In the far western hills, the system of polyandry (one woman married to two brothers) developed over time in response to the limited amounts of land and the annual trading trips that required husbands to leave their families for months at a time. The practice kept population levels down and stopped family land being broken up between brothers. All children born into the family are considered the elder brother's. In recent years the system has started to break down.

To decide not to have children is almost unheard of and a Nepali woman will generally pity you if you are childless. Having a son is a particularly important achievement, especially for Hindu families, where some religious rites (such as lighting the funeral pyre to ensure a peaceful passage into the next life) can only be performed by the eldest son. Girls are regarded by many groups as a financial burden whose honour needs to be protected until she is married off, often at considerable cost.

Children stay at school for up to 12 years; 70 per cent of children will begin school but only seven per cent will reach their 10th school year, when they sit their School Leaving Certificate (SLC) board examination. Many villages only have a primary school, which means children either have to walk long distances each day or board in a bigger town to attend secondary school. The ratio of boys to girls at both primary and secondary schools is almost 2:1 in favour of boys.

Despite what you may see in Kathmandu and Pokhara, Nepal is overwhelmingly rural and poor. Farming is still the main occupation, and debt is a factor in most people's lives. Large areas of land are still owned by zamindars (absent landlords) and up to 50% of a landless farmer's

Contemporary Issues and Modern Nepal, edited by Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachadran, is a collection of essays examining education, development and the Maoist movement in Nepal between 1990 and 2001.

Up to half a million Nepali men seek seasonal work in Indian cities; in 2005 they sent home US\$650 million last year to one-third of Nepali families.

The website www.mountainvoices.org/nepal.asp has an interesting collection of interviews with Nepali mountain folk on a wide variety of topics.

MOVING TIGERS

Nepal's national board game is *bagh chal*, which literally means 'move (*chal*) the tigers (*bagh*)'. The game is played on a lined board with 25 intersecting points. One player has four tigers, the other has 20 goats, and the aim is for the tiger player to 'eat' five goats by jumping over them before the goat player can encircle the tigers and prevent them moving. You can buy attractive brass *bagh chal* sets in Kathmandu and in Patan where they are made.

Nepal's other popular game is *carom*, which looks like 'finger snooker', using discs which glide over a chalked-up board to pot other discs into the corner pockets.

production will go to the landowner as rent. The World Bank estimates that 30% of Nepalis live below the poverty line.

Rice is grown up to 2000m; corn, wheat and millet up to 2800m; then barley, buckwheat and potatoes, up to altitudes of 4000m. Fields of yellow-flowering mustard are planted for making cooking oil, and soya beans, lentils, chilli peppers and sesame are grown on the berms dividing plots.

Older people are respected members of the community and are cared for by their children. Old age is a time for relaxation, prayer and meditation. The dead are generally cremated and the deceased's sons will shave their heads and wear white for an entire year following the death.

For a guide to some cultural Dos and Don'ts in Nepal see p62.

POPULATION

Nepal had just over 23 million people at the last census (2001) and this number is increasing at the rapid rate of 2.45% annually. Over 1.5 million people live in the Kathmandu Valley, 700,000 of them in Kathmandu. Nepal remains predominantly rural; 85% of people live in the countryside. Over 50% of Nepal's population live in the flat fertile lands of the Terai and the population here is increasing rapidly.

There are around 130,000 refugees, some Tibetan, but most expelled from Bhutan, kept in camps in the far east of the country.

MULTICULTURALISM

The human geography of Nepal is a remarkable mosaic of peoples who have not so much assimilated as learned to coexist. Kathmandu is the best place to see diverse ethnic groups, including Limbu, Rai, Newar, Sherpa, Tamang and Gurung.

Simplistically, Nepal is the meeting place of the Indo-Aryan people of India and the Mongoloid peoples of the Himalaya. There are three main cultural zones running east to west: the north including the high Himalaya; the middle hills; and the Terai. Each group has adapted its lifestyle and farming practices to its environment but, thanks largely to Nepal's tortured topography has retained its own traditions. Social taboos, especially among caste Hindus, have meant limited mixing between groups.

Nepal's diverse ethnic groups speak somewhere between 24 and 100 different languages and dialects depending on how finely the distinctions are made. Nepali functions as the unifying language.

Himalayan Zone

The hardy Mongoloid peoples who inhabit the high Himalaya are known in Nepal as Bhotiyas, a slightly derogatory term among caste Hindus. Each group remains distinct but their languages are all Tibetan-based and, with a few exceptions, they are Tibetan Buddhists.

The Bhotiyas are named after the region they come from by adding the suffix *pa* to their name. These include the Sherpas (literally 'easterners') of the Everest region and the Lhopa (literally 'southerners') of the Mustang region.

The difficulty of farming and herding at high altitude drives these people to lower elevations during winter, either to graze their animals or to trade in India and the Terai.

THAKALIS

Originating along the Kali Gandaki Valley in central Nepal, the Thakalis have emerged as the entrepreneurs of Nepal. They once played an important part in the salt trade between the subcontinent and Tibet, and today they are active in many areas of commercial life. Originally Buddhist, many pragmatic Thakalis have now adopted Hinduism. Most Thakalis have small farms, but travellers will regularly meet them in their adopted roles as hoteliers, especially on the Jomsom trek.

TAMANGS

The Tamangs make up one of largest groups in the country. They live mainly in the hills north of Kathmandu and have a noticeably strong Tibetan influence, from their monasteries, known as *ghyang*, to the *mani* walls that mark the entrance to Tamang villages.

According to some accounts, the Tamang's ancestors were horse traders and cavalymen from an invading Tibetan army who settled in Nepal. They are well known for their independence and suspicion of authority, probably caused by the fact that in the 19th century they were relegated to a low status and seriously exploited, with much of their land distributed to Bahuns and Chhetris. As bonded labour they were dependent on menial work such as labouring and portering. Many of the 'Tibetan' souvenirs, carpets and thangka (religious paintings on cotton) you see in Kathmandu are made by Tamangs.

TIBETANS

About 12,000 of the 120,000 Tibetans in exile around the world live in Nepal. The heavy hand of the Chinese during the 1950s and the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959 gave rise to waves of refugees who settled mainly in Kathmandu or Pokhara.

Although their numbers are small, Tibetans have a high profile, partly because of the important role they play in tourism. Many hotels and restaurants in Kathmandu are owned or operated by Tibetans. They are also responsible for the extraordinary success of the Tibetan carpet industry.

Tibetans are devout Buddhists and their arrival in the valley has rejuvenated a number of important religious sites, most notably the stupas at Swayambhunath (p162) and Bodhnath (p169). A number of large, new monasteries have been established in recent years.

SHERPAS

The Sherpas who live high in the mountains of eastern and central Nepal are probably the best-known Nepali ethnic group. These nomadic Tibetan herders moved to the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal 500 years ago from Eastern Tibet, bringing with them their Tibetan Buddhist religion and building the beautiful gompas (monasteries) that dot the steep hillsides. They are strongly associated with the Khumbu region around Mt Everest, although only 3000 of the total 35,000 Sherpas actually live in the Khumbu; the rest live in the lower valleys of the Solu region.

The Oscar-nominated, Nepali-French film *Caravan*, directed by Eric Valli, features magnificent footage of the Upper Dolpo district of western Nepal as it tells the tale of yak caravanners during a change of generations. It was renamed for distribution abroad as *Himalaya*.

Changes in trading patterns and cultures among Nepal's Himalayan people are examined in *Himalayan Traders*, by Von Fürer-Haimendorf.

Despite associations in the West, Sherpas actually do very little portering, focusing mostly on high-altitude expedition work. Most of the porters you meet on the trails are Tamang, Rai or other groups.

People of Nepal by Dor Bahadur Bista describes the many and diverse ethnic groupings found in the country.

According to the 2001 census, Nepal's population is made up of the following groups: Chhetri 15.5%, Brahman-Hill 12.5%, Magar 7%, Tharu 6.6%, Tamang 5.5%, Newar 5.4%, Muslim 4.2%, Kami 3.9%, Yadav 3.9%, other 32.7%, unspecified 2.8%

Tourism stepped in after the collapse of trade with Tibet in 1959, following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and these days the Sherpa name is synonymous with mountaineering and trekking. Potatoes were introduced to the region in the late 19th century and are now the main Sherpa crop. Sherpas are famously hard drinkers.

MIDLANDS ZONE

The middle hills of Nepal are the best places to witness village life at its most rustic. In the east are the Kirati, who are divided into the Rai and Limbu groups. The Newari people dominate the central hills around the Kathmandu Valley, while the Magars and Gurungs inhabit the hills of the Kali Gandaki northeast of Pokhara.

Moving west, the Bahun and Chhetri are the dominant groups, although the lines between castes have become blurred over time.

RAIS & LIMBUS

The Rais and Limbus are thought to have ruled the Kathmandu Valley in the 7th century BC until they were defeated around AD 300. They then moved into the steep hill country of eastern Nepal, from the Arun Valley to the Sikkim border, where many remain today. Others have moved to the Terai or India as economic migrants. Many Rai work as porters in the middle hills.

The Kirati are easily distinguishable by their Mongolian features. They are of Tibeto-Burmese descent, and their traditional religion is distinct from either Buddhism or Hinduism, although the latter is exerting a growing influence. Himalayan hunter-warriors, they are still excellent soldiers and are well represented in the Gurkha regiments.

Many of the men still carry a large *khukuri* (curved knife) tucked into their belt and wear a *topi* (Nepali hat). Some communities in upper Arun live in bamboo houses.

NEWARS

The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley number about 1.1 million and make up 6% of the population. Their language, Newari, is distinct from Tibetan, Nepali or Hindi, and is one of the world's most difficult languages to learn. The Newars are excellent farmers and merchants, as well as skilled artists; the Kathmandu Valley is filled with spectacular examples of their artistic work.

Their origins are shrouded in mystery: most Newars have Mongoloid and Caucasian physical characteristics. It is generally accepted that the Newars' ancestors were of varied ethnicity, and all settled the valley – possibly originating with the Kiratis, or an even earlier group.

Newars lead a communal way of life and have developed several unique customs including the worship of the *kumari*, a girl worshipped as a living god, and the annual chariot festivals that provide the high point of the valley's cultural life. Living so close to the centre of power has also meant there are many Newars in the bureaucracies of Kathmandu.

Newari men wear *surwal* (trousers with a baggy seat that are tighter around the calves, like jodhpurs), a *daura* (thigh-length double-breasted shirt), a vest or coat and the traditional *topi* hat. Newari castes include the Sakyas (priests), Tamrakar (metal casters) and the Jyapu (farmers). Jyapu women wear a black sari with a red border, while the men often wear the traditional trousers and shirt with a long piece of cotton wrapped around the waist.

See the boxed text, opposite for more on this group.

High Religion, by Sherry B Ortner, is probably the best introduction to Sherpa history, culture, religion and traditional society, though it's a bit dated (written in 1989). Also worth looking for is *Sherpa of the Khumbu* by Barbara Brower.

Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal by James F Fisher offers a 1990 anthropological snapshot of how tourism and modernisation has affected Sherpa religious and cultural life. Fisher worked with Edmund Hilary in the Khumbu in the 1960s, bringing the first schools and airstrip to the region.

For information on Buddhist Newari art check out the website of the Huntington Archives of Newari Art at <http://kalaradarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/Nepal/nepal.html>.

NEWARI RITES OF PASSAGE

Newari children undergo a number of *samskara* (rites of passage) as they grow up, many of which are shared by other Nepali Hindus. The *namakarana* (naming rite) is performed by the priests and chief of the clan, and the family astrologer gives the child its public and secret name. The next rite is the *machajanko* or *pasni* (rice feeding), which celebrates the child's presence on earth and wishes them a smooth life. Next for boys comes the *busakha*, performed between the ages of three and seven, when the head is shaved, leaving just a small tuft, known as a *tupi*. This is followed by the fixing of a *kaitapuja* (loincloth), which marks a commitment by the boy to bachelorhood and self-control. Girls undergo *lhi* (a symbolic marriage to Vishnu) between the ages of five and 11, and at this time she begins to wear a thick cotton thread. The *lhi samskara* venerates chastity and guarantees the girl a choice of husband. This is followed by a *barha* (menarche rite), which protects the girl's virginity and safeguards against passion.

Weddings are usually negotiated through a *lami* (mediator), and take place at times deemed auspicious by the family astrologer. The bride is taken in a noisy procession to the groom's house where she is received with an oil lamp and the key to the house. The *chipka thiyeke samskara* involves the serving of 84 (!) traditional dishes and is a symbol of the couple's union.

The first *janko* (old-age *samskara*) takes place at 77 years, seven months and seven days, the second at 83 years, four months and four days and the third at 99 years, nine months and nine days. The final *samskara* is *sithan* (cremation), which marks the body's move to its final destination.

GURUNGS

The Gurungs, a Tibeto-Burmese people, live mainly in the central midlands, from Gorkha and Baglung to Manang and the southern slopes of the Annapurnas, around Pokhara. One of the biggest Gurung settlements is Ghandruk, with its sweeping views of the Annapurnas and Machhapuchhare. The Gurungs have made up large numbers of the Gurkha regiments, and army incomes have contributed greatly to the economy of their region. Gurung women wear nose rings, known as *phuli*, and coral necklaces.

The Gurungs (who call themselves Tamu, or highlanders) originally migrated from western Tibet, bringing with them their animist Bön faith. One distinctive aspect of village life is the *rodi*, a cross between a town hall and a youth centre, where teenagers hang out and cooperative village tasks are planned.

MAGARS

The Magars, a large group (around 8% of the total population), are a Tibeto-Burmese people who live in many parts of the midlands zone of western and central Nepal. With such a large physical spread there are considerable regional variations.

The Magars are also excellent soldiers and fought with Prithvi Narayan Shah to help unify Nepal. Their kingdom of Palpa (based at Tansen) was one of the last to be incorporated into the unified Nepal. They make up the biggest numbers of Gurkhas, and army salaries have greatly improved Magar living standards.

The Magars generally live in two-storey, rectangular or square thatched houses washed in red clay. They have been heavily influenced by Hinduism, and in terms of religion, farming practices, housing and dress, they are hard to distinguish from Chhetris.

BAHUNS & CHHETRIS

The Hindu caste groups of Bahuns and Chhetris are dominant in the middle hills, making up 30% of the country's population.

The Blue Space (www.thebluespace.com) operates nine-day trekking trips in early August and December to watch the famous Gurung honey hunters of central Nepal.

Tamu Kohibo Museum in Pokhara (p252) is dedicated to the culture and customs of the Gurung people.

Even though the caste system was formally 'abolished' in 1963 these two groups remain the top cats of the caste hierarchy. Although there is no formal relationship in Hinduism between caste and ethnicity, Nepal's Bahuns and Chhetris (Brahmin priests and Kshatriya warriors respectively) are considered ethnic groups as well as the two highest castes.

Bahuns and Chhetris played an important role in the court and armies of Prithvi Narayan Shah, and after unification they were rewarded with tracts of land. Their language, Khas Kura, then became the national language of Nepal, and their high-caste position was religiously, culturally and legally enforced. Ever since, Bahuns and Chhetris have dominated the government in Kathmandu, making up over 80% of the civil service.

Outside the Kathmandu Valley, the majority of Bahuns and Chhetris are simple peasant farmers, indistinguishable in most respects from their neighbours. Many had roles as tax collectors under the Shah and Rana regimes, and to this day many are moneylenders with a great deal of power.

The Bahuns tend to be more caste-conscious and orthodox than other Nepali Hindus, which sometimes leads to difficulties in relationships with 'untouchable' Westerners. Many are vegetarians and do not drink alcohol; marriages are arranged within the caste.

Terai Zone

Until the eradication of malaria in the 1950s, the only people to live in the valleys of the Inner Terai, and along much of the length of the Terai proper, were Tharus and a few small associated groups, who enjoyed a natural immunity to the disease. Since the Terai was opened for development, it has also been settled by large numbers of people from the midlands – every group is represented and more than 50% of Nepali people live in the region.

A number of large groups straddle the India–Nepal border. In the eastern Terai, Mithila people dominate; in the central Terai, there are many Bhojpuri-speaking people; and in the western Terai, Abadhi-speaking people are significant. All are basically cultures of the Gangetic plain, and Hindu caste structure is strictly upheld.

THARUS

One of the most visible groups is the Tharu, who are thought to be the earliest inhabitants of the Terai (and they're even thought to be immune to malaria). About one million Tharu speakers inhabit the length of the Terai, including the Inner Terai around Chitwan, although they mainly live in the west. Caste-like distinctions exist between different Tharu groups or tribes. Most have Mongoloid physical features.

Nobody is sure where they came from, although some believe they are the descendants of the Rajputs (from Rajasthan), who sent their women and children away to escape Mughal invaders in the 16th century. Others believe they are descended from the royal Sakya clan, the Buddha's family, although they are not Buddhist. Tharu clans have traditionally lived in thatched huts with wattle walls, or in traditional long houses. Their beliefs are largely animistic, involving the worship of forest spirits and ancestral deities, but they are being increasingly influenced by Hinduism.

More recently, the Tharus were exploited by zamindars (landlords), and many Tharus fell into debt and entered into bonded labour. In 2000 the *kamaiyas* (bonded labourers) were freed by government legislation, but little has been done to help these now landless and workless people. Consequently, in most Terai towns in western Nepal you will see squatter settlements of former *kamaiyas*.

Bahun and Chhetri men can be recognised by their sacred thread – the *janai*, which they wear over the right shoulder and under the right arm – which is changed once a year during the Janai Purnima festival (see p363).

Nepal – the Kingdom in the Himalaya, by Toni Hagen, is one of the most complete studies of Nepal's people, geography and geology. Hagen has travelled extensively throughout Nepal since the 1950s, and the book reflects his intimate knowledge of the country.

MEDIA

The introduction of private FM radio stations following the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1990 revolutionised the Nepal media, breaking the monopoly enjoyed by Radio Nepal since the 1950s.

These stations have come under particular pressure since King Gyanendra seized power in 2005. The palace banned FM stations from presenting news stories or criticising the king, a move that led to 1000 journalists losing their jobs. The most popular station, Kantipur FM, was shut down by the government for a while in 2005. There are three private TV stations, including Kantipur TV and Channel Nepal.

RELIGION

From the simple early morning puja (worship; see the boxed text, p40) of a Kathmandu housewife at a local Hindu temple to the chanting of Buddhist monks in a village monastery, religion is a cornerstone of Nepali life. In Nepal, Hinduism and Buddhism have mingled wonderfully into a complex, syncretic blend. Nowhere is this more evident than in Kathmandu where Tibetan Buddhists and Nepali Hindus often worship at the same temples.

The Buddha was born in Nepal over 25 centuries ago but the Buddhist religion first arrived in the country later, around 250 BC. It is said to have been introduced by the great Indian Buddhist emperor, Ashoka. Buddhism eventually lost ground to Hinduism, although the Tantric form of Tibetan Buddhism made its way full circle back into Nepal in the 8th century AD. Today Buddhism is practised mainly by the people of the high Himalaya, such as the Sherpas and Tamangs, and by Tibetan refugees.

Officially Nepal is a Hindu country but in practice the blending of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and deities, and the subsequent overlaying onto both of Tantric aspects make it hard to separate the religions. Perhaps because of this there is little religious tension in Nepal, and religion plays almost no part in politics.

Take the concepts of Hinduism and Buddhism, add some Indian and Tibetan influence and blend this with elements of animism, faith healing and a pinch of Tantric practice, and you get a taste of Nepal's fabulous spiritual stew.

One thing you'll quickly learn as you travel through Nepal is that it is fruitless to look for rational responses and distinctions in questions of Nepali faith.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that has its origins in the Aryan tribes of Central India about 3500 years ago.

Hindus believe in a cycle of life, death and rebirth with the aim being to achieve *moksha* (release) from this cycle. With each rebirth you can move closer to or further from eventual *moksha*; the deciding factor is karma, which is literally a law of cause and effect. Bad actions during your life result in bad karma, which ends in a lower reincarnation. Conversely, if your deeds and actions have been good you will reincarnate on a higher level and be a step closer to eventual freedom from rebirth. Buddhism later adapted this concept into one of its core principles.

Hinduism has a number of holy books, the most important being the four Vedas, the 'divine knowledge' that is the foundation of Hindu philosophy. The Upanishads are contained within the Vedas and delve into the metaphysical nature of the universe and soul. The Mahabharata is an epic 220,000-line poem that contains the story of Rama. The famous Hindu epic, the Ramayana, is based on this.

In 2005, for the third year in a row, more journalists were arrested in Nepal than in any other country. Reporters Sans Frontiers described Nepal's media in 2005 as the world's most censored.

According to the 2001 census 81% of Nepalis describe themselves as Hindu, 11% as Buddhist, 4% Muslim and 4% other religions (including Christianity).

The Hindu religion has three basic practices. These are puja (worship; see the boxed text, p40), the cremation of the dead, and the rules and regulations of the caste system.

There are four main castes: the Brahmin (Brahman), or priest caste; the Kshatriya (*Chhetri* in Nepali), or soldiers and governors; the Vaisyas, or tradespeople and farmers; and the Sudras, or menial workers and craftspeople. These castes are then subdivided, although this is not taken to the same extreme in Nepal as it is in India. Beneath all the castes are the Harijans, or untouchables, the lowest, casteless class for whom the most menial and degrading tasks are reserved.

Despite common misconceptions, it is possible to become a Hindu, although Hinduism itself is not a proselytising religion. Once you are a Hindu you cannot change your caste – you're born into it and are stuck with your lot in life for the rest of that lifetime.

HINDU GODS

Westerners often have trouble getting to grips with Hinduism principally because of its vast pantheon of gods. The best way to look upon the dozens of different Hindu gods is simply as pictorial representations of the many attributes of the divine. The one omnipresent god usually has three physical representations: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer and reproducer.

Most temples are dedicated to one or another of these gods, but most Hindus profess to be either Vaishnavites (followers of Vishnu) or Shaivites (followers of Shiva). A variety of lesser gods and goddesses also crowd the scene. The cow is, of course, the holy animal of Hinduism, and killing a cow in Nepal brings a jail term.

The oldest deities are the elemental Indo-European Vedic gods, such as Indra (the god of war, storms and rain), Suriya (the sun), Chandra (the moon) and Agni (fire). Added to this is a range of ancient local mountain spirits, which Hinduism quickly co-opted. The Annapurna and the Ganesh Himal massifs are named after Hindu deities, and Gauri Shankar and Mt Kailash in Tibet are said to be the residences of Shiva and Parvati.

The definitions that follow include the most interesting and most frequently encountered 'big names', plus associated consorts, vehicles and religious terminology.

Shiva

As creator and destroyer, Shiva is probably the most important god in Nepal – so it's important to keep on his good side! Shiva is often represented by the phallic lingam, symbolic of his creative role. His vehicle is the bull Nandi, which you'll often see outside Shiva temples. The symbol most often seen in Shiva's hand is the trident.

INCARNATIONS, MANIFESTATIONS, ASPECTS & VEHICLES

There's a subtle difference between these three concepts. Vishnu has incarnations – 10 of them in all. They include Narsingha the man-lion, Krishna the cowherd and Buddha. Shiva, on the other hand, may be the god of 1000 names, but these are manifestations – what he shows himself as – not incarnations. When you start to look at the Buddhist 'gods' their various appearances are aspects rather than incarnations or manifestations.

Each god also has an associated animal known as the 'vehicle' (*vahana*) on which they ride, as well as a consort with certain attributes and abilities. You can normally pick out which god is represented by identifying either the vehicle or the symbols held in the god's hand.

SHAKTI

As well as being the name of one of Shiva's consorts, *shakti* in general is a deity's creative or reproductive energy, which often manifests in their female consorts. A Hindu god's *shakti* is far more than just a companion. A *shakti* often symbolises certain parts of a god's personality, so while Shiva is the god of both creation and destruction, it is often his *shakti*, Parvati, manifesting as Kali or Durga, who handles the destructive business and demands the blood sacrifices.

Shiva is also known as Nataraja, the cosmic dancer whose dance shook the cosmos and created the world. Shiva's home is Mt Kailash in the Himalaya, and he's supposed to be keen on smoking hashish.

In the Kathmandu Valley Shiva is most popularly worshipped as Pashupati, the lord of the beasts. As the keeper of all living things, Pashupati is Shiva in a good mood. The temple of Pashupatinath outside Kathmandu (p166) is the most important Hindu temple in the country.

Shiva appears as bushy-eyebrowed Bhairab when he is in his fearful or 'terrific' manifestation. Bhairab can appear in 64 different ways, but none of them is pretty. Typical of Tantric deities, he has multiple arms, each clutching a weapon; he dances on a corpse and wears a headdress of skulls and earrings of snakes. More skulls dangle from his belt, and his staring eyes and bared fangs complete the picture. Usually Bhairab is black, carries a cup made from a human skull and is attended by a dog. The gruesome figure of Bhairab near the Hanuman Dhoka palace entrance in Kathmandu is a good example of this fearsome god at his worst. Bhairab's female counterparts are the Joginis, wrathful goddesses whose shrines can be found near Sankhu in the eastern end of the Kathmandu Valley, at Guhyeshwari near Pashupatinath, and at Pharping.

Outside of the Kathmandu Valley, Shiva is most commonly worshipped as Mahadeva (Great God), the supreme deity.

Vishnu

Vishnu is the preserver in Hindu belief, although in Nepal (where he often appears as Narayan) he also plays a role in the creation of the universe. Narayan is the reclining Vishnu, sleeping on the cosmic ocean, and from his navel appears Brahma, who creates the universe. The King of Nepal enjoys added legitimacy because he is considered an incarnation of Vishnu.

Vishnu has four arms and can often be identified by the symbols he holds: the conch shell or *sankha*, the dislike weapon known as a *chakra*, the sticklike weapon known as a *gada*, and a lotus flower or *padma*. Vishnu's vehicle is the faithful man-bird Garuda, and a winged Garuda will often be seen kneeling reverently in front of a Vishnu temple. Garuda has an intense hatred of snakes and is often seen destroying them. Vishnu's *shakti* is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, whose vehicle is a tortoise.

Vishnu has 10 incarnations, starting with Matsya, the fish. Then he appeared as Kurma, the tortoise on which the universe is built. Number three was his boar incarnation as Varaha, who bravely destroyed a demon who would have drowned the world. Vishnu was again in a demon-destroying mood in incarnation four as Narsingha (or Narsimha), half-man and half-lion (see p212 for an explanation of the legend behind this incarnation).

Still facing difficulties from demons, Vishnu's next incarnation was Vamana (or Vikrantha), the dwarf who reclaimed the world from the demon-king Bali. The dwarf politely asked the demon for a patch of ground upon which to meditate, saying that the patch need only be big enough that he, the dwarf, could walk across it in three paces. The demon

agreed, only to see the dwarf swell into a giant who strode across the universe in three gigantic steps.

In his sixth incarnation Vishnu appeared as Parasurama, a warlike Brahman who proceeded to put the warrior-caste Chhetris in their place.

Incarnation seven was as Rama, the hero of the Ramayana who, with help from Hanuman the monkey god, rescued his beautiful wife Sita from the clutches of Rawana, evil king of Lanka. Sita is believed to have been born in Janakpur, and this is also where she and Rama married (see p312).

Incarnation eight was the gentle and much-loved Krishna, the fun-loving cowherd, who dallied with the *gopis* (milkmaids), danced, played his flute and still managed to remain devoted to his wife Radha.

For number nine Vishnu appeared as the teacher, the Buddha. Of course, Buddhists don't accept that the Buddha was just an incarnation of some other religion's god. But perhaps it was just a ploy to bring converts back into the fold.

Incarnation 10? Well, we haven't seen that one yet, but it will be as Kalki the destroyer, when Vishnu wields the sword that will destroy the world at the end of the Kaliyuga, the age we are currently in.

Brahma

Despite his supreme position, Brahma appears much less often than Shiva or Vishnu. Like those gods, Brahma has four arms, but he also has four heads, to represent his all-seeing presence. The four Vedas (ancient orthodox Hindu scriptures) are supposed to have emanated from his mouths.

Parvati

Shiva's *shakti* (see the boxed text, p49) is Parvati the beautiful, and she is the dynamic element in their relationship. Just as Shiva is also known as Mahadeva, the Great God, so she is Mahadevi (or just Devi), the Great Goddess. Shiva is often symbolised by the phallic *lingam*, so his *shakti's* symbol is the *yoni*, representing the female sex organ. Their relationship is a sexual one and it is often Parvati who is the energetic and dominant partner.

Shiva's *shakti* has as many forms as Shiva himself. She may be peaceful Parvati, Uma or Gauri, but she may also be fearsome Kali, the black goddess, or Durga, the terrible. In these terrific forms she holds a variety of weapons in her hands, struggles with demons and rides a lion or tiger. As skeletal Kali, she demands blood sacrifices and wears a garland of skulls.

Ganesh

With his elephant head, Ganesh is probably the most easily recognised and most popular of the gods. He is the god of prosperity and wisdom and there are thousands of Ganesh shrines and temples across Nepal. His parents are Shiva and Parvati, and he has his father's temper to thank for this elephant head. After a long trip, Shiva discovered Parvati in bed with a young man. Not pausing to think that their son might have grown up a little during his absence, Shiva lopped his head off! Parvati then forced him to bring his son back to life, but he could only do so by giving him the head of the first living thing he saw – which happened to be an elephant.

Chubby Ganesh has a super sweet tooth and is often depicted with his trunk in a mound of sweets and with one broken tusk; he broke it off and threw it at the moon for making fun of his fatness.

Hanuman

The monkey god Hanuman is an important character from the Ramayana, who came to the aid of Rama to help defeat the evil Rawana and

It is joked that Nepal has three main religions – Hinduism, Buddhism and Tourism.

Actress Uma Thurman is named after the beautiful Hindu goddess Uma, a manifestation of Parvati. Uma forms half of the Uma-Maheshwar image, a common representation of Shiva and Parvati.

TIKA

A visit to Nepal is not complete without being offered a *tika* by one of the many sadhus (Hindu holy men) that wander the streets, dusty, barefoot and carrying an alms bowl and walking staff. The ubiquitous *tika* is a symbol of blessing from the gods worn by both women and men. It can range from a small dot to a full-on mixture of yogurt, rice and *sindur* (a red powder) smeared on the forehead. The *tika* represents the all-seeing, all-knowing third eye, as well as being an important *chakra* (energy) point, and receiving this blessing is a common part of most Hindu ceremonies. It is an acknowledgment of a divine presence at the occasion and a sign of protection for those receiving it. Shops these days carry a huge range of tiny plastic *tikas*, known as *bindi*, that women have turned into an iconic fashion statement.

release Sita from his grasp. Hanuman's trustworthy and alert nature is commemorated by the many statues of Hanuman seen guarding palace entrances, most famously the Hanuman Dhoka, which lends its name to Kathmandu's old Royal Palace.

Hanuman also has an important medicinal connection in Nepal and other Hindu countries. The Ramayana recounts a legend of how Rama desperately needed a rare herb grown only in the Himalaya region, and sent Hanuman to procure it for him. Unfortunately, by the time he finally arrived in the mountains, Hanuman had forgotten which particular herb he had been asked to bring back to Rama, but he got around the problem by simply grabbing a whole mountain, confident that at least somewhere on the mountain would be the required plant.

Machhendranath

A strictly Nepali Hindu god, Machhendranath (also known as Bunga Dyo) has power over the rains and the monsoon and is regarded as protector of the Kathmandu Valley. It is typical of the intermingling of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs in Nepal that, in the Kathmandu Valley at least, Machhendranath has come to be thought of as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of our era.

There are two forms of Machhendranath based on colour and features: Seto (White) Machhendranath of Kathmandu and Rato (Red) Machhendranath of Patan. Some scholars say that they are the same god, others say they are distinct.

Tara

The goddess Tara is another deity who appears in both the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons. There are 108 different Taras, but the best known are Green Tara and White Tara. Tara is generally depicted sitting with her right leg hanging down and her left hand in a *mudra* (hand gesture).

Saraswati

The goddess of learning and consort of Brahma, Saraswati rides upon a white swan and holds the stringed musical instrument known as a *veena*.

Buddhism

Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a religion, as it is centred not on a god but on a system of philosophy and a code of morality. Buddhism was founded in northern India in about 500 BC when prince Siddhartha Gautama achieved enlightenment. According to some, Gautama Buddha was not the first Buddha but the fourth; nor is he expected to be the last 'enlightened one'.

The Buddha never wrote down his dharma (teachings), and a schism that developed later means that today there are two major Buddhist schools. The Theravada (Doctrine of the Elders), or Hinayana, holds that the path to nirvana is an individual pursuit. In contrast, the Mahayana school holds that the combined belief of its followers will eventually be great enough to encompass all of humanity and bear it to salvation. To some, the less austere and ascetic Mahayana school is considered a 'soft option'. Today it is practised mainly in Vietnam, Japan and China, while the Hinayana school is followed in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand. There are still other, sometimes more esoteric, divisions of Buddhism, including the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet, which is the version found in Nepal.

The Buddha renounced material life to search for enlightenment but, unlike other prophets, found that starvation did not lead to discovery. He developed his rule of the 'middle way' (moderation in all things). The Buddha taught that all life is suffering, and that suffering comes from our sensual desires and the illusion of their importance. By following the 'eightfold path' these desires will be extinguished and a state of nirvana, where we are free from their delusions, will be reached. Following this process requires going through a series of rebirths until the goal is reached and no more rebirths into the world of suffering are necessary. The path that takes you through this cycle of births is karma, but this is not simply fate. Karma is a law of cause and effect; your actions in one life determine what you will have to go through in your next life.

The first images of the Buddha date from the 5th century AD, 1000 years after his death (stupas were the symbol of the faith previous to this). The Buddha didn't want idols made of himself but a pantheon of Buddhist gods grew up regardless, with strong iconographical influence from Hinduism. As in Hinduism, the many Buddhist deities reflect various aspects of the divine, here called 'Buddha-nature'. Multiple heads convey multiple personalities, *mudras* (hand positions) convey coded messages, and everything from eyebrows to stances indicate the nature of the god.

There are many different types of Buddha images, though the most common are those of the past (Dipankara), present (Sakyamuni) and future (Maitreya) Buddhas. Buddha is recognised by 32 physical marks, including a bump on the top of his head, his third eye and the images of the Wheel of Law on the soles of his feet. In his left hand he holds a begging bowl, and his right hand touches the earth in the witness *mudra*. He is often flanked by his two disciples.

Bodhisattvas are beings who have achieved enlightenment but decide to help everyone else gain enlightenment before entering nirvana. The Bodhisattva Manjushri has strong connections to the Kathmandu Valley. The Dalai Lama is considered a reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara (Chenresig in Tibetan), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Tibetan Buddhism also has a whole host of fierce protector gods, called *dharmapalas*.

TIBETAN BUDDHISM

There are four major schools of Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism, all represented in the Kathmandu Valley: Nyingmapa, Kargyupa, Sakyapa and Gelugpa. The Nyingmapa order is the oldest and most dominant in the Nepal Himalaya. It origins come from the Indian sage Padmasambhava (or Guru Rinpoche), who is credited with the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century. (He is a common image in Nyingmapa monasteries and is recognisable by his *katvanga* staff of human heads and his fabulously curly moustache.) The Dalai Lama is the head of the Gelugpa school and the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists.

The pipal tree, under which the Buddha gained enlightenment, is also known by its Latin name, *ficus religiosa*.

If you are heading out on a trek (or flying on Royal Nepal!), bear in mind that according to Nepali superstition it's bad luck to start a journey on Tuesday or return on a Saturday.

In some texts the Gelugpa are known as the Yellow Hats, while the other schools are sometimes collectively identified as the Red Hats. Nepal has small pockets of Bön, Tibet's pre-Buddhist animist faith, now largely considered a fifth school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Islam

Nepal's small population of Muslims (about 4% of the total population) are mainly found close to the border with India, with a large population in Nepalganj.

The first Muslims, who were mostly Kashmiri traders, arrived in the Kathmandu Valley in the 15th century. A second group arrived in the 17th century from Northern India, and they primarily manufactured armaments for the small hill states.

The largest Muslim group are the Terai Muslims, many of whom still have strong ties with the Muslim communities in the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Communal tension is a major problem in India, but Nepal's Hindu and Muslim communities coexist peacefully.

Shamanism

Shamanism in practised by many mountain peoples throughout the Himalaya and dates back some 50,000 years. Its ancient healing traditions are based on a cosmology that divides the world into three main levels: the Upper World where the sun, moon, stars, planets, deities and spirits important to the shaman's healing work abide; the Middle World of human life; and the Lower World, where powerful deities and spirits exist.

Faith healers protect against a wide range of spirits, including headless *mulkattas*, which have eyes in their chest and signify imminent death; the *pret*, ghosts of the recently deceased that loiter in crossroads; and *kichikinni*, the ghost of a beautiful and sexually insatiable siren who is recognisable by her sagging breasts and the fact that her feet are on backwards.

During ceremonies the shaman or faith healer (*jhankri*) uses techniques of drumming, divination, trances and sacrifices to invoke deities and spirits, which he or she wishes to assist in the ritual. The shaman essentially acts as a broker between the human and spirit worlds.

WOMEN IN NEPAL

Women have a hard time of it in Nepal. Female mortality rates are higher than men's, literacy rates are lower and women generally work harder and longer than men, for less reward. Women only truly gain status in traditional society when they bear their husband a son.

AIDS & PROSTITUTION IN NEPAL

HIV/AIDS has become a major problem in Nepal. There are an estimated 60,000 Nepalis infected with the virus, and more than 30,000 intravenous drug users in Nepal who are at risk of contracting the virus. A public education programme has been implemented, and along roadsides throughout the country you'll see billboards with pictures of cartoon condoms.

Although prostitution exists in Nepal, particularly in the border towns and along the main truck routes, it is virtually invisible to Western visitors. It is believed that over 100,000 Nepali women work in Indian brothels (7000 Nepali women are sold or trafficked into brothels every year), often in conditions resembling slavery, and over 30,000 of these women are estimated to be HIV positive. When obvious AIDS symptoms force these women out of work, some manage to return to Nepal. However, they are shunned by their families and there is virtually no assistance available to them or their children.

Nepali society is strongly patriarchal society, though this is less the case among Himalayan communities such as the Sherpa, where women often run the show (and the lodge). Boys are strongly favoured over girls, who are often the last to eat and the first to be pulled from school during financial difficulties.

Nepal legalised abortion in 2002. In 2005 landmark rulings gave women under the age of 35 the right for the first time to apply for a passport without their husband's or parent's permission, and safeguarded their right to inherited property. The rural custom of exiling women to cowsheds for four days during their period was only made illegal in 2005. A man may legally take a second wife if the first has not borne him a child after ten years.

On the death of her husband, a widow is often expected to marry the brother of the deceased and property is turned over to her sons, on whom she is then financially dependant. The traditional practice of *sati*, where a woman was expected to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, was outlawed in the 1920s.

The annual festival of Teej is the biggest festival for women, though ironically this honours their husbands. The activities include feasting, fasting, ritual bathing (in the red and gold saris they were married in) and ritual offerings.

ARTS

Wander around the towns of the Kathmandu Valley and you'll come across priceless woodcarvings and sculptures at every turn, in surprisingly accessible places. Nepal's artistic masterpieces are not hidden away in dusty museums but are part of a living culture, to be touched, worshipped, feared or ignored.

Architecture & Sculpture

The oldest architecture in the Kathmandu Valley has faded with history. Grassy mounds are all that remain of Patan's four Ashoka stupas, and the magnificent stupas of Swayambhunath and Bodhnath have been rebuilt many times over the centuries. Magnificent stonework is one of the lasting reminders of the Licchavi period (4th to 9th centuries AD) and you'll see beautiful pieces scattered around the temples of the Kathmandu Valley. The Licchavi sculptures at the temple of Changu Narayan near Bhaktapur (p210) are particularly good examples, as is the statue of Vishnu asleep on a bed of serpents at Budhanilkantha (p182).

NEPAL'S STOLEN HERITAGE

In the last 20 years Nepal has seen a staggering amount of its artistic heritage spirited out of the country by art thieves – 120 statues were stolen in the 1980s alone. Much of the stolen art languishes in museums or private collections in European nations and in the United States, while in Nepal, remaining temple statues are, sadly, increasingly kept under lock and key.

One of the reasons that photography is banned in some temples in Nepal is that international thieves often use photos of temple images to publish underground 'shopping catalogues'. Pieces are then stolen to order, often with the aid of corrupt officials, to fetch high prices on the lucrative Himalayan art market. UN conventions against the trade exist but are weakly enforced.

Several catalogues of stolen Nepali art have been produced in an attempt to locate these treasures, and in 2000 and 2003 several pieces were returned to Kathmandu's National Museum, marking the slow return of Nepal's heritage to its rightful home. Most recently, in 2005, a Buddha statue stolen from Patan was returned after a dealer tried to sell it to an ethnographic museum in Austria for a cool US\$200,000.

The lives and roles of Nepali women are examined in the insightful *The Violet Shyness of Their Eyes: Notes from Nepal* by Barbara J Scot and *Nepali Aama* by Broughton Coburn, which details the life of a remarkable Gurung woman.

Before you start to visit the Kathmandu Valley's many temples, get a great overview on Buddhist and Nepali art at the Patan Museum (p189) and at Kathmandu's National Museum (p165), both of which explain the concepts behind Buddhist and Hindu art and iconography in an insightful and accessible way.

No wooden buildings and carvings are known to have survived from before the 12th century, although Newari craftsmen were responsible for parts of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, which still survive.

The famed artistic skills of the valley's Newar people reached their zenith under the Mallas, particularly between the 15th and 17th centuries. Squabbling and one-upmanship between the city-states of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur fuelled a competitive building boom as each tried to outdo the other with even more magnificent palaces and temples.

Their skills extended far beyond the woodwork for which they are so well known and included fine metalwork, terracotta, brickwork and stone sculptures. The finest metalwork includes the stunning images of the two Tara goddesses at Swayambhunath, and the Sun Dhoka (Golden Gate) in Bhaktapur.

Statues were created through two main techniques – the repoussé method of hammering thin sheets of metal and the 'lost wax' method. In the latter, the statue is carved in wax, this is then encased in clay and left to dry. The wax is then melted, metal is poured into the clay mould and the mould is then broken, leaving the finished statue.

The Nepali architect Arniko can be said to be the father of the Asian pagoda. It was his transplanting of the multiroofed Nepali pagoda design to the court of Kublai Khan in the late 13th century that kick-started the introduction and reinterpretation of the pagoda in China and eastern Asia.

The great age of Nepali architecture came to a dramatic end when Prithvi Narayan Shah invaded the valley in 1769. These days traditional building skills are still evidenced in the extensive restoration projects of the Hanuman Dhoka in Kathmandu and the Tachupal Tole buildings in Bhaktapur, which were completed in the 1970s. Today some young architects are attempting to incorporate traditional features into their buildings, particularly hotels.

NEWAR PAGODA TEMPLES

The distinctive Newar pagoda temples are a major feature of the Kathmandu Valley skyline, echoing, and possibly inspired by, the horizon's pyramid-shaped mountain peaks. While strictly speaking they are neither wholly Newari nor pagodas, the term has been widely adopted to describe the temples of the valley.

The temples are generally square in design, and may be either Hindu or Buddhist (or both, as is the nature of Nepali religion). On occasion temples are rectangular or octagonal; Krishna can occupy an octagonal temple, but Ganesha, Shiva and Vishnu can only inhabit square temples.

The major feature of the temples is the tiered roof, which may have one to five tiers, with two or three being the most common. In the Kathmandu Valley there are two temples with four roofs and another two with five (Kumbeshwar at Patan and Nyatapola at Bhaktapur). The sloping roofs are usually covered with distinctive *jhingati* (baked clay tiles), although richer temples will often have one roof of gilded copper. The bell-shaped *gajur* (pinnacle) is made of baked clay or gilded copper.

The temples are usually built on a stepped plinth, which may be as high as, or even higher than, the temple itself. In many cases the number of steps on the plinth corresponds with the number of roofs on the temple.

The temple building itself has just a small sanctum, known as a *garbhagriha* (literally 'womb room') housing the deity. Worshipers practise individually, with devotees standing outside the door to make their supplications. The only people permitted to actually enter the sanctum are *pujari* (temple priests).

Nepal by Michael Hutt is an excellent guide to the art and architecture of the Kathmandu Valley, it outlines the main forms of art and architecture, and describes specific sites within the valley, often with layout plans. It has great colour plates and black-and-white photos.

If you are interested in the architectural conservation of Kathmandu check out the website of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust at www.kvptnepal.org.

Good News:
The Kathmandu has the world's densest collection of Unesco World Heritage Sites.

Bad News:
The valley was added to Unesco's List of World Heritage Sites in Danger in 2004.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the temples is the detailed decoration, which is only evident close up. Under each roof there are often brass or other metal decorations, such as *kinkinimala* (rows of small bells) or embossed metal banners. The metal streamer that often hangs from above the uppermost roof to below the level of the lowest roof (such as on the Golden Temple in Patan) is called a *pataka*. Its function is to give the deity a means of descending to earth.

The other major decorative elements are the wooden *tundala* (struts) that support the roofs. The intricate carvings are usually of deities associated with the temple deity or of the *vahana* (deity's vehicle) but quite a few depict explicit sexual acts (see the boxed text, p118 for more on Nepali erotic art).

SHIKHARA TEMPLES

The second-most common temples are the *shikhara* temples, which have a heavy Indian influence. The temples are so named because their tapering tower resembles a *shikhara* (mountain peak, in Sanskrit). Although the style developed in India in the 6th century, it first appeared in Nepal in the late Licchavi period (9th century).

The main feature is the tapering, pyramidal tower, which is often surrounded by four similar but smaller towers, and these may be located on porches over the shrine's entrances. The Krishna Mandir and the octagonal Krishna Temple, both in Patan's Durbar Square, and the spire of the Mahabouddha Temple in Patan are all excellent examples.

Painting

Chinese, Tibetan, Indian and Mughal influences can all be seen in Nepali painting styles. The earliest Newari paintings were illuminated manuscripts dating from the 11th century. Newari *paubha* paintings are iconic religious paintings similar to Tibetan thangkas. Notable to both is a lack of perspective, symbolic use of colour and strict iconographic rules.

Modern Nepali artists struggle to make a living, although there are a few galleries in Kathmandu that feature local artists. Some artists are fortunate enough to get a sponsored overseas exhibition or a posting at an art college outside the country to teach their skills. Commissioning a painting by a local artist is a way to support the arts and take home a unique souvenir of your trip.

The eastern Terai has its own distinct form of colourful mural painting called Mithila art – see the boxed text, p315.

Music & Dance

The last few years have seen a revival in Nepali music and songs, both folk and 'Nepali modern'. The staple Hindi film songs have been supplanted by a vibrant local music scene thanks to advances made in FM radio.

In the countryside most villagers supply their own entertainment. Dancing and traditional music enliven festivals and family celebrations, when villages erupt with the energetic sounds of *bansari* (flutes), *madal* drums and cymbals, or sway to the moving soulful sounds of devotional singing and the gentle twang of the four-stringed *sarangi*. Singing is one important way that girls and boys in the hills have to interact and flirt, showing their grace and wit through dances and improvised songs.

There are several musician castes, including the *gaine*, a dwindling caste of travelling minstrels, and *damai*, who often perform in wedding bands. Women generally do not perform music in public.

In *Power Places of Kathmandu*, by Kevin Bubrski and Keith Dowman, Bubrski provides photos of the valley's most important sacred sites and temples, while noted Buddhist scholar Dowman provides the interesting text.

The cultural organisation Spiny Babbler (www.spinybabbler.org) has an online Nepali art museum and articles on Nepali art. It is named after Nepal's only endemic species of bird.

TIBETAN CARPETS

One of most amazing success stories of the last few decades is the local Tibetan carpet industry. Although carpet production has long been a cottage industry inside Tibet, in 1960 the Nepal International Tibetan Refugee Relief Committee, with the support of the Swiss government, began encouraging Tibetan refugees in Patan to make and sell carpets.

Tibetan and New Zealand wool is used to make the carpets. The exuberant colours and lively designs of traditional carpets have been toned down for the international market, but the old ways of producing carpets remain the same. The intricacies of the senna loop method are hard to pick out in the blur of hands that is usually seen at a carpet workshop; each thread is looped around a gauge rod that will determine the height of the carpet pile, then each row is hammered down and the loops of thread split to release the rod. To finish it off the pile is clipped to bring out the design.

The carpet industry has declined somewhat over recent years, largely because of negative publicity about the exploitative use of child labour and the use of carcinogenic dyes (practices that continue, despite being illegal). Still, today Nepal exports more than 244,000 sq metres of rugs (down from a peak of 300,000 sq metres in the 1990s), valued at around US\$135 million. The industry accounts for around 50% of the country's exports of manufactured goods to countries other than India, and employs more than 250,000 workers directly, and up to a million indirectly.

Nepali dance styles are as numerous and varied as its ethnic groups. They range from the stick dances of the Tharu in the Terai and the quasi-linedancing style of the mountain Sherpas. Joining in with an enthusiastic group of porters from different parts of the country at the end of a trekking day is a great way to learn some of the moves. Masked dances are also common, from the Cham dances performed by Tibetan Buddhist monks to the masked Hindu dances of Nava Durga in Bhaktapur.

A good introduction to popular Nepali folk music is the trio (flute, sitar and tabla) of Sur Sudha, Nepal's de facto musical ambassadors, whose evocative recordings will take you back to the region long after you've tasted your last daal bhaat. Try their *Festivals of Nepal* and *Images of Nepal* recordings. You can listen to track excerpts at www.amazon.com, and check out the band at www.sursudha.com.

The folk song that you hear everywhere in Nepal (you'll know which one we mean when you get there) is *Resamm Phirri*.

Film

The Nepali film industry has come a long way since the 1980s and early '90s, when only four or five films were produced annually. More recently the local film industry was making up to 70 films per year, although this bubble burst in 2001 when government-imposed curfews caused audience numbers to plummet and finances to dry up.

Recent scandal has both helped and rocked the industry. A Bollywood heart-throb's incendiary anti-Nepal comments in December 2000 prompted a violent backlash against Indian films. In 2002 the publication of paparazzi-style nude pictures of a famous Nepali film starlet led to her subsequent suicide.

According to John Whelpton in his *History of Nepal*, the first film showed in Kathmandu depicted the wedding of the Hindu god Ram. The audience threw petals and offerings at the screen as they would do at a temple or if the god himself were present.

Basantpur by Neer Shah, the coproducer of *Caravan*, is a recent Nepali film depicting the intrigues and conspiracies of life at the Rana court. It owes something to Bollywood 'masala movies' (a little bit of everything)

You can see 'for-tourist' versions of Nepal's major dances at Newari restaurants in Kathmandu and the New Himalchuli Cultural group (p152) in Kathmandu.

Film South Asia is a biannual festival of South Asian documentaries (odd years) that alternates with the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (even years). For details see www.himalassociation.org/fsa.

Himalayan Voices, by Michael Hutt, subtitled 'An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature', includes work by contemporary poets and short-story writers.

Arresting God in Kathmandu, by Samrat Upadhyay, is an engaging, and readable series of short stories set in Kathmandu, by an author billed as the first Nepali writer writing in English (he's now living in the US). The follow-up novel *Guru of Love* is also recommended.

and is based on a historical novel written nearly 60 years ago. Another Nepali film to look out for is *Mukundo* (Mask of Desire) directed by Tsering Rita Sherpa, which explores secular and spiritual desires in Kathmandu. Tulsi Ghimire is another popular Nepali director. Perhaps the best-known film shot in Nepal is Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*, which was partly filmed at Bhaktapur's Durbar Sq and the Gokarna Forest Reserve.

Literature

Nepal's literary history is brief, dating back to just the 19th century. The written language was little used before then, although religious verse, folklore, songs and translations of Sanskrit and Urdu dating back to the 13th century have been found.

One of the first authors to establish Nepali as a literary language was Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814–68), who broke away from the influence of Indian literature and recorded the Ramayana in Nepali; this was not simply a translation but a 'Nepali-ised' version of the Hindu epic. Motiram Bhatta (1866–96) also played a major role in 19th-century literature, as did Lakshmi Prasad Devkota (1909–59) in the 20th century. Nepal's literary community has always struggled in a country where literacy levels are extremely low.

Today a vibrant and enthusiastic literary community exists, meeting in teashops, brew houses and bookstalls in Kathmandu and other urban centres. Funding comes from small prizes and writers' families – sales are often so low they barely cover the cost of the paper.

Responsible Tourism

Tourism, and trekking in particular, is having a great environmental and social impact in Nepal. (for more on responsible trekking see p330). The local communities in or around popular tourist routes have been hugely affected by tourism, for better and worse, usually without having any say in the matter.

It is an irony that we as travellers often inadvertently damage the very things we came to see: we crave to get off the beaten track and end up creating another beaten track; we want to experience traditional culture but don't want to lose our foreign comforts. We are often disappointed when traditional villages adopt modern housing, transport and dress – things we would not question in our own culture. These are among the many contradictions, inherent in travel, you will face when visiting Nepal.

A few tour operators, both abroad and in Nepal, are making conscious efforts to address problems associated with tourism, but it's slow going. The best companies are those that have a serious commitment to protecting the fragile ecosystems, and which direct at least some portion of profits back into local communities. Although these won't always be the cheapest trips, the extra money you spend is an important way to contribute to the future of the areas you visit.

Your very presence in Nepal will certainly have an effect – some people say an increasingly negative one. The challenge for you as a visitor to Nepal is to respect the rights and beliefs of the local people, and to minimise your impact – culturally and environmentally. The further you venture off the beaten track, the greater your responsibility as a visitor becomes. As the cliché goes, 'the Himalaya is there to change you, not for you to change the Himalaya'.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INITIATIVES

There are increasing numbers of good examples of how tourism can act as a force for positive change, merging tourism with community work.

As part of its **Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme** (TRPAP; www.welcomenepal.com/trpap), the Nepal Tourism Board, with British and Dutch funding, has established several village tourism projects across Nepal, with the aim of bringing tourism money to communities not currently benefiting from tourist dollars. Profits from homestay accommodation, food sales and handicrafts are funnelled into village social funds. Projects include village walks in Lumbini, hikes and homestays in the hills north of Chitwan (see p288), and new trekking routes in the Langtang (see p235), Solu Khumbu, Dolpo and Kangchenjunga regions. For more details, you can download brochures and maps at the website or contact the Nepal Tourism Board's **Sustainable Tourism Unit** (☎ 01-4256909; info_trpap@ntb.org.np) in Kathmandu.

A similarly good village homestay programme operates in the Gurung village of Sirubari, about 30km from Pokhara (see p302).

Explore Nepal (Map p116; ☎ 01-4248942; www.explorenepal.com.np; Kamaladi, Kathmandu) is a private Nepali company that operates a number of 'clean-up treks', where participants are involved in helping clean up villages along the trekking routes. The company's director was at the forefront of the campaign to have polluting three-wheeler Vikram tempos banned from the Kathmandu Valley. Its hotel, Kantipur Temple House (p135) in Kathmandu recycles its water and has banned plastic goods from the hotel.

You can download a free responsible tourism brochure from World Expeditions (www.worldexpeditions.net).

You can help reduce the growing mountains of waste plastic in village rubbish heaps by not buying unrecyclable bottles of mineral water; instead carry a water bottle and filter or treat the water with iodine. In Kathmandu and Pokhara refill it at KEEP offices (see p65) and on the Annapurna Circuit use the Safe Water Drinking Scheme (see p330).

Consider this: trekkers in Nepal leave behind an estimate 100 tonnes of unrecyclable water bottles every year.

The gorgeous **Dwarika's Hotel** (p144) in Kathmandu funds a large workshop where craftspeople patiently repair and restore fretwork windows and carvings that would otherwise almost certainly be lost in Kathmandu's rush to survive and modernise.

Community Action Treks (www.catreks.co.uk, www.canepal.org.uk) is the fundraising arm of **Community Action Nepal** (www.canepal.org.uk), an NGO run by British mountaineer Doug Scott. It runs three charity treks a year to the Everest region. **Porters Progress** (www.portersprogress.org) – see the boxed text, p327 – also runs an annual Everest trek to raise funds for its worthy organisation.

Himalayan Travel (☎ 01304-620880; www.himalayantravel.co.uk) runs treks to support the **Nepal Trust** (www.nepaltrust.org), an NGO that works on development and sustainable tourism projects in far western Nepal's remote and impoverished Humla district. It also runs one trek a year where the trekkers work on development initiatives – a 2005 group helped renovate Halji Gompa.

In a similar project, the US-based **Cultural Restoration Tourism Project** (CRTP; <http://crtp.net>) arranges volunteer treks to restore Chhairro Gompa in Mustang (www.chhairrogompa.org).

Sometimes contributing to a charity just involves kicking back in a good guesthouse. Nature's Grace Lodge (p258) in Pokhara is run by the **Child Welfare Scheme** (www.childwelfarescheme.org), which operates development programmes, a clinic and a vocational centre in the region. Administrative costs are directly covered by profits from the guesthouse.

Crooked Trails (www.crookedtrails.com) is a nonprofit US travel company that promotes community-based tourism and runs trips to Nepal, during which you get to work on community projects in the Terai and trek around Jomsom. Part of your trip fee goes to programmes that support the communities you are visiting.

Dolma Tours (www.dolmatours.com) runs 14-day trips to Briddim in the Langtang area, during which you get to know the local community, stay in village-owned lodges, learn the local language and take cookery classes. Part of the profits go into a village development and education fund. See the boxed text, p235 for more details on the area.

Several travel companies contribute to local development projects; **Spirit Adventures** (www.spiritadventures.com.au) funds an orphanage in Kathmandu and **Wilderness Travel** (www.wildernesstravel.com) provides half of the funds for a Sherpa dental clinic in the Khumbu. Ask what your preferred travel company does before handing over your cash.

ECONOMIC CHOICES

As the country's third-largest money earner and an employer of up to 250,000 Nepalis, tourism is vital to Nepal, but it often has a price. While visitors can instil local pride with their interest in Nepal's traditional arts and crafts, for example, the resulting souvenir trade often warps the very nature of these traditional crafts, robbing religious items like thangkas (Buddhist religious paintings) and Hindu statuary of their sacred significance.

Don't underestimate your power as an informed consumer. You can maximise the beneficial effects of your expenditure by frequenting locally owned restaurants and fair-trade craft stores, and by using environmentally aware trekking agencies. 'Ecotourism' in Nepal's national parks and conservation areas has encouraged local governments to make environmental protection a priority. Entry fees to historical sights contribute to their preservation. Hiring a guide on a trek also helps; it adds to your safety and understanding and provides direct employment and infuses money into the hill economy. All good stuff!

For more on the general issues behind responsible tourism, check out Tourism Concern (www.tourismconcern.org.uk) or Partners in Responsible Tourism (www.pirt.org).

Pay a fair price for goods or services but don't get carried away. Hagglings down the last Rs 10 like a terrier chewing on a toy will only result in hardship and disrespect; yet paying over the odds will drive up local inflation (especially for the next tourist).

Fair Trade

The principles of fair trade emphasise an exchange that benefits both parties, by supporting safe working environments, sustainable and traditional methods of production, profit sharing, supporting low-income groups and discouraging child labour.

A number of shops in Nepal specialise in handicrafts produced by low-income women. These are nonprofit development organisations and the money goes to the craftspeople in the form of fair wages (not charity). They also provide training, product development, and rehabilitation programmes. Your purchasing power can help low-income and low-status women and at the same time support traditional craft-making skills. Plus you walk away with some great souvenirs!

One of the best of these organisations is **Mahaguthi** (www.mahaguthi.org), which was established with the help of Oxfam. Its shops in Kathmandu and Patan sell a wide range of crafts that support programmes to rehabilitate destitute women and children. It works with 150 craft producers, encouraging micro-financing, entrepreneurship, social welfare programs and a revival of traditional crafts.

Sana Hastakala (www.sanahastakala.org) in Kathmandu, Dhankuta Sisters in Patan and Dhukuti in Patan and Pokhara (established with the help of UNICEF) are similar organisations based on the principles of fair trade. Dhukuti operates as a sales agent for the **Association of Craft Producers** (www.acp.org.np), an organisation that works with over 1000 low-income craft producers.

The Maheela shop is operated by the **Women's Foundation** (www.womenfoundation.org), which runs a shelter for women and children who have been victims of abuse, domestic violence, forced labour or trafficking, or have been displaced or widowed by fighting between Maoists and the Nepalese army. It offers training in handicraft production. You can sponsor children through the organisation and you'll receive regular updates on their progress.

Ethical Shopping

There is still a thriving trade in endangered animal furs and trophies in Nepal, despite the fact that this is officially prohibited.

Be aware that *shahtoosh* (or *shartoosh*) shawls are illegal both in Nepal and abroad. *Shahtoosh* comes from the wool of the protected *chiru*, or Tibetan antelope, which are killed for their superfine hair (a 2m shawl requires the death of three antelopes). *Shahtoosh* shawls are often referred to as 'ring shawls', as they are fine enough to pass through a finger ring, but this term is also used for perfectly legal pashmina (where the hair is merely sheared from a living mountain goat). If in doubt check with the dealer, though you can also tell by the price; *shahtoosh* is four or five times more expensive than pashmina (see p370).

Begging

Begging is relatively common in Nepal, partly because both Hinduism and Buddhism encourage the giving of alms. This presents many visitors with a heart-rending moral dilemma. Should you give? Sometimes, especially if you've just spent Rs 500 on drinks, it seems grotesque to ignore someone who is genuinely in need. It is often worth checking to see how the local Nepalis react; if they give, it's a reasonably safe assumption that the beneficiary is genuine.

Around the main religious shrines, especially Pashupatinath, there are long lines of beggars. Pilgrims customarily give a coin to everyone in the

More information on fair trade can be found on the website of the Fair Trade Group Nepal (www.fairtradegrouppneal.org) or the International Federation of Alternative Trade (www.ifat.org).

For details on fair-trade organisations and their crafts, see p153 and p194. See also the boxed text about the Janakpur Women's Development Centre, p315).

line (there are special moneychangers nearby who will change notes for small-denomination coins). Sadhus (holy men) are another special case, and are usually completely dependent on alms. There are plenty of con artists among their ranks, but equally, plenty of genuine holy men.

In the countryside, visitors will quickly be discovered by small children who chant a mantra that sounds something like: 'bonbonpenonerupeece?' Someone, somewhere, started giving children sweets, pens and money, and it sometimes seems that every child in Nepal now tries their luck. Don't encourage this behaviour. Most Nepalis find it offensive and demeaning (as do most visitors), and it encourages a whole range of unhealthy attitudes.

By presenting school books or teaching materials (such as exercise books, school text books and pens bought in Kathmandu bookshops) to teachers and village elders, you can contribute more to long-term progress than you would by giving a cash donation or passing out pens. Several organisations, including **READ Nepal** (www.readnepal.org) and **Room to Read** (www.roomtoread.org) work towards building and stocking libraries in Nepal.

Thamel attracts many of Kathmandu's estimated 1000-plus street kids. The lure of easy money attracts many kids onto the streets in the first place, and gives them a powerful incentive to remain. It's also a dog-eat-dog world: children seen receiving money may well be beaten up and have it stolen. By giving to beggars in Thamel you are in many ways encouraging a further influx of people into Kathmandu, where very few facilities exist for them. There are signs up around Thamel asking visitors not to do so. If you want to give money, several organisations operate child shelters, including **Child Welfare Scheme** (www.childwelfarescheme.org) in Pokhara and the UK-based **Street Children of Nepal Trust** (☎ 0117-9321156; www.streetchildrenofnepal.org). **APC Nepal** (☎ 01-4268299; www.pommeccanelle.org) operates a home for street kids in Basantapur. Travellers can sponsor a kid for €20 per month or make a donation through Paypal.

Although the blind and people with leprosy are probably genuinely dependent on begging for their survival, long-term solutions are offered by organisations like Kathmandu's Leprosy Hospital and Tilganga Eye Centre. In association with The Fred Hollows Foundation and other partners, the **Tilganga Eye Centre** (www.tilganga.org) provides eye-care services to the poorest of Nepal's poor, often restoring people's sight with relatively simple treatments and surgical techniques. Many Australians will remember the late Professor Fred Hollows, who was instrumental in establishing the centre, which was opened in 1994. Both the Tilganga Eye Centre and **The Fred Hollows Foundation** (www.hollows.org) accept donations, as does the excellent **Himalayan Cataract Project** (www.cureblindness.org). A donation of as little as US\$12 can restore someone's sight.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

An important dimension of responsible tourism is the manner and attitude that visitors assume towards local people. You'll get more out of your visit by learning about Nepali life and culture and by travelling with an open mind.

One of travel's great gifts is that it allows you to re-examine your own culture in a new light. Life for many is extremely hard, but despite the scarcity of material possessions, Nepal has many qualities that shame the 'developed' world.

Most Nepalis make allowances for the odd social gaffe, even if it does embarrass them, but they do appreciate it when a genuine effort is made to observe local customs. Following is a collection of simple suggestions that will help you to avoid offence.

If you have any clothes or medicines left at the end of your trip, don't haul them home. Instead donate them to Porter's Progress or the Porters Clothing Bank. Alternatively, contact them in advance and carry out clothing from your home country.

Behaviour

Follow a Nepali proverb and 'Dress according to the land you are in' – shorts, Lycra and revealing clothes are unsuitable for women. Shorts are acceptable for men only when trekking; going without a shirt anywhere is not. Nudity is unacceptable anywhere.

Public displays of affection between men and women are frowned upon. Nepali men often walk around hand in hand, but this does not carry any sexual overtones.

Raising your voice or shouting show extremely bad manners and will not solve your problem, whatever it might be. Always try to remain cool, calm and collected.

Nepalis rarely shake hands, although among Nepali men with frequent Western connections it is becoming more accepted. The *namaste* greeting (placing your palms together in a prayer position) is a better choice. A sideways tilt or wobble of the head, accompanied by a slight shrug of the shoulders, conveys agreement in Nepal, not a 'no' (visitors from India will be used to this).

Never touch anything or point at anything with your feet, the 'lowest' part of the body. If you accidentally do this, apologise by touching your hand to the person's arm and then touching your own head. It's bad manners to step over someone's outstretched legs, so avoid doing that, and move your own legs when someone wants to pass. In contrast, the head is spiritually the 'highest' part of the body, so don't pat children on the head.

Other tips:

- When handing money to someone (or receiving) pass (or receive) with your right hand and touch your right elbow with your left hand, as a gesture of respect.
- When addressing someone, particularly elders, it's a good idea to add *-ji* at the end of the name (eg Danny-*ji*) to convey respect.
- Nepalis do not like to give negative answers or no answer at all. If you are given a wrong direction or told a place is much nearer than it turns out to be, it may be through fear of disappointing you.
- Fire is sacred, so do not throw rubbish or cigarette butts into it.
- Always remove your shoes before entering a Nepali home.

Visiting a Temple

Always walk clockwise around Buddhist stupas, *chörtens* and mani walls, and always remove your shoes before entering a Buddhist or Hindu temple or sanctuary. You may also have to remove any items made from leather, such as belts and bags. Many Hindu temples do not permit Westerners to enter, so respect this.

It's customary to give a *khata* (white scarf) to a lama when you are introduced. The scarves can easily be found in Tibetan shops. A small donation to the temple or monastery will always be appreciated.

Finally, a few other things to remember; don't step over a shrine or offering, don't smoke in a holy place and *definitely* don't urinate on a *chörten* (yes, we actually saw that one!).

Photography

Do not intrude with a camera, unless it is clearly OK with the people you are photographing. Ask before entering a temple compound whether it is permissible to enter and take photographs, and don't photograph cremations or people washing at riverbanks or wells.

Respect people's privacy; most Nepalis are very modest. Although people carry out many activities in public (they have no choice), it does

'If you are given a wrong direction or told a place is much nearer than it turns out to be, it may be through fear of disappointing you'

not follow that passers-by have the right to watch or take photographs. Riverbanks and village wells, for example, are often used to wash at, but the users expect consideration and privacy.

Religious ceremonies are also often private affairs, so first ask yourself whether it would be acceptable for a tourist to intrude and take photographs at a corresponding event in your home country – then get explicit permission from the senior participants. The behaviour of some photographers at places such as Pashupatinath (the most holy cremation site in Nepal) is shameful – imagine the outrage a busload of scantily clad, camera-toting tourists would create if they invaded a family funeral in the West.

VOLUNTEER WORK

It's possible to get work as a volunteer, and this can be a rewarding experience and one which gives you the opportunity to put something back into the community. It's harder than you think to offer your services for free and most foreign organisations will charge you hefty for the privilege. Check out www.volunteernepal.org for volunteering tips and ideas.

The **International Mountain Explorers Connection** (IMEC; Map p136; www.mountainexplorers.org) publishes an annual Nepal Volunteer Handbook, which outlines the opportunities for volunteering in Nepal. It is available for US\$10 from the IMEC office in Thamel or online to members.

Volunteer programmes have been scaled back in recent years due to Maoist activity in the rural areas that form the Maoist heartland. Contact the agencies below (a web search will bring up many more) to see what programmes they are running.

Child Environment Nepal (☎ 4352492; www.cennepal.org.np) Takes childcare volunteers in its orphanage at a cost of US\$75 per week to cover board and lodging.

Educate the Children (www.etc-nepal.org) Three-month teaching stints in rural Nepal offered by this Nepali organisation. There's a US\$100 placement fee and living costs of around US\$30 per week.

Ford Foundation (☎ 01-4378864; www.fordnepal.org) Arranges volunteer work focusing on teaching and childcare, from two weeks upwards, accommodation arranged with host family.

Gift For Aid (Map p136; ☎ 01-4418100; www.giftforaid.org) Can help with placements in fields of teaching, health, occupational therapy and the environment. There's no placement charge and volunteers stay with local families.

Global Vision International (www.gvi.co.uk) British organisation that arranges four- to 12-week placements in is schools, orphanages and environmental work. Placements are pricey. If you are already in Kathmandu contact Tony Jones at Himalayan Encounters (see p90) about teaching positions in orphanages in Pokhara or Chitwan.

Global Volunteer Network (www.volunteer.org.nz/nepal) Healthcare, children education, environment, US\$350 plus local fee, two months US\$800.

Himalayan Healthcare (www.himalayan-healthcare.org) Doctors and healthcare professionals can volunteer at the organisation's clinic in Ilam, and they also run medical treks (around US\$2000 for two weeks) when the security situation allows.

Himalayan Light Foundation (www.hlf.org.np) Minimum five-months commitment. US\$150 administration fee.

Himshikhar Socio-Cultural Society (www.hopenhome.org) Nepali NGO, fees from US\$250.

Info Nepal (☎ 01-4700210; www.infonepal.org/index.html) Wide variety of volunteering opportunities, costing around €600 for three months.

Insight Nepal (www.insightnepal.org.np) Pokhara-based programme that runs six-week/three-month volunteer programmes for US\$480/840, which includes training, food, accommodation, trekking and a Chitwan safari excursion. A similar organisation is Cultural Destination Nepal (www.volunteernepal.org.np).

KEEP (www.keeppnepal.org) Arranges rural volunteer work positions, preferably for a minimum two months, or you can offer to teach English to porters and guides in Kathmandu for a month in December/January and July/August. There's a US\$50 placement fee. See p114 for details.

Culture Shock! Nepal: A Guide to Customs & Etiquette by Jon Burbank is an insightful guide to Nepali culture and is perfect for anyone planning to work or volunteer in Nepal.

Know Nepal (www.knownepal.org) Mostly teaching, costs US\$350/450 for three/five months.

Nepal Kingdom Foundation (www.nkf-mt.org.uk/nkf.htm) Project in Panglong, near the Tibetan border.

Prison Assist (info@panepal.org) Kathmandu-based organisation that looks after children whose parents are in prison. Contact Indira Rana Magar. No volunteering costs.

Rokpa (www.rokpa.org) Swiss-Tibetan organisation that takes general volunteers for a winter (mid-December to March) soup kitchen in Bodhnath and nurses for a medical tent.

Rural Community Development Programme (www.rcdpnepal.org/nepal) Costs around US\$700/900 for one/two months.

Starchildren (☎ 071-3615245 in the Netherlands; www.starchildren.nl) Pokhara-based charity that works with children with HIV. No volunteering costs.

Vajrayana Centre (☎ 01-2074256; www.vajrayana.org; vajrayana_centre@yahoo.com) Contact Tsewang Sherpa about teaching English to Tibetan refugees in Bodhnath.

Volunteer Nepal Himalaya (USA ☎ 303-998-0101; www.hec.org/volunteering/teaching.htm) Programme run by IMEC (see earlier) to teach English for three months in the Solu-Khumbu region. Costs include a US\$1000 fee/donation, plus US\$150 per month food and lodging.

Volunteer Work Opportunity Programs (VWOP; ☎ 01-4416614; vwop2000@hotmail.com) Nepali organisation that coordinates teaching, agricultural and environmental volunteers. There's a one-off administration fee of US\$220.

Foreign-based organisations that arrange pricier volunteer placements in Nepal include:

Experiential Learning International (www.eliabroad.org)

Global Action Nepal (☎ 01403-864704; www.gannepal.org)

Global Crossroad (www.globalcrossroad.com)

I-to-I (www.i-to-i.com) UK (☎ 0870-333 2332); USA (☎ 800-985 4864)

Involvement Volunteers Association (☎ 03-9646 5504; www.volunteering.org.au)

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

There are a number of organisations based in Nepal that are involved in grass-roots initiatives to minimise the impact of tourism; they include:

American Himalayan Foundation (USA ☎ 415-2887245; www.himalayan-foundation.org)

Runs projects in Sherpa education, reforestation, assistance to elderly Tibetans in exile and restoration of monasteries in Mustang, Tengboche and Thamel.

Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP; ☎ 01-4225393, ext 363; Tridevi Marg, Kathmandu; ☎ 9am-5pm, 9am-4pm winter) Nongovernmental, nonprofit organisation that exists to improve local standards of living, to protect the environment and to develop more sensitive forms of tourism. ACAP has started work on a number of projects, such as forestry nurseries, introducing wood-saving technologies (eg efficient stoves), banning fires altogether in certain areas, and building rubbish tips and latrines.

Gift for Aid (Map p136; ☎ 01-4418100; gift@infoclub.com.np, www.giftforaid.org; Thamel, Kathmandu) is a Dutch initiative that aims to connect foreign travellers with local small-scale tourism-funded development projects. It can often link visitors with volunteer opportunities. Pop into the office to view some local development projects and donate to your favourite project.

Himalayan Foundation for Integrated Development (www.himalayafoundation.org) Assists the Sherpa communities in the Khumbu with small-scale ecotourism and education projects.

International Mountain Explorers Connection (Map p136; ☎ 2081407; www.mountainexplorers.org; ☎ USA 303-9980101; Thamel, Kathmandu) Educates trekkers, offers English and first-aid training to porters and operates a clothing bank through the Porter Assistance Project. Travellers can volunteer to help teach porters English.

Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP; ☎ 01-4216775; www.keeppnepal.org; ☎ 10am-5pm Sun-Fri; Thamel) KEEP offer tips on how you can lessen your environmental impact, offers clean water refills and also accepts donations of medical supplies and other equipment. See p114 for details; there's also an office in Pokhara.

If you have time it's well worth checking out the BBC video *Carrying the Burden*, which plays everyday except Saturday at 3.30pm (or on request) at Porters Progress in Kathmandu and Lukla, and daily at 2pm at the International Mountain Explorers Connection in Thamel (see Map p136).

Porters Progress (Map p136; ☎ 01-4410020; www.portersprogress.org; Thamel, Kathmandu)

Campaigns for the ethical treatment of porters, porter safety and medical relief, and offers free English tuition and medical training to porters. It operates a clothes and kerosene stove bank in Lukla and currently has clothes for 700 porters.

Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC; spcc@mail.com.np) Works on waste reduction and recycling in the Khumbu region and helped banned glass bottles from the Everest region.

Environment

Nepal is blessed by, and is hostage to, its incredible environment. Its economy, history, culture, tourist attractions and development are all tied closely to its daunting mountains and valleys. Remote as they may seem, the Himalaya are not a wilderness Shangri-la – some 50 million people live in the Himalaya. Life here is, by necessity, in fine ecological balance, a balance that in places has been upset, most notably by tourism.

It's easy to fret about trail erosion, overgrazing, landslides and litter, but the reality in these awesome mountains is that the natural processes of the Himalaya have long dwarfed the impact of man. The question is for how long.

THE LAND

Nepal may be a small country, but when it comes to height it is number one in the world. Mountains cover 64% of Nepal, providing huge challenges in a country where 80% of people live off the land. Nepal measures about 800km east–west and 230km at its widest point north–south, making a total area of around 147,181 sq km.

Within that small area, however, is the second-greatest range of altitude on earth – starting with the Terai, less than 100m above sea level, and finishing at the top of Mt Everest (8850m), the world's highest point. With this comes an incredible ecological diversity, where conditions change from tropical to arctic in a mere 160km. The overriding geographical feature is the Himalaya, born of a slow-motion continental crash of mind-boggling proportions.

Geology

About 60 million years ago, the Indo-Australian tectonic plate collided with the Eurasian continent. As the former was pushed under Eurasia, the Earth's crust buckled and folded and the Himalayas were born.

The upheaval of mountains caused the temporary obstruction of rivers that once flowed unimpeded from Eurasia to the sea. However, on the southern slopes of the young mountains, new rivers formed as trapped moist winds off the tropical sea rose and precipitated. As the mountains

The Sanskrit word Himalaya means abode (*alaya*) of the snows (*himal*). Pronounce it correctly as they do in the corridors of the Royal Geographical Society, with the emphasis on the second syllable – *himaaritiya*, darling...

Nepalis divide the year into six, not four, seasons: Basanta (spring), Grisma (pre-monsoon heat), Barkha (monsoon), Sharad (post-monsoon), Hemanta (autumn) and Sheet (winter).

HOW HIGH IS MT EVEREST?

Using triangulation from the plains of India, the Survey of India established the elevation of the top of Everest at 29,002ft (8839m). A century later, in 1954, the Survey of India revised the height to 29,028ft (8848m) using the unweighted mean of altitudes determined from 12 different survey stations around the mountain.

On 5 May 1999, scientists supported by the National Geographic Society and Boston's Museum of Science recorded GPS data on the top of Mt Everest for 50 minutes. Their measurements produced a revised elevation of 29,035ft (8850m). Nepal, however, continues to favour the 8848m elevation. As part of the same survey, GPS readings from the South Col indicated that the horizontal position of Everest is moving steadily and slightly northeastward at about 6cm a year.

Then in May 2005 a Chinese team made measurements from the summit using ice radars and GPS systems and eventually calculated a height of 8844.43m, accurate to 20cm. So is Everest shrinking? Not exactly; the Chinese claim that this is the most accurate measurement yet since it measures the height of the rock, without the accumulated 3.5m of ice and snow measured on the summit by other readings.

continued to rise and the gradient became steeper, both sets of rivers cut deeper into the soft, young terrain. When you look at Nepal's amazing mountain ranges and dividing gorges you are actually seeing what *isn't* there – the gap between the peaks eroded by rivers over millions of years. Rivers such as the Arun, Bhoté Kosi and Humla, which rise in Tibet and breach the Himalaya, are actually older than the mountains themselves.

The mountain-building process continues today, not only displacing material laterally, but also sending the ranges even higher (about 1cm per year) and resulting in natural erosion, landslides, silt-laden rivers, rock faults and earthquakes. Nepal's terrain can be likened to a complex maze of ceilingless rooms.

One result of all this plate tectonics is that Nepal is in an active seismic zone. A huge earthquake in 1934 destroyed much of the country. A similar-sized quake would cause unimaginable damage to modern Kathmandu's densely-packed and poorly constructed buildings.

Physiographic Regions

Nepal consists of several physiographic regions, or natural zones: the plains in the south, four mountain ranges, and the valleys lying between them. Most people live in the fertile lowlands or on the southern sunny slopes of the mountains where farming is easier and life less harsh.

THE TERAI & CHURE HILLS

The only truly flat land in Nepal is the Terai (sometimes written Tarai), a patchwork of paddy fields, mango groves, bamboo stands and thatched villages. Seen from the air, the monotonous expanse of the Gangetic plain extends up to 40km into Nepal before the land rears up an average 900m to form the Chure Hills (known in India as the Siwalik Hills), which runs the length of the country and is the first of the four mountain ranges. The range harbours the fossilised remains of many mammals no longer typical of Eurasia, and separates the Terai from the Inner Terai or the Dun.

MAHABHARAT RANGE

North of the Inner Terai, the next range of foothills is the Mahabharat Range, or the 'Middle Hills'. These vary between 1500m and 2700m in height, and though quite steep, are characterised by water-retentive soils that allow cultivation and extensive terracing. On the lower slopes, remnants of subtropical forests can be found. On the upper reaches, above cultivation, temperate elements begin. These mountains are cut by three major river systems: the Karnali, the Narayani and the Sapt Kosi.

PAHAR ZONE

Between the Mahabharat Range and the Himalaya lies a broad, extensively cultivated belt called the midlands, or the Pahar zone. This includes the fertile valleys (previously large lakes) of Kathmandu, Banepa and Pokhara, and supports nearly half of Nepal's population. Lying between 1000m and 2000m, subtropical and lower temperate forests (damaged by fuel and fodder gathering) are found here.

The stunningly located Pokhara area, right at the foot of the Annapurna massif, is unique because there is no formidable barrier directly to the south to block the path of spring and monsoon rain clouds. As a result Pokhara receives an exceptionally high level of rainfall, limiting cultivation to below 2000m.

At the other extreme, the Humla-Jumla area in the west is protected to the south by ranges over 4000m in height; these stop much of the region's

monsoon moisture. The area is characterised by wide, uneroded valleys, snowless peaks and drier vegetation.

THE HIMALAYA

Nepal's borders contain about one-third of the total length of the Himalaya and include 10 of the world's 14 tallest mountains. These mountains are terraced and cultivated up to about 2700m, or to the level of cloud and mist. As a result, the high-temperate forest above this to the tree line is fairly well preserved.

The inner valleys are those cradled within the Himalayan ranges. The higher parts of these broad, glacier-worn valleys, which are found in the Everest, Langtang and upper Kali Gandaki areas, are not affected by the strong winds that desiccate the valley floors. The partial rainscreen of all these high valleys creates ecologies that are different again.

The Himalaya do not form an unbroken wall of peaks, but rather groups of massifs, or himal. The range is crossed by passes that have been used for centuries by Himalayan traders, migrating peoples and, most recently, Tibetan refugees.

THE TRANS-HIMALAYA

North of the Himalaya is a high desert region, similar to the Tibetan plateau. This area encompasses the arid valleys of Mustang, Manang and Dolpo, as well as the Tibetan marginals (the fourth range of mountains, which sweeps from central to northwestern Nepal, averaging less than 6000m in height). The trans-Himalaya is in the rainshadow area and receives significantly less precipitation than the southern slopes. Uneroded crags, spires and formations like crumbling fortresses are typical of this stark landscape.

WILDLIFE

Animals BIRDS

More than 850 bird species are known in Nepal and, surprisingly considering the population and pollution, almost half of these can be spotted in the Kathmandu Valley. March to May is the main breeding season and so it's a great time to spot birds. Resident bird numbers are augmented by migratory species, which arrive in the Terai in spring (February and March) en route from Siberia. During this migration the bar-headed goose has been observed flying at altitudes near 8000m.

Eight species of stork have been identified along the watercourses of the Terai. Similar in appearance are the cranes, though these are not as well represented, save for the demoiselle cranes that fly down the Kali Gandaki and Dudh Kosi for the winter, before returning in spring to their Tibetan nesting grounds. The endangered sarus crane (found in Royal Bardia National Park) is particularly beautiful, with a dramatic red band around its eyes that makes it look like a cartoon bank robber. Around 30 sarus cranes live at the privately funded Lumbini Crane Sanctuary near Lumbini (p295).

Raptors or birds of prey of all sizes are found in the Himalaya, and are especially prevalent with the onset of winter. Raptors include the huge Himalayan griffon and lammergeier, both of which have a wingspan of nearly 3m. Vulture populations have plummeted across the Himalaya in recent years and of Nepal's nine species of vulture, three are now critically endangered.

There are six species of pheasant in Nepal, including the national bird, the *daphe*, or impeyan pheasant, the male of which has a plumage of iridescent colours. These birds are 'downhill fliers' – they do not fly, per

The Kali Gandaki valley between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri massifs is considered the world's deepest gorge, with a vertical gain of 7km spaced between 20km.

Mt Everest's 'real' name is its Tibetan name, Chomolangma, which translates as 'Goddess Mother of the Universe'. The Nepali name is Sagarmartha, which is Sanskrit for 'Brow of the Ocean'.

The Terai makes up only 18% of Nepal's area but holds 50% of its population and 70% of its agricultural land.

Saligrams (fossilised ammonites) are found throughout the Himalaya (and regarded as a symbol of Shiva), and seashell fossils have been even found halfway up Mt Everest, proof that the region used to lie beneath the ancient Tethys Sea.

The best places in Nepal for bird-watching are Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (p316) and Royal Chitwan National Park (p275). The best spots in the Kathmandu Valley are Pulchowki, Nagarjun and Shivapuri National Park.

Nepal covers only 0.1% of the world's surface area but is home to nearly 10% of the world's species of birds, including 72 critically endangered species.

se, and must walk uphill! The cheer and koklas pheasants live west of the Kali Gandaki, while the kalij pheasant is common throughout Nepal.

Nepal hosts 17 species of cuckoo, whose arrival in March heralds the coming of spring. The Indian cuckoo is recognised by its '*kaphal pakyo*' call, which announces in Nepali that the fruit of the box myrtle is ripe. The common hawk cuckoo has a repetitious call that rises in a crescendo and sounds like 'brain fever' – or so it was described by British sahibs as they lay sweating with malarial fevers.

One of the most colourful, varied and vocal families is the timalids, or babblers and laughing thrushes, common from the tropical Terai to the upper temperate forest. They can often be identified by their raucous calls. The black-capped sibia with its constant prattle and ringing song is an integral part of the wet temperate forests. The spiny babbler is Nepal's only endemic species.

Above the tree line, two species of chough, congregating in large flocks in winter, are prevalent. Though the two species often overlap in range, the yellow-billed chough is found higher and is known to enter mountaineers' tents high on Everest.

Besides such families as kingfishers, bee-eaters, drongos, minivets, parakeets and sunbirds, there are a host of others including 30 species of flycatchers and nearly 60 species of thrushes and warblers.

Dark kites, hawklike birds with forked tails, are common over Kathmandu. At sunset loose groups of crows, mynahs, egrets and kites fly to their respective roosts.

In the Pokhara region, the Indian roller is conspicuous when it takes flight, flashing the iridescent turquoise on its wings. Otherwise, while perched, it appears as a plain brown bird. Local superstition has it that if someone about to embark on a journey sees a roller going their way it is a good omen.

MAMMALS

Due to habitat degeneration from both natural and human causes, opportunities for viewing mammals are usually restricted to national parks, reserves and western Nepal, where the population is sparse. Wildlife numbers have been thinned by poaching, whether for pelts or medicinal parts. Animals are also hunted because of the damage they inflict on crops and domestic animals.

At the top of the food chain is the royal Bengal tiger (*bagh* in Nepali), which is solitary and territorial. Males have territorial ranges that encompass those of two or three females and may span as much as 100 sq km. Royal Chitwan National Park in the Inner Terai and Royal Bardia National Park in the western Terai protect sufficient habitat to sustain viable breeding populations (Chitwan has 110 tigers, Bardia 22). For more on the signature species of Royal Chitwan National Park see the boxed text, p279.

The spotted leopard (*chituwa*) is an avid tree climber and, in general, more elusive than the tiger. Like the tiger, this nocturnal creature has been known to prefer human flesh when it has grown old or been maimed. Local people liken the spotted leopard to an evil spirit because its success at evading hunters suggests it can read minds.

The near-mythical snow leopard ('white leopard' in Nepali) is rarely spotted, partly because of its superb camouflage and partly because it inhabits some of the most remote and inhospitable high mountain terrain on earth, notably around Dolpo. Numbers are estimated at between 300 and 500, which makes up around 10% of the global population. Its territory depends upon the ranges of its main prey, ungulate (hoofed)

herds. Packs of wolves compete directly and when territories overlap, the solitary snow leopard will be displaced.

The one-horned rhinoceros (*gaida*) is the largest of three Asian species and is a distinct genus from the two-horned African rhino. It has poor eyesight, and though it weighs up to two tonnes, it is amazingly quick-footed. Anyone who encounters a mother with its calf is likely to witness a charge, which is disconcertingly swift, even if you are on an elephant. The rhino inhabits the grasslands of the Inner Terai, specifically the Chitwan Valley (which has 372 rhinos), although it has also been reintroduced to Royal Bardia National Park and Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve.

The Asian elephant (*hathi*) is genetically distinct from its African relative. The only wild elephants known to exist in Nepal are in the western part of the Terai and Chure hills, though individuals often range across the border from India. Elephants are known to maintain matriarchal societies, and females up to 60 years of age bear calves. Though elephants are able to reach 80 years of age, their life spans are determined by dentition. Molars are replaced as they wear down, but only up to six times. When the final set is worn, the animal dies of starvation.

There are several species of deer, but most are confined to the lowlands. The spotted deer is probably the most beautiful, while the sambar is the largest. The muntjac, or barking deer, which usually makes its presence known by its sharp, one-note alarm call, is found at altitudes up to 2400m, while the tiny musk deer (the male is hunted for its valuable musk pods) ranges even higher.

There are two primates: the rhesus macaque and the common langur (*bandar*). The rhesus is earth-coloured, with a short tail and travels on the ground in a large, structured troop, unafraid of humans. The langur is arboreal, with a black face, grey fur, and long limbs and tail. Because of Hanuman, the monkey god in the Hindu epic the Ramayana, both species are considered holy and are well protected. The rhesus ranges from the Terai up to 2400m, while the langur goes up to 3600m.

Two even-toed ungulate mammals are found in the alpine regions. They are the Himalayan tahr, a near-true goat, and the blue sheep (*bharal*), which is genetically stranded somewhere between the goat and the sheep. The male tahr with its flowing mane poses on the grassy slopes of inner valleys, while the blue sheep turns a bluish-grey in winter and is found in the trans-Himalayan region. Harder to spot is the nimble goral, which combines characteristics of both goats and antelope, and makes a sneezing noise when alarmed.

The Himalayan black bear is omnivorous and a bane to corn crops in the temperate forests. Though it rarely attacks humans, its poor eyesight may lead it to interpret a standing person as making a threatening gesture and to attack. Nepal's bears are known to roam in winter instead of hibernating.

The pika, or mouse hare, is the common guinea pig-like mammal of the inner valleys, often seen scurrying nervously between rocks. The marmot of western Nepal is a large rodent; it commonly dwells in the trans-Himalaya.

Noisy colonies of flying foxes or fruit bats have chosen the trees near the Royal Palace in Kathmandu and the chir pines at the entrance to Bhaktapur as their haunts. They are known to fly great distances at night to raid orchards. They have adequate eyesight for their feeding habits and do not require the sonar system of insectivorous bats.

Nepal's endangered river dolphin, on the other hand, is the only animal to have eyes but no lenses. It is therefore effectively blind, relying on sonar to find its way through muddy river courses.

Bird Conservation Nepal (www.birdlifene.org) is an excellent Nepali organisation based in Kathmandu that organises bird-watching trips every other Saturday and publishes books, birding checklists and a good quarterly newsletter.

Birds of Nepal, by Robert Fleming Sr, Robert Fleming Jr and Lain Singh Bangdel, is a field guide to Nepal's many hundreds of birds. *Birds of Nepal* by Richard Grimmett and Carol Inskipp is a comprehensive paperback with line drawings.

The Bird Education Society (www.besnepal.org) offers an online and printed checklist of birds in Royal Chitwan National Park and runs birding trips from its office by the park.

A shocking survey in April 2005 revealed that the rhino population of Royal Chitwan National Park had declined by 182 animals, almost 30% of the population, since 2000. Of these, 94 animals were killed by poachers.

More than 30% of the world's total one-horned rhino population lives in Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park.

Most of the yaks you see in Nepal are actually *dzo* or *dzopkyo*, male yak-cow hybrids; one reason being that yaks won't plough, but *dzo* will. And while we are at it, there's no such thing as 'yak' cheese or 'yak' butter – a female yak is actually called a *nak*.

REPTILES

The Terai is home to two indigenous species of crocodile: the gharial and the marsh mugger. The endangered gharial inhabits rivers, and is a prehistoric-looking fish-eating creature with bulging eyes and a long, narrow snout. The marsh mugger prefers stagnant water and is omnivorous, feeding on anything within reach. Because of the value of its hide and eggs, the gharial was hunted to the brink of extinction, but has increased in numbers since the establishment of a hatchery in Chitwan (now home to 25% of the world's gharial population).

Though venomous snakes such as cobras, vipers and kraits are present, the chance of encountering one is small. The majority of species are found in the Terai, though the mountain pit viper is known higher up, along with a few other nonvenomous species.

Plants

And the Wildest dreams of Kew are but the facts of Kathmandu
Rudyard Kipling

There are 6500 known species of trees, shrubs and wildflowers in Nepal. The height of floral glory can be witnessed in March and April when Nepal's 30 species of rhododendrons (*lali gurans* in Nepali) burst into colour. The huge magnolias of the east with their showy white flowers on bare branches are also spectacular, as are Nepal's dozens of species of orchid.

In the postmonsoon season, the flowers of summer are all but gone. However, in the subtropical and lower temperate areas, some wildflowers that have survived environmental degradation are pink luculia, mauve osbeckia and yellow St John's wort. Flowering cherry trees, and blue gentians in the temperate areas, add autumnal colours. Otherwise enjoy the autumn yellows of maples and ginger, and the reds of barberry shrubs.

In the Kathmandu Valley, silky oak with its spring golden inflorescence, and bottlebrush and eucalyptus, are planted as ornamentals, along with cherry, poplar and jacaranda. Historically, the Nepalis have been avid gardeners of such exotics as hibiscus, camellia, cosmos, salvia and marigold.

Throughout Nepal the magnificent mushrooming canopies of banyan and pipal trees are unmistakable, usually found together atop a stone dais designed for accommodating porters' loads. The pipal tree has a special religious significance (the Buddha gained enlightenment under a pipal tree) and often shelters shrines or has threads wrapped around it.

Sal, a broad-leaved, semideciduous hardwood, dominates the low-lying tropical areas of the Terai. The leaves are used as disposable plates, and the wood is used for construction. There are also deciduous moist forests of acacia and rosewood here. Open areas of tall elephant grass (*phanta*) can grow to 2½ metres high and is used by local Tharu people for thatching.

NATIONAL PARKS & CONSERVATION AREAS

Despite Nepal's small size and heavy demand for land, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (www.dnpwc.gov.np) has managed to set aside an impressive 18% of its land for protection. There are nine national parks, three conservation areas, three wildlife reserves and one hunting reserve protecting every significant ecological system in the country. There is talk of creating a new national park in the Rolwaling region.

The first protected areas such as Sagarmatha were similar to the New Zealand park service (where the park has no inhabitants), imposed from above with little partnership with locals and initially, at least, without their cooperation. Recent initiatives concentrate on accommodating

Nag is the Nepali name for both the cobra and the serpent spirits who live in the soil and control the rains.

Rhododendron arboreum, Nepal's national flower, reaches heights of 18m and ranges in colour from red to white, getting paler with altitude.

Himalayan Flowers & Trees, by Dorothy Mierow and Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha, is the best available field guide to the plants of Nepal.

people and their needs, not evicting them. They promote sustainable development, the preservation of culture and work to balance conservation needs with resource development, including tourism. The Annapurna Conservation Area, for example, has 40,000 residents. Between 20% and 50% of park revenues are reserved for community-development projects.

NATIONAL PARKS & CONSERVATION AREAS

Name	Location	Features	Best time to visit	Entry fee (Rs)
Annapurna CA	north of Pokhara, west-central Nepal (p352)	most popular trekking area in Nepal, extremely diverse landscapes and cultural groups, high Annapurna peaks	Oct-Apr/May	2000
Dhorpatan HR	west-central Nepal	Nepal's only hunting reserve (access is difficult), blue sheep	Mar-Apr	500
Kangchenjunga CA	eastern Nepal	third-highest mountain in the world, 30 species of rhododendron, many endemic flower species, snow leopard	Mar-Apr, Oct-Nov	2000
Khaptad NP	far western Nepal	core area is important religious site	Mar-Apr, Oct-Nov	1000
Koshi Tappu WR	eastern Nepal (p316)	grasslands, often flooded during monsoon, 440 species of birds, wild water buffalo	Oct-Apr	500
Langtang NP	north-central Nepal, on the Tibetan border (p341)	culturally diverse, varied topography, important location on migratory route for birds travelling between India and Tibet	Mar-Apr, Sept–mid-Dec	1000
Makalu-Barun NP	eastern Nepal, bordering Sagarmatha NP	rugged steep remote wilderness areas, rich diversity of plant and animal life	Oct-May	1000
Manaslu CA	west-central Nepal, bordering Annapurna CA	rugged terrain, 11 types of forest, snow leopard, musk deer	Oct-Nov, Mar-Apr	2000
Parsa WR	central Terai, east of Chitwan	sal forests, wild elephants, 300 species of birds, many snake species	Oct-Apr	500
Rara NP	northwest Nepal	Nepal's biggest lake, little visited, many migratory birds	Oct-Dec, Mar-May	1000
Royal Bardia NP	far western Terai (p308)	sal forest, tiger, one-horned rhinoceros, over 250 species of birds	Oct-early Apr	500
Royal Chitwan NP	central Terai (p275)	tropical and subtropical forests, rhinoceros, tiger, gharial crocodile, 540 species of birds, World Heritage site	Oct-Feb	500
Royal Sukla Phanta WR	southwestern Nepal (p310)	riverine flood plain, grasslands, endangered swamp deer, wild elephants	Oct-Apr	500
Sagarmatha (Everest) NP	mid-eastern Nepal (p334)	highest mountains on the planet, home of the Sherpa people, stunning monasteries, World Heritage site	Oct-May	1000
Shey Phoksundo NP	northwest Nepal	trans-Himalayan ecosystem, alpine flowers, high passes, snow leopard, musk deer	Jun-Sep	1000
Shivapuri NP	northern Kathmandu Valley (p183)	close to Kathmandu, many bird and butterfly species, good hiking and biking	Oct-May	250

NP = National Park CA = Conservation Area WR = Wildlife Reserve HR = Hunting Reserve

These core protected areas are then surrounded by a zone of community-owned forests, whose people have a stake in their continued existence.

Most people visit at least one of the Nepal's protected areas. In 2003 43,000 tourists visited the Annapurna Conservation Area, 35,000 visited Royal Chitwan National Park and 3100 visited Langtang. Only 290 people visited the wonderful Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve. Most other conservation areas are in hard-to-reach places, where roads are bad and transportation difficult, or in the Maoist-affected regions of the far west and east of the country.

The last few years have seen a shift in the management of protected areas from government to NGOs. The non governmental **King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation** (☎ 5526571; www.kmtnc.org.np) runs the ACAP and Manaslu Conservation Areas, as well as Patan Zoo, and is hoping to add management of the Rara, Shey Phoksundo and Shivapuri protected areas to its CV. The Mountain Institute has put forward proposals to run the Makalu-Barun and Kangchenjunga conservation areas.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The ecology and environment of Nepal are fragile and a rapidly growing population is constantly putting more pressure on the land. Much of the land between the Himalaya and the Terai has been vigorously modified by humans to provide space for crops, animals and houses. Forests have been cleared, towns have grown and roads have eaten into valleys that were previously accessible only on foot. Shangri-la is now in danger of environmental collapse.

Population growth is the biggest issue facing the environment. More people need more land for agriculture, and trees continue to be cut down for housing and firewood. In places like the Annapurna Conservation Area, Kangchenjunga Conservation Area and Sagarmatha National Park efforts have been made to promote alternative fuels and support reforestation. Solar energy and biogas energy have great potential in Nepal, which also boasts the world's greatest hydroelectric potential.

Grazing animals and deforestation have meant that during each monsoon huge chunks of hillsides devoid of trees are washed away. These often-massive landslides leave gigantic scars and wash downriver valuable soil that is eventually dumped in the Bay of Bengal. In 2002 virtually the entire village of Khobang in eastern Nepal was washed away in a landslide.

Tourism has also brought environmental problems, either directly, with increasing litter, trail erosion and demand for fuel, or indirectly, as local wealth converts into unsustainably large herds, though the scope is still limited to a few regions.

The return to the concept of community forests has been quite successful in Nepal. The forests buffer national parks like Royal Chitwan and provide local residents with economic alternatives to poaching and resource gathering in the main parks. For more on the concept see the boxed text, p275.

Air and water pollution in the Kathmandu Valley are severe, due partly to the uncontrolled population growth in the valley (currently 10% a year) and partly because of the closed bowl-like structure of the valley, where winter temperature inversion traps pollutants in the valley. In the dry season the holy Bagmati River is little more than a stinking, black stream of floating sewage.

The victims of Nepal's Maoist insurgency are not just human. The deteriorating security situation in many parks has led to a cut in the number of army checkpoints, which in turn has spurred poachers. Nepal's rhino

population of 600 fell by over 25% between 2000 and 2005. Snow-leopard bones and pelts were discovered in a hotel room in Thamel in 2004, hours before they were to be smuggled over the little-patrolled mountain passes into Tibet and China.

Global warming brings its own long-term challenges to the region. Edmund Hillary and environmental organisations want Mt Everest to be added to Unesco's list of threatened heritage sites, a move which would legally require international governments to cut emissions of greenhouse gases.

Warming has already caused glaciers to start to melt, creating dangerous levels in many of the region's 2300 glacial lakes. In 1985 a natural dam collapsed in the Khumbu, creating a flash flood that destroyed 16 bridges and killed 20 people. A breach in a larger lake, such as the Imja Glacier Lake in the Everest region's Chukhhung Valley, could create catastrophic flooding.

It is predicted that Himalayan glaciers will shrink by 20% by 2035. Eventually rivers will shrink too, affecting agriculture and river flows far downriver into India. Consider that the Ganges alone provides water for 25% of India's population and that 40% of the Ganges' water comes from Nepal (rising to 70% in the dry season) and it's easy to see how global warming quickly becomes a global problem.

Bis Hajaar Tal (20,000 Lakes) in Royal Chitwan National Park (p275) and the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (p316) are both Ramsar sites, thus designated as wetlands of international importance.

The Heart of the Jungle, by KK Gurung, details the wildlife of Royal Chitwan National Park.

Nepal Nature (www.nepalnature.com) is a tour company run by Nepali conservationists and nature experts. It runs bird-watching tours to Shivapuri National park and crane sanctuaries around Lumbini and you can download birding checklists from its website. Nature Trail (www.naturetrail.com.np) also runs birding tours.

Himal South Asia (www.himalmag.com) is a bimonthly magazine mainly devoted to development and environmental issues. It's an excellent publication with top-class contributors.

For more on Nepal's environment check out www.iucnnepal.org and www.wfnepal.org.

Outdoor Activities

Nepal is possibly the world's greatest outdoors destination. The towering mountains famously offer some of the Himalaya's most awe-inspiring treks but also some spectacular mountain biking; and its mighty rivers fuel some of the best white-water rafting you'll find anywhere. An added bonus is that all this fun comes in at least half the price of places like the US or New Zealand. For an added thrill try bungee jumping 160m into a Himalayan gorge or abseiling *into* a thundering 45m waterfall. Oh, and did we mention that Pokhara is one of the best paragliding spots in the world? Pack a spare pair of underpants – you're going to need them.

HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU HAVE?

One day

- bungee jump at The Last Resort (opposite)
- paraglide at Sarangkot (p79)
- take a mountain flight (p384)
- mountain bike down the Scar Rd (p83)

Two days

- go canyoning at Borderlands or The Last Resort (p78)
- raft the Bhote Kosi or Trisuli River (p95)
- trek Nagarkot to Sundarjal (p224)

Three days

- mountain bike Kathmandu–Dhulikhel–Namobuddha–Lakuri Bhanjyang (p84)
- raft the Kali Gandaki (p97)

Four Days

- learn to kayak at a kayak clinic (p92)
- do a canyoning and Bhote Kosi rafting combo (p78)
- raft the Kali Gandaki or Marsyangdi (p95)
- take a Chitwan safari excursion from Kathmandu (p282)
- take on the Tatopani loop trek from Pokhara (p268)
- experience the views on the Annapurna Skyline Trek (Royal Trek) (p269)

Six days

- trek from Borderlands or The Last Resort (p233)

- hike the Tamang Heritage Trail near Langtang (p235)

- complete the Ghorapani to Ghandruk loop trek (p268)

Seven days

- fly in to Lukla then trek to Thami, Namche Bazaar and Tengboche on the Everest Base Camp trek (p334)

Eight days

- trek the Helambu trek (p339)

Nine days

- trek the Jomsom trek (p345)
- raft the Sun Kosi River (p98)

10 days

- complete the Langtang trek (p341)
- do a Karnali River trip (p98)

15 days

- trek up to Everest Base Camp with flights in and out of Lukla (p334)

18 days

- complete the Annapurna Circuit (p347)

21 days

- combine the Everest Base Camp and Gokyo trek (p334)

TOP 10 PLACES FOR DAY HIKES

The following locations are some of the most rewarding places for day hiking, as opposed to multiday trekking:

- Chitwan Hills – p288
- Bandipur – p244
- Tamang Heritage Trail, Langtang region – p235
- Kathmandu Valley – see 'Top Five Valley Hikes' p162
- Around Tansen – p301
- Tansen to Ranighat – p301
- Nagarkot – p224
- Shivapuri National Park – p183
- Pokhara's World Peace Pagoda – p255
- Around Pokhara (Rupa Tal, Begnas Tal & Sarangkot) – p265

TREKKING

Nepal is the world's greatest trekking destination, even (and perhaps especially) if the only camping you do at home is lip-synching to Kylie Minogue and Queen songs (we know you do it!). For an overview of the most popular multiday teahouse treks, see the Trekking chapter, p323.

Short Treks & Day Hikes

If you don't have time for a big trek, there are several shorter treks which give you a taste of life on Nepal's trails – see the boxed text opposite. In particular, there are several short treks from Pokhara in the southern foothills of the Annapurnas (see p268), or you could easily cobble together a trek of several days around the rim of the Kathmandu Valley (p162).

You can also throw in a couple of flights here and there to speed up the trekking process. As an example, fly in to Jomsom and take a few days to hike to surrounding villages of Muktinath, Kagbeni and Marpha before flying back to Pokhara for a four- or five-day trip.

There are also plenty of great day hikes around Nepal. We have detailed many of these throughout the text; see the boxed text to help locate these.

ADVENTURE SPORTS

Bungee Jumping

The 'ultimate bungee' straddles a mighty 160m drop into the gorge of the Bhote Kosi at The Last Resort, just 12km from the Tibetan border. It's one of the world's longest bungee jumps (higher than the highest bungee in New Zealand) and the roars and squeals of free falling tourists echo up and down the valley for miles.

The swing or bungee costs US\$80 from Kathmandu (including return transport from Kathmandu and lunch) or US\$65 if you are already up at The Last Resort. Extra jumps cost US\$25, or add on a swing to a bungee for an extra US\$40. Every fourth jump is free. For US\$15 you can reveal your inner wisdom and travel up to watch someone else jump and enjoy the looks on everyone else's faces when they catch their first glimpse of how deep a 160m gorge really is. The price includes whatever lunch you can muster, wisely served up *after* the jump.

Visit the office of **The Last Resort** (Map p136; ☎ 01-4439525; www.tlnepal.com) in Kathmandu for details of current packages. A two-day bungee and rafting

For information on some of the golfing opportunities in Nepal see p253.

As if the tallest bungee in Asia wasn't enough, the fiendish minds at the Last Resort have devised the 'swing', a stomach-loosening eight-second free fall, followed by a Tarzan-like swing and then three or four pendulum swings back up and then down the length of the gorge. We feel ill just writing about it.

ALL FOR THE SAKE OF RESEARCH *Bradley Mayhew*

'Its the most exciting thing you can do in a day from Kathmandu' was what Megh Ale told me when I mentioned I might try some canyoning up at the Borderlands Resort. Sure, I thought, it'll be fun but how exciting can a day trip from the capital really be?

The first day was pretty relaxed, meeting my fellow canyoners (experienced abseilers, just what the novice in me needed...), learning how to abseil down a large boulder (I had to stifle a yawn) and then some small cascades. This is nice, I thought, but not quite the underpant-soiling adrenalin Megh had promised me.

So the next day, as I stood astride a small stream and shuffled backwards towards a drop-off, it came as a bit of a shock to see the water fall away into vertical nothingness. It takes a certain leap of faith to trust all your weight to a harness but I eventually learned that the key to canyoning is to lean right back, with your weight all on the rope 'brake', in order to get your legs 90 degrees from the rock face. This stops your legs slipping quite so much on the mossy, water-polished rock face.

The challenge of the first drop was to avoid slipping into the waterfall just to the side. The second involved a backwards jump of about 5m into a churning pool of uncertain depth. It took several 'one, two, THREE!'s from the guides and some considerable swearing on my part before I let myself fall backwards into the narrow rock pool.

The scariest thing about the third descent was that I couldn't see the bottom of the drop (and there's nothing worse than the thousand-foot gorge of my imagination). After about 10m of descent, the rock overhang meant I had to lower myself down into mid-air, dangling like bait on hook.

That freaked me out a bit but it wasn't until the last fall, as I stood astride Big Jumbo (the name of the waterfall, unfortunately...) that the fear really hit me like, well, a 50-tonne waterfall. This was a 45m drop and when you are leaning back over the slippery lip of a waterfall, that's a BIG drop! Even the instructors were looking a bit nervous... There was no way out, no way back up the last waterfall. The only option was to go down Big Jumbo (again, the waterfall).

As I lowered myself down the cliff the angle between the rope and the waterfall began to narrow until there was only one harrowing choice; straddle the waterfall or enter it. Apparently there was one other option – slip on some wet moss, swing into the full force of the water and scream like a girl. I chose the latter. Actually, there was no chance of screaming because the full crashing force of the icy water made it hard to breath. I tried to keep calm and lower myself down the chute but at one point I remember thinking 'Holy Crap! This is too much pressure, I'm going to fall – and I don't even know how far it is!'

After a serious pummelling, I felt a tug on the rope and swung out of the waterfall scrambling on the rock face like Buster Keaton in a wetsuit. I stood there shaking for a while, before lowering myself down the last 10m. 'Jesus!' I shouted at the main guide. 'That was frickin' GREAT! Now that I can recommend in a guide book!'

The things I do for you guys...

package with overnight accommodation and four meals and transport costs around US\$130.

Canyoning

This exciting sport is a wild combination of rappelling/abseiling, climbing, sliding and swimming that has been pioneered in the canyons and waterfalls near The Last Resort and Borderlands (see p233).

Both companies run two-day canyoning trips for about US\$100, or you can combine two days of canyoning with a two-day Bhote Kosi rafting trip for US\$190 to US\$200. On day one you drive up from Kathmandu, have lunch, get some basic abseiling training and then practise on nearby cascades. Day two involves a trip out to more exciting falls, with a maximum abseil of up to 45m. Most canyons involve a short hike to get there.

For details of accommodation at The Last Resort see p233.

The Last Resort uses Panglong canyon early in the season and to train novices. After December the action moves to higher and more exciting canyons such as Kanglang, Kahule and Bhukute (a 60m drop), once the water flow has subsided to safe levels. Canyoning is not possible during the monsoon.

Borderlands uses Old and New Jumbo canyons. Old Jumbo (also called Big Jumbo) is the more challenging of the two (only possible from late November) and involves a flying fox cable ride across the Bhote Kosi River and then a 30-minute walk up to the first of four waterfalls and a short water slide.

It's best to bring a pair of closed-toe shoes that can get wet as these are better than sandals. Hiking shoes, a water bottle and bathing suits are also required and a waterproof camera is a real bonus. After November, wetsuits are a must and are provided.

Paragliding

Pokhara is the place to head for if you want to hurl yourself off a cliff and glide in majestic silence above the Himalaya, either on a tandem paragliding flight or solo after a multiday course. November, December and January bring perfect flying conditions and stunning views of Phewa Tal and the Himalayan peaks that have inspired gliders to rank Sarangkot as one of the best paragliding spots in the world.

Sunrise Paragliding (www.nepal-paragliding.com; Pokhara ☎ 61-521174; UK ☎ 07879-424089) are the leading company. They offer short tandem flights (30 to 40 minutes, US\$75) in the morning and late afternoon, longer distance flights (60 to 90 minutes, US\$120) that take advantage of midday thermals and even multiday 'treks' that journey from valley to valley. For something a lot scarier try the 20-minute acrobatic tandem flights. If you want to learn to fly yourself, a 10-day paragliding course costs US\$1250. Most flights start with a short jeep ride up to Sarangkot.

In conjunction with Sunrise, **Himalayan Frontiers** (www.himalayanfrontiers.co.uk) has pioneered parahawking, an intriguing mix of paragliding and hawking that uses trained steppe eagles and pariah kites to lead gliders to the best thermals, enabling them to glider higher and further. You can experience this glorious blending of man and nature on a 30-minute tandem flight. Both companies run a seven-day parahawking course from November to February for US\$650. Glider and ultralight flights are also available. See p253 for details. Less brave souls can see the avian guides at their roost at Maya Devi Village on the northern shore of Phewa Tal (see p254).

Blue Sky Paragliding (☎ 61-534737; www.paragliding-nepal.com) is a new Nepali-Swiss operation. In Kathmandu you can contact them through the Hotel Northfield (p140).

Avia Club Nepal (☎ 61-540338; www.avianepal.21bc.net; Lakeside, Pokhara) operates microlight flights from Pokhara between October and May. The 15/30/60-minute flights cost US\$65/112/198.

Rock Climbing

If you need to polish up or learn some climbing skills before heading off into the mountains, try the **Pasang Lhamu Climbing Wall** (Mappp110-11; ☎ 4370742; www.pasanglhamu.org; ☎ 10am-5.30pm) on the outskirts of Kathmandu. A day's membership costs Rs 350 and equipment can be rented for Rs 100. Week-long climbing courses are available (Rs 4799). See p128 for details.

The **Shreeban Rock Climbing Nature Camp** (www.shreeban.com.np) in Dhading, on the road from Kathmandu to Pokhara, offers climbing on the roped rock wall behind its camp. See p237.

Check to see if Balloon Sunrise Nepal (www.balloon-sunrise-nepal.com.np) has resumed balloon flights (US\$195) over the Kathmandu Valley. The views of the Himalaya and valley were incredible and the rice field landings usually attracted a huge, excited and curious crowd of local villagers.

For details on elephant-back jungle safaris in Royal Chitwan National Park see p281, in Royal Bardia National Park see p308 and in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve see p317.

The Nepal Open Paragliding Championships are held every year over five days in January in Sarangkot and attract competitors from around the world.

The **Nepal Mountaineering Association** (Map p116; ☎ 4434525; www.nma.com.np; Naخال, Kathmandu) runs month-long climbing courses in Manang, on the Annapurna Circuit, every August/September. These are really aimed at Nepali guides but also accept foreigners for a fee of US\$1000. They also run occasional rock climbing courses in Nagarjun.

For mountaineering and climbing on Nepal's trekking peaks see later in this chapter.

Marathons

As if a normal marathon wasn't enough, two marathons are held in the Everest region at an altitude of over 5000m. Participants get to enjoy a two-week acclimatisation trek to base camp, before running all the way back to Namche Bazaar in around five hours.

The annual **Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon** (www.everestmarathon.com; registration fee US\$250) on May 29th commemorates the first ascent of Mt Everest on May 29th 1953 with the world's highest marathon (42km). The similar **Everest Marathon** (www.everestmarathon.org.uk) is run every other November (next in 2007), to raise money for charities working in Nepal.

The **Toyota Kathmandu Marathon** (www.kathmandumarathon.org) is organised every 18 months (next is Oct 2006) in the Kathmandu Valley by the Scheer Memorial Hospital at Banepa to raise funds for charitable medical care in Nepal. A half-marathon and 5km race are also run.

If those don't sound challenging enough, go for psychological testing and then consider the annual **Annapurna Mandala Trail**, a nine-day, 340km foot race around the Annapurna Circuit from Besisahar, over the 5400m Thorung La and down the Kali Gandaki valley to Dhampus.

The even crazier **Himal Race**, a 955km, 22-day run from Annapurna to Everest Base Camps, is on hold, due to a temporary bout of sanity.

The Nepal branch of **Hash House Harriers** (www.aponarch.com/hhhh) meets for a run every Saturday afternoon. Check the website for details.

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Strong wheels, knobbly tyres, a soft padded seat and 17 more gears than the average Nepali bike – the mountain bike is an ideal, go anywhere, versatile machine for exploring Nepal. These attributes make it possible to escape sealed roads, and to ride tracks and ancient walking trails to remote, rarely visited areas of the country. Importantly, they allow independent travel – you can stop whenever you like – and they liberate you from crowded buses and claustrophobic taxis.

Nepal's tremendously diverse terrain and its many tracks and trails are ideal for mountain biking. In recent years, Nepal has rapidly gained recognition for the biking adventures it offers – from easy village trails in the Kathmandu Valley to challenging mountain roads that climb thousands of metres to reach spectacular viewpoints, followed by unforgettable, exhilarating descents. For the adventurous there are large areas of the country still to be explored by mountain bike.

The Kathmandu Valley offers the best and most consistent biking in Nepal, with a vast network of tracks, trails and back roads. A mountain bike really allows you to get off the beaten track and discover idyllic Newari villages that have preserved their traditional lifestyle. Even today, it's possible to cycle into villages in the Kathmandu Valley that have rarely seen a visitor on a foreign bicycle. Each year more roads are developing, opening trails to destinations that were previously accessible only on foot.

Many trails are narrow, century-old walkways that are not shown on maps, so you need a good sense of direction when venturing out without

a guide. To go unguided entails some risks, and you should learn a few important words of Nepali to assist in seeking directions. It's also important to know the name of the next village you wish to reach.

Transporting Your Bicycle

If you plan to do a mountain biking trip of more than a day or two it may be a good idea to bring your own bicycle from home. Your bicycle can be carried as part of your baggage allowance on international flights. You are required to deflate the tyres, turn the handlebars parallel with the frame and remove the pedals. Passage through Nepali customs is quite simple once you reassure airport officers that it is 'your' bicycle and it will also be returning with you, though this requirement is never enforced.

On most domestic flights, if you pack your bicycle correctly, removing wheels and pedals, it is possible to load it in the cargo hold. Check with the airline first.

Local buses are useful if you wish to avoid some of the routes that carry heavy traffic. You can place your bicycle on the roof for an additional charge (Rs 50 to Rs 100 depending on the length of the journey and the bus company). If you're lucky, rope may be available and the luggage boy will assist you. Make sure the bicycle is held securely to cope with the rough roads and that it's lying as flat as possible to prevent it catching low wires or tree branches. Unless you travel with foam padding it is hard to avoid the scratches to the frame. Supervise its loading and protect the rear derailleur from being damaged. Keep in mind that more baggage is likely to be loaded on top once you're inside. A lock and chain is also a wise investment.

Equipment

Most of the bicycles you can hire in Nepal are low-quality Indian so-called mountain bikes, not suitable for the rigours of trail riding. The better operators like Himalayan Mountain Bikes or Dawn Till Dusk rent high quality front shock, 18-gear mountain bikes for around Rs 700 per day, or Rs 500 per day for a week's hire. Cheaper companies offer battered front suspension bikes for Rs 450, with discounts for a week's hire. Nepal Mountain Bike Tours rents front suspension bikes for Rs 300 to 700 per day. The better rental shops can supply helmets and other equipment.

If you bring your own bicycle it is essential to bring tools and spare parts, as these are largely unavailable outside of Kathmandu. Established mountain bike tour operators have mechanics, workshops and a full range of bicycle tools at their offices in Kathmandu. Dawn Till Dusk also has a separate repair workshop near Kilroy's restaurant in Thamel – see map p136.

Although this is not a complete list, a few items that may be worth considering bringing with you include:

- bicycle bell
- cycling gloves, tops and padded shorts (or even your own seat)
- energy bars and electrolyte water additives
- fleece top for evenings and windbreaker
- helmet
- lightweight clothing (eg Coolmax or other wicking materials)
- medium-sized money bag for valuables
- minipump
- spare parts (including inner tubes)
- stiff-soled shoes that suit riding and walking
- sun protection and sunglasses
- water bottles or hydration system (eg CamelBak)
- face mask and gloves

Nepa Maps and Himalayan Maphouse (www.himalayan-maphouse.com) produce a fairly useful map to paragliding the Annapurna region.

Borderlands (p233) offer a day's tuition on fixed rope climbing at Nagarjun, just outside Kathmandu. The day costs US\$35 per person and includes equipment, transport and tuition.

The Yak Attack is a planned nine-day, 300km mountain bike and foot race around the Annapurna Circuit, including over the 5416m Thorung La. It's due to kick off in March 2007 and the organisers hope to make it an annual event. The 13-day trip costs £1095; see www.e-w-c.co.uk for details.

The most detailed Kathmandu Valley map is commonly referred to as the 'German map' (also Schneider and Nelles Verlag), and is widely available in Kathmandu. The maps by Karto Atelier are also excellent.

Nepa Maps and Himalayan Maphouse (www.himalayan-maphouse.com) produce useful maps to *Mountain Biking the Kathmandu Valley and Biking around Annapurna*, though they aren't to be relied on completely.

Road Conditions

Traffic generally travels on the left-hand side, though it's not uncommon to find a vehicle approaching you head-on or even on the wrong side of the road. In practice, smaller vehicles give way to larger ones, and bicycles are definitely at the bottom of the hierarchy. Nepali roads carry a vast array of vehicles: buses, motorcycles, cars, trucks, tractors, holy cows, wheelbarrows, dogs, wandering children and chickens, all moving at different speeds and in different directions.

The centre of Kathmandu is a particularly unpleasant place to ride because of pollution, heavy traffic and the increasingly reckless behaviour of young motorcyclists.

Extreme care should be taken near villages as young children play on the trails and roads. The onus seems to fall on the approaching vehicle to avoid an incident. A good bicycle helmet is a sensible accessory, and you should ride with your fingers continually poised on the rear brake lever.

A few intrepid mountain bikers have taken bicycles into trekking areas hoping to find great riding but these areas are generally not suitable for mountain biking and you have to carry your bicycle for at least 80% of the time. Trails are unreliable, and are subject to frequent rock falls. In addition, there are always trekkers, porters and local people clogging up the trails. Sagarmatha National Park doesn't allow mountain bikes. Courtesy and care on the trails should be a high priority when biking.

Trail Etiquette

Arriving in a new country for a short time where social and cultural values are vastly different from those of your home country does not allow much time to gain an appreciation of these matters. So consider a few pointers to help you develop respect and understanding. For more information, see p62.

CLOTHING

Tight-fitting Lycra bicycle clothing might be functional, but is a shock to locals, who maintain a very modest approach to dressing. Such clothing is embarrassing and also offensive to Nepalis.

A simple way to overcome this is by wearing a pair of comfortable shorts and a T-shirt over your bicycle gear. This is especially applicable to female bicyclists, as women in Nepal generally dress conservatively.

SAFETY

Trails are often filled with locals going about their daily work. A small bell attached to your handlebars and used as a warning of your approach, reducing your speed, and a friendly call or two of *'cycle ioh!'* (cycle coming!) goes a long way in keeping everyone on the trails happy and safe. Children love the novelty of the bicycles, the fancy helmets, the colours and the strange clothing, and will come running from all directions to greet you. They also love to grab hold of the back of your bicycle and run with you. You need to maintain a watchful eye so no-one gets hurt.

Guided Tours

A small number of Nepali companies offer guided mountain-bike trips. They provide high-quality bicycles, local and Western guides, helmets and all the necessary equipment. There is usually a minimum of four bicyclists per trip, although for shorter tours two is often sufficient. For the shorter tours (two to three days) vehicle support is not required, while for longer tours vehicles are provided at an extra cost.

Tours range from US\$25 to US\$35 for a simple day trip, such as the loop routes north from Kathmandu to Tinpile, Tokha and Budhanilkantha; or south to the traditional village of Bungamati.

A downhill day trip with vehicle support costs around US\$55 per person. Options include driving to Nagarkot and riding down to Sankhu and Bodhnath or Bhaktapur, or driving to Kakani and taking the Scar Rd down. Dawn Till Dusk offers exhilarating downhill runs from the top of Phulchowki and Nagarjun peaks.

Multiday trips around the Kathmandu Valley cost around US\$45 per day without vehicle backup, or US\$65 with vehicle support and range from two to 10 days. Prices include bike hire, a guide, hotel accommodation and meals. The following three-day routes rank among the most popular offerings:

- Budhanilkantha–Chisopani–Nagarkot and back
- Kathmandu to Chitwan via Daman and Hetauda; via the backroads west of Dakshinkali
- Bhaktapur–Dhulikhel–Namobuddha–Panauti
- Nagarkot–Dhulikhel–Panauti–Lakuri Bhanjyang–Sisneri

TOUR COMPANIES

The following companies have good-quality imported mountain bikes that can also be hired independently of a tour. Any others fall a long way back in standards and safety.

Bike Nepal (Map p136; ☎ 01-4240633; www.bikenepal.com, Thamel, Kathmandu) Day trips US\$25. Located next to Pumpnickel Bakery.

Dawn Till Dusk (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700286, 4215046; www.nepalbiking.com; JP School Rd, Thamel, Kathmandu) Contact Chhimi Gurung. Local tours, rentals and servicing at the Kathmandu Guest House office; longer tours and sales a five minute walk to the south in Thamel. Day trips US\$35, multiday trips around US\$45/65 without/with transport backup.

Himalayan Mountain Bikes (HMB; www.bikingnepal.com, www.bikeasia.info) Kathmandu (Map p136; ☎ 01-4212860; hmb@bikeasia.info); Pokhara (Map p248; ☎ 061-523240; Central Lakeside) Kathmandu Valley tours US\$50 per day with accommodation but no transport. Full service & repairs, bike hire RS 700 per day.

Massif Mountain Bikes (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700468; www.massifmountainbike.com, www.mtbnepal.com; Thamel, Kathmandu) Bike hire Rs 600 per day, guide US\$15 per day, day tour US\$30. Acts as the Nepal representative of Unique Trails (www.uniquetrails.com). Located across from La Dolce Vita Restaurant.

Nepal Mountain Bike Tours (Map p136; ☎ 01-4701701; www.bikehimalayas.com) One-man-show run by Suresh Kumar Dulal. Day trips from US\$25, bike rentals Rs 300 to Rs 700. Next to Green Hill Tours.

Routes

THE SCAR ROAD FROM KATHMANDU

Distance 70km

Duration Six hours

Start/Finish Kathmandu

Brief description Fine views & a fun descent through a national park, after a tough initial climb of around 700m

Leaving Kathmandu (elevation 1337m), head towards Balaju, on the Ring Rd 2km north of Thamel, and follow the sealed Trisuli Bazaar road towards Kakani, 23km away at an altitude of 2073m. You start to climb out of the valley as the road twists and turns past the **Nagarjun Forest Reserve** (see p182), which provides the road with a leafy canopy. Once you're through the initial pass and out of the valley, the road continues

The Trans Himalayan Mountain Bike Race is a 1000km annual race from Lhasa to Kathmandu – contact Himalayan Marathons (www.himalayanmarathons.com) for details.

For more ideas on biking routes around the Kathmandu Valley see p161.

The Scar Rd is considered one of the Kathmandu Valley's classic mountain-bike adventures, offering a challenging ride for all levels of experience.

When it comes to caring for the environment, the guidelines that apply to trekkers also apply to mountain bikers. For more detailed information, see p330.

northwest and offers a view of endless terraced fields to your left. On reaching the summit of the ridge, take a turn right (at a clearly marked T-junction), instead of continuing down to Trisuli Bazaar. (If you go too far you reach a checkpoint just 100m beyond.) At this point magnificent views of the Ganesh Himal (*himal* means a range with permanent snow) provide the inspiration required to complete the remaining 4km of steep and deteriorating blacktop to the crown of the hill at **Kakani** (see p234), for a well-deserved rest.

After admiring the view from a road-side teashop, descend for just 30m beyond the gate and take the first left on to a 4WD track. This track will take you through the popular picnic grounds frequented on Saturday by Kathmandu locals. Continue through in an easterly direction towards Shivapuri. The track narrows after a few kilometres near a metal gate on your left. Through the gate, you are faced with some rough stone steps and then a 10-minute push/carry up and over the hilltop to an army checkpoint. Here it's necessary for foreigners to pay an entry fee of Rs 250 to the Shivapuri National Park. Exit the army camp, turning right where the Scar Rd is clearly visible in front of you. You are now positioned at the day's highest point – approximately 2200m.

Taking the right-hand track you start to descend dramatically along an extremely steep, rutted single trail with several water crossings. The trail is literally cut into the side of the hill, with sharp drops on the right that challenge a rider's skill and nerve. As you hurtle along, take time to admire the view of the sprawling Kathmandu Valley below – it's one of the best.

The trail widens, after one long gnarly climb before the saddle, then it's relatively flat through the protected Shivapuri watershed area. This beautiful mountain biking section lasts for nearly 25km before the trail descends into the valley down a 7km spiral on a gravel road. This joins a sealed road, to the relief of jarred wrists, at **Budhanilkantha** (see p182), where you can buy refreshments. Take a moment to see the Sleeping Vishnu just up on your left at the main intersection. From here the sealed road descends gently for the remaining 15km back into the bustle of Kathmandu.

KATHMANDU TO DHULIKHEL

Distance 90km

Duration Two days

Start/Finish Kathmandu

Brief description A circular route past a classic selection of the valley's cultural sights

From Thamel, head east out of town in the direction of **Pashupatinath** (see p166). Proceed along the northern fringe of the Pashupatinath complex, on the south side of the Bagmati River, and look for the road running off to the right near the northern end of the airport runway. From the northeast corner join the road running north-south and then the road running east to the town of Bhaktapur. This road runs parallel to the much busier Arniko Hwy and is a much better option to Bhaktapur, via the northern tip of Thimi.

You can also access this road from the Arniko Hwy; take a left off the main hwy, just pass the bridge over the Manohara River, onto a narrower sealed road that heads back towards the airport on its east side. At the next main intersection (1.8km on) is the turn right to **Bhaktapur** (see p196), 16km away.

You could spend time in this wonderfully preserved former kingdom, but if you intend to cycle straight through, you'll save yourself Rs 750 entry fee

by taking the roads around the town, to the north and east. Make your way to the town's eastern gate, join a tarmac road and then bear southeast.

The asphalt ends and the road continues in the form of a compacted track towards the rural village of Nala, 9km away through a beautiful corner of the valley. The track climbs gradually to a minor pass and army checkpoint. A gentle 2km downhill gradient brings you past the Buddhist Karunamaya Temple (dedicated to Machhendranath) to rural **Nala**, with its pretty four-roofed Bhagwati Temple in the central square.

From Nala head right and continue for 3km to **Banepa** (see p227), riding through the old town before hitting the main Arniko Hwy. Turn left at the highway and continue along the sealed main road for a further 4km uphill to **Dhulikhel** (see p227). This completes the first day (32km).

Dhulikhel to Namobuddha & Kathmandu

The trail to **Namobuddha** is a popular detour from Dhulikhel, and offers superb trail riding with spectacular views of the Himalaya. See p230 for a description of the route.

From Panauti you join a sealed road that's a flat run along the valley to the main road at Banepa. From this point you can return to Kathmandu, 26km via the Arniko Hwy, or ride the 3.5km back to Dhulikhel. The loop from Dhulikhel via Namobuddha is 37km; if you return to Kathmandu it's a total run of 58km via Namobuddha. Alternatively, take the adventurous alternative route back to Kathmandu via Lakuri Bhanjyang (see below).

THE BACK DOOR TO KATHMANDU

Distance 30km

Duration Half day

Start Panauti

Finish Patan/Kathmandu

Brief description Remote mountain route with almost zero traffic

Don't let the heavenly first 4.5km of tarmac lull you into a false sense of security. The road soon deteriorates into 3km of dirt road to the village of Kushadevi, followed by 2.5km of bone-jarring stony track to Riyale. From here the valley really starts to close in and gets increasingly remote – this is definitely not the place to blow a tyre! It's amazing how remote the route is, considering it is so close to Kathmandu.

The next 8.5km is on smooth dirt road that switchbacks up the hillsides to the pass of **Lakuri Bhanjyang** (1960m). You may find some basic food stalls but the actual summit is currently occupied by the army. In the past, travel companies have set up tented camp accommodation near here but this depends on tourism numbers and the levels of army presence. Figure on two to three hours to here.

From here on it's all downhill. The first section drops down the back side of the hill, blocking the views, but you soon get great views of the Annapurna and Ganesh Himal massifs – particularly spectacular in sunset's pink glow.

A further 5km of descent, rough at times, brings you to the turnoff left to Sisneri and the first village on this side of the pass. Soon the asphalt kicks in again, shortly followed by the pleasant village of **Lubhu**, with its impressive central three-tiered Mahalakshmi Mahadev Temple. Traffic levels pick up for the final 5km to the Kathmandu ring road near Patan; be prepared for the 'civilisation' to come as a bit of a shock after such a beautiful, peaceful ride.

This circular tour (see map p160) takes you along valley backroads to Dhulikhel on the first day (32km), and then to Namobuddha and back to Kathmandu via the busy Arniko Hwy (58km), or better the remote dirt road through the southern foothills (see 'The Back Door to Kathmandu' route).

This backroads track offers a great alternative return route to Kathmandu, bypassing the busy, dangerous and polluted main Arniko Hwy. It's a surprisingly remote route (see map p160), so make sure you take enough water, food and spare parts as there's nothing en route.

DHULIKHEL TO THE TIBETAN BORDER**Distance** 83km one way**Duration** Four days return**Start** Dhulikhel**Finish** Kodari**Brief description** A long descent followed by a gradual climb alongside the white water of the Bhote Kosi to the border with Tibet**Dhulikhel to Lamosangu (49km)**

From Dhulikhel you immediately begin an adrenaline-filled descent (almost 900m) into the Panchkhal Valley, on a slick sealed road, with majestic views of the Himalaya adding to a thrilling ride. A couple of short climbs interrupt the descent as you cycle to Dolalghat, on the Indrawati River, a popular starting point for Sun Kosi rafting trips (see p98 for more information). On the downhill watch for overtaking buses on the blind corners.

From Dolalghat (around 53km from Kathmandu) you cross the bridge over the Indrawati River and climb out of the Panchkhal Valley to join the Bhote Kosi, which you follow for the rest of the journey. Owing to landslide damage there is a mixture of surfaced and unsurfaced roads. Traffic can be quite heavy along this section. The road climbs at a gentle gradient as it follows the river.

A couple of kilometres past the turn-off to Jiri is Lamosangu, 27km from Dolalghat, where there are a couple of fish restaurants.

Lamosangu to Tatopani & Kodari (34km)

The next section of the ride continues for around 7km to Barabise, where the road changes into a compacted dirt track with a top layer of dust that is transformed into choking clouds when buses pass; in wet weather it all turns to mud. Care should be taken during heavy rains as this section of the road is particularly susceptible to landslides. The valley's sides begin to get steeper and it gradually changes into a beautiful gorge with spectacular waterfalls.

The track climbs practically the entire 23km to Tatopani and a further 4km to Kodari (p233), at the edge of the Friendship Bridge and the border with Tibet. The section of the ride that climbs from Tatopani to the Friendship Bridge is probably the most beautiful.

It should be possible to return as far as Borderlands the same day, taking advantage of a mainly downhill ride. Otherwise, you can stay in Tatopani and visit the hot springs there (see p233).

Tatopani to Dhulikhel

The ride back to Dhulikhel is around 80km and includes the long climb out of Dolalghat, for which you should allow plenty of time. An option here is to jump on a local bus with your bicycle. Depending on how you feel after the climb, you can stay in Dhulikhel or complete the trip by returning the 32km to Kathmandu.

THE RAJPATH FROM KATHMANDU**Distance** 150km**Duration** Two days**Start** Kathmandu**Finish** Hetauda**Brief description** Classic but gruelling on-road ride over a 2488m pass, culminating with incomparable Himalayan views at Daman. For a regional overview see the map pp312–13.

From Dhulikhel, it is possible to continue 83km along the Arnika Hwy to the Friendship Bridge that marks the Tibetan border at Kodari (1500m). This is a three- or (more likely) four-day return trip from Dhulikhel. Add it on to the previous itinerary for a great four- or five-day run from Kathmandu. See map p160 for details.

Accommodation options are at Barabise, Borderlands resort (a further 16km from Lamosangu, on a dirt road), and The Last Resort (4km further). See p232 for more on accommodation options in this area.

It may be possible (but dependent on border guards) for border junkies to cycle beyond the bridge and climb a rough, winding and steep track to the Chinese customs checkpoint (8km), just outside of Zhangmu (Nepali: Khasa), which is visible from the bridge.

The ride begins on the Kathmandu–Pokhara (Prithvi) Hwy, which gives the only access to the valley. After leaving the valley, the highway descends to Naubise, at the bottom of the Mahesh Khola Valley, 27km from Kathmandu, where the Rajpath intersects with the Prithvi Hwy. Take the Rajpath, which forks to the left and is well signposted for Hetauda. Start a 35km climb to Tistung (2030m) past terraced fields, carved into steep hillsides. On reaching the pass at Tistung you descend for 7km into the beautiful Palung Valley before the final steep 9km climb to Daman, at a height of 2322m.

This day's ride (almost all climbing) takes between six and nine hours in the saddle. Thus, with an early start it is possible to stay in **Daman**, which will give you the thrill of waking up to the broadest Himalayan panorama Nepal has to offer (see p305). The following day the road climbs a further 3km to the top of the pass, at 2488m. At this point, you can savour the very real prospect of an exhilarating 2300m descent in 60km!

As you descend towards the Indian plains, laid out before you to the south, notice the contrast with the side you climbed, as the south side is lush and semitropical. With innumerable switchbacks and a bit of speed you should watch out for the occasional bus and truck looming around blind corners. The road eventually flattens out after the right turn to cross a newly constructed bridge and the first main river crossing. The rest of the journey is a gently undulating route alongside a river; a further 10km brings you to **Hetauda**. (See p304 for details on accommodation and the useful cyclists' notebooks in the Motel Avocado.) After a night's rest, you can continue along the Rajpath towards India or turn right at the statue of the king in the centre of town and head towards Royal Chitwan National Park.

HETAUDA TO NARAYANGARH & MUGLING**Distance** 91km to Narayangarh, 105km via Sauraha**Duration** One to 1½ days**Start** Hetauda**Finish** Narayangarh or Mugling**Brief description** Tropical ride across the Terai plains, best during winter and combined with a visit to Chitwan.

This is vastly different riding from that of the other rides described in this chapter, and in the summer months (May to September) it can be a very hot and humid ride. From Hetauda, as you cycle along the flat, smooth road towards Narayangarh enjoying the lush subtropical scenery, watch for resort signposts on your left. Machan Wildlife Resort's (p285) turn-off is 40km from Hetauda, and the resort is reached after a further 4km of beautiful trail riding with three river crossings. Alternatively, a further 23km from the Machan turn-off brings you to the Chitwan Jungle Lodge (p285) turn-off. A further 14km brings you to Tadi Bazaar and the turn-off for Sauraha, reached by an interesting 6km-long 4WD track.

From Narayangarh (p273), on the banks of the Narayani River 20km from Sauraha, you can return to either Kathmandu or Pokhara via Mugling. Although some may say this section from Narayangarh to Mugling is best avoided on a bicycle because of heavy bus and truck traffic, it is nonetheless a very beautiful section of road to ride, and traffic during many times of the day can be light. The alternative is to catch a bus. If you're heading to Pokhara (96km) it may be a good idea to miss the busy highway between Mugling and Pokhara by catching a bus in Mugling (see p239). Here, the road is much improved and vehicles travel a lot faster in what are still quite dusty conditions.

The switchbacking Tribhuvan Hwy (or Rajpath as it is popularly known) was the first highway to connect Kathmandu with the rest of the world. Most traffic from the Terai and India uses the highway that runs to the west between Narayangarh (Narayanghat) and Mugling, which, although longer, is actually quicker, so traffic along the Rajpath is relatively light.

Hetauda is just to the east of Royal Chitwan National Park, which has a wide selection of accommodation, both in the park and in the town of Sauraha – see p283. You are prohibited from riding inside the park, but are allowed to ride directly to your resort.

For a map of the area around Royal Chitwan National Park see pp276–7.

KATHMANDU TO POKHARA VIA THE PRITHVI HIGHWAY**Distance** 216km**Duration** Two days**Start** Kathmandu**Finish** Pokhara**Brief description** Riverside views, changing scenery and plenty of traffic separates Nepal's two tourist magnets.

A surprisingly large number of bicyclists show an interest in this ride, perhaps due to the riverside views, and the attractions at either end. You are almost guaranteed to see the remains of a truck or bus crash en route. The message is obvious – take care on this notorious stretch of road.

It's theoretically possible to make Pokhara in 12 to 14 hours of steady biking, but it's a much better idea to break the trip at the wonderful but little-visited sights of Bandipur and Gorkha, both of which are a short detour off the road and offer decent accommodation. For details of the sights along this road see the Kathmandu to Pokhara chapter, p236.

After leaving the valley on the Prithvi Hwy at Thankot, the highway descends to Naubise, at the bottom of the Mahesh Khola Valley, 27km from Kathmandu, where the Rajpath intersects with the Prithvi Hwy.

Following the thrilling, if not hair-raising, descent (watching for oil slicks after on-the-spot truck repairs), Mugling is about the halfway mark at 120km, four to five hours' ride from Kathmandu. There are also lots of simple food stops along the way at some very scenic spots.

From Mugling you keep to the right as you exit the town and within 300m you will cross the Trisuli River bridge. The second half of your journey to Pokhara is mostly uphill, but still offers some excellent downhill. From Mugling there's overall altitude gain of about 550m over 96km. Again there are numerous roadside cafés and food stops to keep the carbohydrates supplied. The final approach to Pokhara, with the Annapurnas as a backdrop, will pick you up after a long day of biking.

At Mugling you'll find plenty of food and accommodation (see p239), or break the trip at the idyllic River Side Springs Resort (p238), just before Mugling, at Kurintar.

POKHARA TO SARANGKOT & NAUDANDA**Distance** 54km**Duration** Seven hours, or an overnight trip**Start/Finish** Pokhara**Brief description** Work up a sweat to two of Pokhara's best Himalayan viewpoints, followed by a great downhill coast.

Leave early and ride along Lakeside (towards the mountains) to the last main intersection and sealed road. Turn right; this is the road that returns to central Pokhara. After 2km you turn left and continue straight on (north). This intersection is the zero km road marker. After a further 2km there is a smaller sealed road to the left, signposted as the road to Sarangkot.

This winds its way along a ridge into Sarangkot, providing outstanding views of the Himalaya, which seems close enough to reach out and touch. After 6km a few tea shops mark a welcome refreshment stop just where the stone steps mark the walking trail to the summit. From here it's a 4WD track that closely hugs the edge of the mountain overlooking Phewa Tal. Continue until you join a Y-intersection that doubles back sharply to the right and marks the final climb to Sarangkot Point. You can turn this ride into a relaxed overnight trip by staying in lodges here (see p266).

From Sarangkot continue straight ahead, riding the narrower motorcycle trails leading to Kaski and Naudanda. After the Sarangkot turn-off the trail soon begins to climb to Kaski, towards the hill immediately in front of you. The section to Kaski takes around 30 to 60 minutes, and you may need to push your bicycle on the steeper section near the crown of the hill. Over the top you follow the trail through to Naudanda. You are now at around 1590m, having gained around 840m altitude from

The ride to Sarangkot, visible directly north from Pokhara Lakeside, provides an excellent, challenging day trip. This is in fact the bicycle leg of the Annapurna Triathlon. For a map of the area see map p266.

Pokhara. The trail is rocky in parts and will test your equipment to the extreme, so do not consider riding this trail on a cheap hire bicycle.

From Naudanda it's a 32km downhill run to Pokhara along the smooth asphalt highway. This route starts with a twisting 6km descent into the Mardi Khola Valley then descends gently as it follows the river, allowing an enjoyable coast almost all the way back to Pokhara.

RAFTING & KAYAKING

Nepal has a reputation for being one of the best places in the world for rafting and kayaking, with outstanding river journeys ranging from steep, adrenaline-charged mountain streams to classic big-volume wilderness expeditions. Warm water, a subtropical climate (with no bugs!) and huge white sandy beaches that are ideal for camping just add to the appeal.

There has also been a continuous increase in the number of kayakers coming to Nepal and it is justifiably recognised as a mecca for paddlers. Several companies offer trips that cater specifically to kayakers, where you get to explore the river with rafts carrying all your gear and food, and often camp near choice play spots.

When to Go

The best times for rafting are September to early December, and March to early June. From early September to early October, and May to June, the rivers can be extremely high with monsoon runoff. Any expeditions attempted at this time require a very experienced rafting company with an intimate knowledge of the river and strong teams, as times of high flows are potentially the most dangerous times to be on a river.

From mid-October onwards is one of the most popular times to raft, with warm settled weather and exciting runs. In December many of the rivers become too cold to enjoy unless you have a wetsuit, and the days are short with the start of winter – the time to consider shorter trips. The summer season from March to early June has long hot days and lower water flows to begin with, which generally means the rapids are a grade lower than they are from September to November. The rivers rise again in May with the premonsoon storms and some snowmelt.

From June to August, the monsoon rains arrive. The rivers carry 10 times their low-water flows, and can flood with 60 to 80 times the low-water levels,

The view from the ridge at Naudanda is spectacularly beautiful. Dhaulagiri, Manaslu, the Annapurnas and Machhapuchhare create a classic Himalayan panorama, especially on a cool, clear morning. To the south you can look down over Pokhara and Phewa Tal.

The website www.raftnepal.org offers an excellent overview of rafting options across Nepal, as well as advice about other extreme sports.

THE FUTURE OF RIVER-RUNNING IN NEPAL

In the past 15 years, a number of rivers have stopped flowing freely because of construction of hydroelectric projects. Nepal sees hydro development as a means of stimulating economic growth. If this is done responsibly, with consensus among the river-running community and other concerned parties, then there will still be many world-class river runs but this is currently not happening. A new river project on the Marsyangdi – to take water out at Philesangu and drop it back in at Bhote Odar – has made the Marsyangdi a series of shorter sections. There are projects planned for the Karnali, Arun and Bhote Kosi Rivers.

The Nepal River Conservation Trust (NRCT) was formed by a group of concerned river guides in 1995 to raise awareness of the plight of Nepal's rivers, to lobby governments and to promote responsible use of rivers. The NRCT trains river guides in best environmental practice and organises river restoration projects. The NRCT organises the Bagmati River Festival from June to August (main events mid-August), which involves clean-up and environmental awareness campaigns, and rafting trips on the Bagmati from Sundarjal to Sankhamul. It also organises the Seti River festival in Pokhara (last week of September) and an annual Bhote Kosi festival in February. Contact the NRCT (☎ 01-4361995; www.nepalrivers.org.np; PO Box 12346 Kathmandu) for more information.

Anyone who is seriously interested in rafting and kayaking should get hold of *White Water Nepal* by Peter Knowles, with David Allardice as the consultant on rafting. It has very detailed information on river trips, with 60 maps, river profiles and hydrographs, plus advice on equipment and health. It's possible to get copies of the book in Kathmandu, or check out www.riverspublishing.co.uk.

Nepa Maps and Himalayan Maphouse (www.himalayan-maphouse.com) produce fairly useful rafting maps to the Bhote Kosi, Sun Kosi and Trisuli.

The annual Himalayan Whitewater Challenge, or rodeo, is a kayaking competition that runs for three days in November on the Bhote Kosi.

making most rivers insanely difficult. Only parts of the Seti and Trisuli are commercially run during the monsoon. River levels can fluctuate dramatically at any time, although as a general rule weather patterns in Nepal are quite stable.

What to Bring

If you go on an organised rafting trip all specialised equipment is supplied, as well as tents. Roll-top dry bags keep your gear dry even if the raft flips.

Usually you will only need light clothing, with a warmer change for nights. A swimsuit, a sunhat, sunscreen and light tennis shoes or sandals (that will stay on your feet) are all necessary, but can be bought in Kathmandu. Overnight trips require a sleeping bag, but these can easily be hired. In winter you will need thermal clothing.

Organised Trips

There are dozens of companies in Kathmandu claiming to be rafting and kayaking operators. A few are well-established companies with good reputations, and the rest are newer companies, often formed by guides breaking away and starting their own operations, and sometimes people with very little experience of rivers. Although these new companies can be enthusiastic and good, they can also be shoestring operations that may not have adequate equipment and staff. Most of the small travel agencies simply sell trips on commission; often they have no real idea about the details of what they are selling and are only interested in getting bums on seats.

If a group has recently returned from a trip, speak to its members. This will give you reliable information about the quality of equipment, the guides, the food and the transportation. Question the company about things such as how groups get to and from the river, the number of hours spent paddling or rowing, where the camps are set up, food provided (rafting promotes a very healthy appetite), who does the cooking and work around the camp, the cooking fuel used (wood isn't convenient or responsible), what happens to rubbish, hygiene precautions, and night-time activities. Many companies have a photo file or video in their office, which can give you an impression of the equipment, safety and how trips are operated.

Check how many people have booked and paid for a trip, as well as the maximum number that will be taken.

The quality of the rafting equipment is another variable, and can make a huge difference to the comfort and safety of participants. Modern self-bailing rafts, good life jackets and helmets are essential. Check how old the equipment is (modern plastic and alloy paddles are preferable to locally made wooden ones, for example) and ask what first-aid gear, supplies, spare parts and repair equipment are carried.

If your time is limited you may choose to book a trip before you leave home, though all Kathmandu operators accept walk-in bookings. Shorter trips depart every few days but the recent downturn in tourism has led to a drop in the number of longer rafting trips, especially at the beginning and end of the season, so it's worth contacting a company in advance to see when they are planning a trip. The best companies will refer you to a friendly competitor if they don't have any suitable dates.

Rafting trips vary from quite luxurious trips where you are rowed down the river and staff do everything for you (pitch camp, cook and so on), to trips where you participate in the running of the expedition including pitching tents, loading the rafts and helping with the cooking.

Generally you'll be rafting for around five to six hours a day, you can expect to be running rapids about 30% of the time depending on the river. The first and last day will most likely be half days. Longer trips of a week or more will have one rest day when you can recover or explore the surroundings.

Trips range in price from US\$30 to US\$60 a day, and generally you get what you pay for. It is better to pay a bit more and have a good, safe trip than to save US\$100 and have a lousy, dangerous trip. Bear in mind that trips in Nepal are generally less than half the cost of similar trips in the USA, so in relative terms all the prices are extremely reasonable. If you plan to do a more difficult trip it's particularly important to choose a company that has the experience, skills and equipment to run a safe and exciting expedition. As one rafting company says, 'saving you a little can cost you a lot'.

With the constant change in rafting companies it's difficult to make individual recommendations; the fact that a company is not recommended here does not necessarily mean it will not deliver an excellent trip. Nonetheless, the following companies have been recommended for their professionalism.

Drift Nepal (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700797; driftnepal@wlink.com.np) Contact Samir Thapa.

Equator Expeditions (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700782; www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com, www.nepalgate.com; Thamel, Kathmandu) This company specialises in long participatory rafting and kayaking trips as well as kayak instruction.

Himalayan Encounters Kathmandu (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700426; raftnepal@himenco.wlink.com.np; Thamel, Kathmandu); Pokhara (Map p257; ☎ 061-520873) This company is associated with Encounter Overland, and has earned a solid reputation through many Trisuli and Sun Kosi trips. Their Trisuli trips stay at their lodge, the Old Inn in Bandipur (see p244).

Mountain River Rafting (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700770; www.raftnepal.com; Thamel, Kathmandu) 1st fl next to Nargila Restaurant and across from the Northfield Café.

Ultimate Descents Nepal (www.udnepal.com) Kathmandu (Map p136; ☎ 01-4701295); Pokhara (Map p257; ☎ 061-523240) Near Northfield Café. Specialises in long participatory rafting trips as well as kayak instruction and clinics on the Seti River.

Ultimate Rivers (Map p136; ☎ /fax 01-4700526; info@urnepal.wlink.com.np; www.ultimateasia.info; Thamel, Kathmandu) Ultimate Rivers is associated with the New Zealand company Ultimate Descents International (www.ultimatedescents.com) and specialises in participatory rafting and kayak instruction.

Safety

Safety is the most important part of any river trip. Safety is a combination of the right technical skills, teamwork, planning and local knowledge. Unfortunately, there are no minimum safety conditions enforced by any official body in Nepal. This makes it very important to choose a professional rafting and kayaking company.

RIVER GRADING SYSTEM

Rivers are graded for difficulty on an international scale from class I to VI, with class I defined as easy-moving water with few obstacles, and class VI as nearly impossible to negotiate and a hazard to life. Anyone who is in reasonable physical shape and isn't afraid of water can safely go on rivers graded class I to III. For more difficult and exciting class IV rivers, you should be active, confident in water, and have rafting experience. Class V is a very large step up from class IV; expect long continuous sections of powerful white water, strenuous paddling, steep constricted channels, powerful waves and the possibility of overturning a raft. Swimming in a class V rapid poses a significant risk.

www.raftingassociation.org.np is the website of the Nepal Association of Rafting Agents and has information on the annual Himalayan Whitewater Challenge, contact details of rafting companies and overviews of river routes.

Waterproof camera containers allow you to take photos all the way down the river – ask your company if they have any for rent or, better, bring your own.

Ganesh Kayak Shop in Pokhara is the only place to hire kayaks by the day – see p253.

RAFT NUMBERS

There should be a minimum of two rafts per trip. If anyone falls out of a raft the second raft can help with the rescue. In higher water, three rafts are safer than two. Many experts agree that one or two safety kayakers can replace the second raft, though the kayakers need to be white-water professionals with the training, skill and experience not only to run the most difficult rapids on the river, but also to be able to perform rescues in these rapids. Good safety kayakers are invaluable on steeper rivers where they can often get to swimmers in places no other craft could manage.

RAFT GUIDES

The most important aspects of rafting safety are both the skills and judgment of the raft guides and the teamwork of the group on the trip. If possible, speak with the guide who will lead the trip to get an impression of the people you will be spending time with and the type of trip they run. Ask them about their previous experience. Overseas experience or training allows the guides to keep up with the latest advances and safety training. Kayaking experience adds additional depth to a guide's skills.

All guides should have a current first-aid certificate and be trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Reputable companies with reliable guides will seek international accreditation such as the Swiftwater Rescue Technician (SRT) qualification.

ON THE RIVER

Your guide should give you a comprehensive safety talk and paddle training before you launch off downstream. If you don't get this it is probably cause for concern.

- Listen to what your guide is telling you. Always wear your life jacket in rapids. Wear your helmet whenever your guide tells you, and make sure that both the helmet and jacket are properly adjusted and fitted.
- Keep your feet and arms inside the raft. If the raft hits a rock or wall and you are in the way, the best you'll escape with is a laceration.
- If you do swim in a rapid, get into the 'white-water swimming position'. You should be on your back, with your feet downstream and up where you can see them. Hold on to your paddle as this will make you more visible. Relax and breathe when you aren't going through waves. Then turn over and swim at the end of the rapid when the water becomes calmer. Self rescue is the best rescue.

Kayaking

The opportunities for kayak expeditions are exceptional. Apart from the rivers discussed later in this chapter, of note at the right flows are the Mardi Khola, Tamba Kosi, Karnali headwaters, Thuli Bheri, Balephi Khola and tributaries of the Tamur.

The upper Modhi Khola is also good for experienced kayakers. The side creek of the Bhurungdi Khola, by Birethani village, hides several waterfalls which are runnable by experienced kayakers.

KAYAK CLINICS

Nepal is an ideal place to learn to kayak and several rafting companies offer learner kayak clinics. For the communication required to teach, the best instruction clinics tend to be staffed with both Western and Nepali instructors. Kayak clinics normally take about four days, which gives you time to get a good grounding in the basics of kayaking, safety and river dynamics.

The clinics are a pretty laid-back intro to kayaking, with around four to six hours of paddling a day. On day one you'll learn self-rescue, T-rescue and Eskimo roll, which will help you to right yourself when you capsize. Day two sees you on the river, learning to ferry glide (cross the river), eddy in and eddy out (entering and leaving currents), brace and perfect your strokes. Day three is when you start really having fun on the river, running small (class II) rapids and journeying down the river, learning how to read the rapids. The key is to relaxed your upper body to move with the kayak, and not to panic underwater. Flexibility is a real plus. Expect one instructor for every three people.

Equator Expeditions and Ultimate Descents International (see rafting companies p90) operate clinics on the upper Sun Kosi. Equator runs the Sukute Beach Resort, just north of Sukute village at km 69/70. It's fairly comfortable but isn't as luxurious as Borderlands or The Last Resort, with squat toilets and cold showers. Still, it has a great spot on the river, with a private beach, a bar area with pool tables and a lovely stretch of river nearby. It also has a pool which is a real bonus when learning Eskimo rolls.

The Last Resort/Ulimate Descents International uses the Riverside Camp, between kilometre markers 83 and 84, which is a similarly basic camp, made up of dome tents. Both companies charge around US\$160 for the four-day clinic, though Equator will drop this in low season to US\$120 if you take the bus there and back. For both trips check what kind of transportation is included. You may find yourself flagging down local buses and putting your kayak on the roof for short rides after a trip down the river.

Other companies such as Ultimate Descents Nepal and Mountain River Rafting (see rafting companies p90) operate their four-day clinics on the gentle Seti River, for around US\$200, from Pokhara to Pokhara. The first day's training takes place on Phewa Tal and the remaining 2½ days are on the Seti, with two nights' riverside camping. The kayak route follows the rafting route (see p96), putting in at Damauli and taking out at Ghaighat, at the junction with the Trisuli River. The advantage to learning on the Seti is that you get to journey down a real river, unlike the shorter runs of Bhote Kosi.

Kayak clinic accommodation is generally more basic than other trips so you should bring your own sleeping bag, towel, swimming costume, snacks and hot drinks. Nose plugs are useful for those practice Eskimo rolls.

The bulk of kayak clinics operate in October, November, April and May. December is quieter but there's a lot less sunlight to warm you up at the beginning and end of the day.

TRANSPORTING YOUR OWN KAYAK

Most airlines will carry short kayaks on the same basis as surfboards or bicycles; there's no excess baggage charge, so long as you are within the weight limits. If you are a group, negotiate a deal at the time of booking. If there are only one or two of you, just turn up, put all your bulky light gear in the kayak, with heavy items in your carry-on luggage, and smile sweetly! If you phone the airline in advance they have to quote the rulebook and start talking air cargo, which is expensive.

Choosing a River

Before you decide on a river, you need to decide what it is that you want out of your trip. There are trips available from two to 12 days on different rivers, all offering dramatically different experiences.

First, don't believe that just because it's a river it's going to be wet 'n' wild. Some rivers, such as the Sun Kosi, which is a full-on white-water trip

Nose plugs are useful for those practice Eskimo rolls.

Nepal is an ideal place to learn to kayak and several rafting companies offer learner kayak clinics

RIVER TRIPS IN NEPAL

River	Trip duration (Days)	Cost	Transport	Season and grade	Add-ons
Bhote Kosi	2	US\$60-80	3hr drive from Kathmandu	Oct-Dec III-V, Feb-May III-IV	canyoning and kayak clinics at Borderlands and The Last Resort Bandipur
Trisuli	2	US\$70-80	from Kathmandu or Pokhara	Jun-Aug III-IV, Sep-May III	
Seti	3	US\$120	from Pokhara	Jun-Aug IV, Sep-May II-III	kayak clinics are popular here
Kali Gandaki	3	US\$80-120	from Pokhara	Sep-Nov III-IV+, Feb-May III-IV	Royal Chitwan NP
Marsyangdi	4	US\$200-225	5hr drive from Kathmandu or Pokhara, then day-long trek	Oct-Dec IV-V, Feb-Apr IV+	
Sun Kosi	8-9	US\$300-350	3hr from Kathmandu to start point; 16hr drive or flight back from Biratnagar	Sep-Nov III+ to V-, June III to V+	Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, or continue on to Darjeeling in India
Karnali	10	US\$350-400	16hr bus ride or flight, followed by 2-day trek	Sep-Nov III to V, Feb-May III to IV	Royal Bardia National Park
Tamur	11	US\$550-650	flight/15-hour bus drive and three-day trek there; flight or 16 hour bus drive back	Oct-Dec III to IV, Mar-Apr III to IV+	The Hide Out

in September and October, are basically flat in the low water of early spring. On the flip side, early spring can be a superb time to raft rivers such as the Marsyangdi or Bhote Kosi, which would be suicidal during high flows. The Karnali is probably the only river that offers continually challenging white water at all flows, though during the high-water months of September and May it's significantly more challenging than in the low-water months.

Longer trips such as the Sun Kosi (in the autumn), the Karnali and the Tamur offer some real heart-thumping white water with the incredible journeying aspect of a long river trip. With more time on the river, things are more relaxed, relationships progress at a more natural pace, and memories become entrenched for a lifetime. Long after the white water has blurred into one white-knuckled thrill ride, the memories of a moonrise over the river and the friends you inevitably make will remain. River trips are much more than gravity powered roller coaster rides; they're liquid journeys traversed on very special highways. For many people they become a way of life.

If a long trip is simply impossible because of financial or time constraints, don't undervalue the shorter ones. Anyone who has ever taken a paddle-raft or kayak down the Bhote Kosi (at any flow) would be hard pressed to find anything better to do with two days in Nepal. There are also medium-length options that are perfect for people who want to experience a river journey but have limited time.

River Routes

This section describes the main commercially rafted rivers in Nepal. It is by no means a complete list, and private boaters who have the experience, equipment and desire to run their own expeditions are best advised to consult the aforementioned guidebook, *White Water Nepal*.

TRISULI

Distance 40km

Duration Two days

Start Baireni

Finish Multiple locations

Brief description Popular, a wild ride during the monsoon

With easy access just out of Kathmandu, the Trisuli is where many commercial trips operate. This is the cheapest trip available in Nepal – if you sign on to a US\$15-a-day raft trip, this is where you'll end up.

What makes the Trisuli so cheap is also what makes it one of the least desirable rafting trips in the country. The easy access is provided by the Prithvi Hwy, which is the only highway connecting Kathmandu and India, and it runs right alongside the river. During most flows the rapids are straightforward and spread well apart. The large number of companies operating on the river drives the prices down, but it also detracts considerably from the experience of the trip. Beaches are often heavily used and abused, with garbage, toilet paper and fire pits well assimilated into the sand. This, combined with the noise and pollution of the highway, makes the Trisuli a less than ideal rafting experience.

It's not all bad news though. During the monsoon months the Trisuli changes character completely as huge runoffs make the river swell and shear like an immense ribbon of churning ocean. There are fewer companies running at this time of the year, and the garbage and excrement of the past season should by now be well on its way to Bangladesh as topsoil.

BHOTE KOSI

Distance 10km

Duration Two days

Start Borderlands

Finish Lamosangu

Brief description Just three hours from Kathmandu, the Bhote Kosi is one of the best short raft trips to be found anywhere in the world

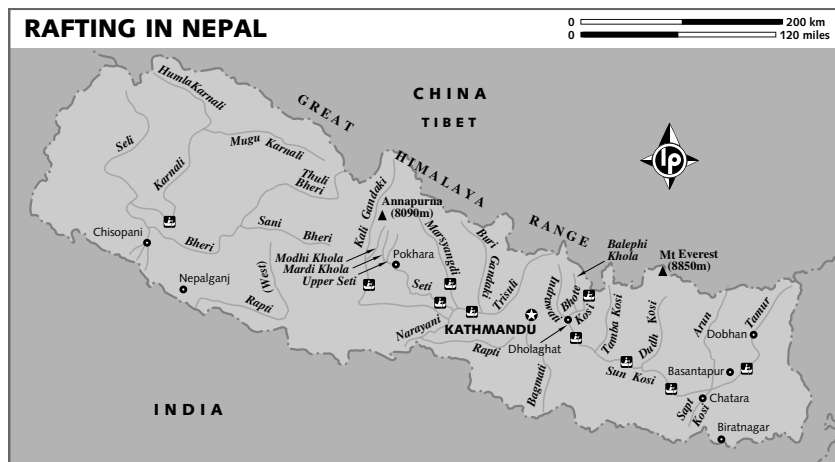
The Bhote Kosi is the steepest river rafted in Nepal – technical and totally committing. With a gradient of 80ft per mile (24m per 1.6km), it's a full eight times as steep as the Sun Kosi, which it feeds further downstream. The rapids are steep and continual class IV, with a lot of continual class III in between.

This river is one of the most fun things you can do right out of Kathmandu and a great way to get an adrenaline fix during the low-water months, but it should only be attempted with a company that has a lot of experience on the Bhote Kosi, and is running the absolute best guides, safety equipment and safety kayakers. The Great Wall rapid is normally portaged as it is simply too dangerous during normal flows. The river is more challenging in October, by November it has dropped to medium flows.

The normal run is from around 95km northeast of Kathmandu (north of Barabise) to the dam at Lamosangu. The river has been kayaked above this point, but a raft trip here would not be recreational. At high flows

The best white water is found on the section between Baireni and Mugling, and trips on the Trisuli can be combined with trips to Pokhara or Chitwan.

You can get an idea of what you are in for by looking at the names of some of the rapids – Gerbil in the Plumbing, Frog in a Blender, Carnal Knowledge of a Deviant Nature, Etlax and Liquid Bliss!



several of the rapids become solid class V, and the consequences of any mistakes become serious.

Most trips are two days, but the first day consists largely of training in the calmer waters below the dam (from just above the turn-off to Jiri), with most of the rapids coming thick and furious further upstream on the second day, so if you are already up there then it can be done as a day trip.

Camping on the Bhote Kosi is limited, with few good beaches, so most groups stay at comfortable river camps like Borderlands and The Last Resort (see p233). Borderlands has the highest put-in point which gives you a little more rafting time.

Rafting the Bhote Kosi out of one of these camps means you get more river time and can relax at the end of the day in pristine surroundings and comfort. The environmental impact of trips is limited by staying at fixed camps, which also create local employment and business. They also offer other activities, so you can mix and match what you do.

SETI

Distance 32km

Duration Two days

Start Damauli

Finish Gaighat

Brief description Perfect for beginners, families and learner kayakers

The Seti is an excellent two-day trip in an isolated area, with beautiful jungle and plenty of easy rapids. Beware of companies who market this as a hot white-water trip. While it's a beautiful river valley well worth rafting, it's not a white-water bonanza.

This is the perfect river for a family trip or in which to learn to kayak (see above). The water is warm and the rapids are class II or II+. During the monsoon (June and August) the river changes gear and creates white water action up to class IV.

The logical starting point is Damauli on the Prithvi Hwy between Mugling and Pokhara. This would give you 32km of rafting to the confluence with the Trisuli River. From the take out at Gaighat it's just a one-hour drive to Royal Chitwan National Park.

Beware if you decide to try the upper section of the Seto River, as it disappears underground above Dule Gouda! Perhaps this is what they refer to as class VI...

KALI GANDAKI

Distance 90km

Duration Three days

Start Baglung

Finish Andhi Khola

Brief description Diverse trip down the holy river, through deep gorges and past waterfalls

The Kali Gandaki is an excellent alternative to the Trisuli, as there is no road alongside, and the scenery, villages, and temples all combine to make it a great trip.

The rapids on the Kali Gandaki are much more technical and continual than those on the Trisuli (at class III to IV depending on the flows), and in high water it's no place to be unless you are an accomplished kayaker experienced in avoiding big holes. At medium and lower flows, it's a fun and challenging river with rapids that will keep you busy for three days.

The Kali Gandaki is one of the holiest rivers in Nepal, and every river junction is dotted with cremation sites and above-ground burial mounds. If you've been wondering what's under that pile of rocks, we recommend against exploring. Because of the recent construction of a dam at the confluence with the Andhi Khola, what was once a four- to five-day trip has now become a three-day trip, starting at Baglung and taking out at the dam site. At very high flows it will probably be possible to run the full five-day trip to Ramdhighat by just portaging the dam site. This option would add some great white water and you could visit the fantastic derelict palace at Ranighat (see p301), which is slowly being restored.

If you can raft to Ramdhighat beside the Siddhartha Hwy between Pokhara and Sunauli, you could continue on to the confluence with the Trisuli at Devghat. This adds another 130km and three or four more days. The lower section below Ramdhighat doesn't have much white water, but it is seldom rafted and offers a very isolated area with lots of wildlife.

MARSYANGDI

Distance 27km

Duration Four days (two days rafting)

Start Ngadi

Finish Phalesangu

Brief description Short but sweet white knuckle ride

The Marsyangdi is steeper and offers more continuous white water than most other rivers in Nepal; it's not called the 'Raging River' for nothing! A hydro project has severely affected this world-class rafting and kayaking river but it is still possible to have a two-day run on the rapids before reaching the dam.

The trip starts with a bus ride from Dumre to Besisahar. From here it is a beautiful trek up to the village of Ngadi, with great views of the Manaslu and the Annapurnas ahead of you the whole time.

From Ngadi downstream to the end of the trip at the dam side above Philesangu, it's pretty much solid white water. Rapids are steep, technical and consecutive, making the Marsyangdi a serious undertaking. Successful navigation of the Marsyangdi requires companies to have previous experience on the river and to use the best guides and equipment. Rafts must be self-bailing, and should be running with a minimum of weight and gear on board. Professional safety kayakers should be considered a standard safety measure on this river.

Kayakers have the option of descending the Modhi Khola on the first day to its confluence to the Kali Gandaki, to join up with the rafting group at the end of the first day.

The dam on the Marsyangdi is due for completion in 2006, so check with rafting operators for current information on what itineraries they're running.

KARNALI**Distance** 180km**Duration** 10-11 days (seven days rafting)**Start** Surkhet**Finish** Chisopani**Brief description** A wilderness trip in far western Nepal down Nepal's largest and longest river

The Karnali is a gem, combining a two-day trek with some of the prettiest canyons and jungle scenery in Nepal. Most experienced river people who have paddled the Karnali find it one of the best all-round river trips they've ever done. In high water, the Karnali is a serious commitment, combining *huge*, though fairly straightforward, rapids with a seriously remote location. At low water the Karnali is still a fantastic trip. The rapids become smaller when the river drops, but the steeper gradient and constricted channel keep it interesting.

Being the longest and largest river in all of Nepal, the Karnali drains a huge and well-developed catchment. Spring snowmelts can drive the river up dramatically in a matter of hours – as the river rises, the difficulty increases exponentially. The river flows through some steep and constricted canyons where the rapids are close together, giving little opportunity to correct for potential mistakes. Pick your company carefully.

The trip starts with a long, but interesting, two-day bus ride to the remote far west of Nepal. If you're allergic to bus rides, it's possible to fly to Nepalganj and cut the bus transport down to about four hours on the way over, and two hours on the way back. From the hill town of Surkhet a lovely two-day trek brings you to Sauli, from where it is a two-hour trek to the Karnali River. Once you start on the Karnali it's 180km to the next road access at Chisopani, on the northern border of the Royal Bardia National Park.

The river section takes about seven days, giving plenty of time to explore some of the side canyons and waterfalls that come into the river valley. Better-run trips also include a layover day, where the expedition stays at the same campsite for two nights. The combination of long bus rides and trekking puts some people off, but anyone who has ever done the trip raves about it. Finish with a visit to the Royal Bardia National Park at the end for what is an unbeatable combination.

SUN KOSI**Distance** 270km**Duration** Eight to nine days (seven days rafting)**Start** Dolalghat**Finish** Chatara**Brief description** A self-sufficient expedition through central Nepal from the Himalaya to the Gangetic Plain

This is the longest river trip offered in Nepal, traversing 270km through the beautiful Mahabharat Range on its meandering way from the put-in at Dolalghat to the take-out at Chatara in the far east of the country. It's quite an experience to begin a river trip just three hours out of Kathmandu, barely 60km from the Tibetan border, and end the trip looking down the hot, dusty gun barrel of the north Indian plain just eight or nine days later. Because it's one of the easiest trips logistically, it's also one of the least expensive for the days you spend on a river.

The Sun Kosi (River of Gold) starts off fairly relaxed, with only class II and small class III rapids to warm up on during the first couple of days. Savvy guides will take this opportunity to get teams working together

THE HIDE OUT

If joining a rafting trip down the Sun Kosi consider a break at **The Hide Out** (Map p136; ☎ 01-4413209; www.nepalhideout.com), a tented camp along the lines of Borderlands or The Last Resort, way out in the remote eastern foothills of Kangchenjunga.

Getting here involves a two- to three-day trek from the road head at Basantapur, or a 1½-hour walk from Taplejung, which has unreliable flights from Kathmandu. The camp is at the junction of the Tamur and Maiwa Kholas, near Dobhan.

The resort runs a series of treks and cultural activities, including hikes to the impressive Sobwa Falls and Khamlung Peak, or a five-day trek to Pathibara Temple, plus a wide range of village visits and cultural programmes. See the website for details or contact Andy Coopland at info@nepalhideout.com.

with precision. The river volume increases with the air temperature as several major tributaries join the river and from the third day the rapids become more powerful and frequent. During high-water trips you may well find yourselves astonished at just how big a river wave can get.

While the lower sections of large-volume rivers are usually rather flat, the Sun Kosi reserves some of its biggest and best rapids for the last days, and the last section is nonstop class IV before a final quiet float down the Sapt Kosi. Some companies add on an extra day's rafting on the lower section of the Tamur, from Mulghat down.

At the right flow it's an incredible combination of white water, scenery, villages, and quiet and introspective evenings.

TAMUR**Distance** 120km**Duration** 11 days**Start** Dobhan**Finish** Chatara**Brief description** Remote expedition in the foothills of Kangchenjunga in the far east of the country; includes a three-day trek.

Way out in the far east, this river combines one of the best short treks in Nepal with some really challenging white-water action. The logistics of this trip make it a real expedition, and while it is a little more complicated to run than many rivers in Nepal, the rewards are worth the effort.

First you have to get to Basantapur, a 15-hour drive from Kathmandu or a US\$81 flight to Biratnagar and then a five-hour drive. Most expeditions begin with a stunning three- or four-day trek from Basantapur up over the Milke Danda Range, past the alpine lake of Gupha Pokhari to Dobhan. At Dobhan three tributaries of the Tamur join forces, combining the waters of the mountains to the north (including Kangchenjunga, the world's third largest mountain). The first 16km of rapids is intense, with rapid after rapid, and the white water just keeps coming through towering canyons until the big finale. The best time to raft is probably when flows are at medium, which is between mid-October and mid-November.

OTHER RIVERS

The **Upper Seti** just outside Pokhara makes an excellent half-day trip when it is at high flows. Trips operate in mid-September and October (grade III+) and cost US\$35 return from Pokhara.

The new and exciting **Balephi Khola** (above the Bhote Kosi) is run by a few companies from Jalbire to its confluence with the upper Sun Kosi.

Many rafters consider the Sun Kosi to be one of the world's 10 classic river journeys.

Ultimate Descents Nepal runs trips from mid-September to early November and in May, and charges US\$90 for the two-day trip

The **Bheri**, which is in the west, is a great float trip with incredible jungle scenery and lots of wildlife. This is one of the best fishing rivers and can be combined with a visit to the Royal Bardia National Park.

The **Arun** from Tumlingtar makes an excellent three-day wilderness trip, although the logistics of getting to the starting point are pretty complicated.

CLIMBING & TREKKING PEAKS

Bivouacked somewhere between trekking and mountaineering are Nepal's 'trekking peaks'. The name 'trekking peak' can be quite deceiving; they vary in their level of difficulty but most include significant mountaineering challenges. They are the natural first step if you are interested in progressing from trekking and scrambling onto crampon and rope work.

Organised Climbs

Because of the bureaucracy involved (see 'Permits and Fees', opposite), it is easiest to use an adventure travel company to organise the climb, rather than do the running around yourself. Trip permit fees are included in all the prices listed in this section.

Equator Expeditions (see p91) is one company that organises mountaineering courses and ascents of Mera and Island Peaks in the Solu Khumbu region. If you sign up for a climb you can often get discounts on their other trips, such as a free two-day Bhote Kosi raft or US\$50 off a kayak clinic.

Equator operates a six-day course and ascent of Island Peak, properly known as Imja Tse (6189m), from a base in Chhukung. After acclimatisation, training and a half-day hike to base camp, the peak is generally climbed in a single eight-hour day, departing early in the morning. It's physically demanding but not technically difficult – only the last section is on ice and snow. The north ridge offers a slightly more difficult route option. Trips run weekly in season (mid-October to mid-November, end March to May) and cost US\$600.

The second most popular option is to Lobuche East (6119m), a more technically difficult ascent that requires two days' training. Climbers generally depart from a high camp at 1.30am and are back by noon. The six-day round trip from Dzonglha costs around US\$600. Trips operate in November and from mid-April to mid-May.

Also in the Everest region, Mera Peak (6476m) involves more trekking than climbing, though it is the highest of the trekking peaks. It's a minimum 15-day trip from Lukla and involves trekking up to the 5415m Mera La, from where the climbing begins. Trips from Kathmandu cost from US\$1300 to US\$1800 and run in November, April and May. Don't confuse Mera Peak with Mehra Peak (Kongma Tse), further north.

Other possible trekking peak ascents in the Everest region include Phari Lapche (6017m or 6073m) Machhermo (6273m) and Kyoze/Kyajo Ri (6186m), all in the stunning Gokyo Valley.

For all of these trips you will need to hire your own plastic climbing boots and gaiters, either from Kathmandu or Namche Bazaar. Prices include permits, equipment, guides, tent accommodation and food. Expect a group size of around six to eight climbers.

In the Annapurna region, Pisang Peak (6091m) and Chulu East (6584m) are both five-day excursions from Manang; the former is more common, with an organised trip costing around US\$1200. A few companies, such as the UK's **Himalayan Frontiers** (www.himalayanfrontiers.co.uk), run

climbing trips to Tharpu Chuli/Tent Peak (5663m) from Machhapuchhare Base Camp in the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Several companies, including Mountain Monarch run trekking peaks as part of a standard trek. In the Everest region this includes the Everest Base Camp trek and Island Peak (21 to 23 days, US\$1500) or Lobuche East (25 days, US\$1750). Pisang peak or Chulu West can be combined with the Annapurna Circuit trek (24 to 25 days, US\$1650 to US\$1700). Yala Peak (5500m) can be included as part of a 16-day Langtang trek (US\$1140).

Trekking companies in Kathmandu that organise ascents of trekking peaks include:

Climb High Himalaya (☎ 01-4372874; www.climbhighhimalaya.com, Kathmandu)

Equator Expeditions (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700782; www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com, www.nepalgate.com; Thamel, Kathmandu)

Himalayan Ecstasy (Map p136; ☎ 01-2012171; www.himalayanecstasy.com, Kathmandu) Offer Island and Lobuche peaks together in one trip for US\$1000.

Mountain Monarch (☎ 01-4361668; www.mountainmonarch.com; Lazimpat, Kathmandu)

Nepal Mountain River (Map p136; ☎ 01-4700770; www.nepalmountain.com) Across from Northfield Café; generally a bit more expensive.

Permits & Fees

To arrange your own climbing trip, a permit is required from the **Nepal Mountaineering Association** (NMA; Map p116; ☎ 01-4434525; www.nma.com.np.; PO Box 1435, Nag Pokhari, Kathmandu). Permits must be applied for in advance and are only valid for one month, although weekly extensions are available for 25% of the total fee. All people ascending trekking peaks must be accompanied by a *sirdar* (leader) who is registered with the NMA.

Of the 33 'trekking peaks' the 15 'new' peaks designated in 2002 are classified as 'A' peaks, the original 18 (including all those above) are 'B' peaks. The fees for climbing trekking peaks depend on the group size and the classification. For group 'B' peaks the fees are: one to four people, US\$350; five to eight people, US\$350 for the group plus US\$40 per person; nine to 12 people (the maximum group size), US\$510 plus US\$25 per person. For Group 'A' peaks the fees are: one to seven people, US\$500; eight to 12 people, US\$500 plus US\$100 per person.

Bill O'Connor's book *The Trekking Peaks of Nepal* gives a detailed description of the climb to each of the 18 traditional peaks plus the approach trek to the mountain. Equipment, applications, procedures and other matters are comprehensively covered but there's little information on the new 'A' trekking peaks.

Food & Drink

Eating in Nepal is a mixed bag. The bad news is that generic Nepali food is distinctly dull (think rice and vegetables twice a day for the rest of your life). The good news is that, unless you're trekking off the beaten track, you probably won't spend much time eating it because you'll be too busy tucking into Tibetan, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Indian and pretty much anything else. And for when you want to remind yourself that you are in Nepal there are a fair number of places that serve up varied, spicy and interesting Newari dishes.

One of the most common highland foods is *dhedo*, a thick doughlike paste made from grain or millet flour.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Most Hindu Nepalis are vegetarians, whether out of choice or necessity, and most of the time meals consist of a dish called *daal bhaat tarkari*, literally 'lentil soup', 'rice' and 'curried vegetables'. If you are lucky it will be spiced up with a bowl of *achar* (pickles) and maybe some chapati (unleavened Indian bread), *dahi* (curd or yoghurt) or *papad* (pappadam – crispy fried thin pancake). Only very occasionally does it come with *masu* (meat). The occasional *daal bhaat tarkari*, especially home cooked, can be just fine and it's perfect at the end of a long day trekking. Eaten day in and day out it can get very boring indeed. The most common vegetables are spinach, squash and potato.

Throughout the Indian subcontinent butter (*makan*) is clarified into ghee to make it last longer.

Newars in contrast are great meat eaters. *Buff* (water buffalo) is the meat of choice (cows, and thus beef, are sacred and never eaten) but goat is also common and Newars have a particular fondness for wild boar. Spices are heavily used in Newari food, especially chilli, though in general Nepali food is not as spicy as the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Many Newari dishes are only eaten at particular celebrations or family events and for these (and the best Newari food in general) you need to be invited to a Newari home. However, a few top-end restaurants in Kathmandu offer a good range of Newari cuisines (see p147). For a rundown of Newari dishes see p106.

Nepal is also one of the best places to try a range of Tibetan cuisine (it's certainly a lot better than in Tibet!), though most dishes are just variations on momos (dumplings; fried or steamed) or noodles (long or short) and end up tasting remarkably similar. See p107 for a rundown of dishes.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Tongba is a Himalayan brew made by pouring (and periodically re-adding) boiling water to a bamboo tube of fermented millet. As with all fine beers, it's generally drunk through a straw.

We Dare You!

Very little is wasted when a beast is slaughtered, and in true Newari eateries you can find dishes made from just about every imaginable animal part or fluid – from stewed brains to boiled lungs and fried blood!

Our favourite dishes include *jan-la* (raw steak with the skin attached), *bul-la* (dregs of rice wine with diced spleen and pieces of bone swimming in it), *ti-syah* (fried spinal bone marrow) and the aptly named *swan-puka* (lung filled through the windpipe with spicy batter and then boiled, sliced and fried), topped off with some *cho-hi* (steamed blood pudding). Oh...my...God... Still hungry?

HOW TO MAKE NEPALI CHIYA

Heat three cups of milk in a saucepan, along with four cloves, four cardamom pods, four teaspoons of sugar and two cinnamon sticks. Heat until it comes to the boil but be careful not to burn it. In a separate saucepan add three cups of boiling water to four teaspoons of black tea leaves. Let sit for three minutes. Strain hot milk into tea and gently heat for a couple of minutes but do not boil.

Desserts

Like their Indian neighbours, Nepalis enjoy a huge range of sticky sweets, mostly milk-based, of which the most visible are *barfi* (milk boiled down into a fudge), *rasbari* (milk balls – similar to Indian *rasgulla*), *lal mohan* (deep-fried milky dough balls), *kheer* (rice pudding) and *julebi* (orange, figure-of-eight deep-fried syrupy sweets).

Anyone who visits Bhaktapur should try the *juju dhau* (king of curds), a wonderfully creamy thick yogurt. *Sikarni* is a traditional dessert of yogurt flavoured with cinnamon and cardamom.

DRINKS Nonalcoholic

In general *don't drink the water* (see p396). Most good restaurants do boil and filter their water, and tea is almost always safe. There are dozens of brands of cheap bottled water – some spring water, others just treated tap water – though prices rise rapidly in the countryside. You can be environmentally friendly and save some money by purifying your own water or refilling your water bottle from safe water sources.

Tea is the national drink and comes in two distinct types. Tourist restaurants generally serve up the world's weakest tea, often a totally ineffectual Mechi teabag dunked into a glass of hot milk. Proper Nepali *chiya* (sometimes called *masala* tea) is a far more satisfying brew, where the tea leaves are boiled up together with milk, sugar and spices. In Tibetan-influenced areas the drink of choice is black tea churned up with salt, soda and yak butter to produce a soupy consistency.

Lassi – a refreshing drink of curd (yoghurt) mixed with sugar and what may be untreated water (proceed with caution) – is a highlight of travelling in the subcontinent and comes in a range of sweet and salty flavours.

Alcoholic

Locally produced Nepali beer is pretty good, especially after a hard day's walking or bicycling around the valley. The best brands are Tuborg (Danish), Carlsberg (Danish) and San Miguel (Filipino), all brewed in Gorkha, though you can also get the odd imported Indian-bottled Kingfisher or can of Guinness. The best local beer is Everest Beer.

Chang, the popular Himalayan homebrew, is a mildly alcoholic concoction made from barley, millet or rice and what may be untreated water. It's found along many trekking routes and can be served hot or cold.

Harder spirits include arak, fermented from potatoes or grain, and *rakshi*, a Newari-style distilled rice wine that runs the gamut from smooth firewater to paint stripper. Kukhri Rum is probably the most famous locally bottled spirit.

Officially alcohol is not sold by retailers on the first two days and last two Saturdays of the Nepali month, but this rarely affects foreigners or restaurants.

Most Nepalis round off a meal with a *digestif* of *pan* (betel nut and leaf mixture). Those little spots of red on the pavement that look like little pools of blood are (generally) *pan*.

To eat *daal bhaat* the local way, pour the soupy *daal* onto the rice, mix it into balls with your fingers, add a bit of pickle and vegetable and shovel it into your mouth with your right hand.

CELEBRATIONS

At festival time, most Nepalis cram their annual meat intake into a couple of days. Feasts known as *bhoj* follow major sacrifices during Dasain and other dates.

Certain festivals are associated with specific foods. During the Janai Purnima festival, Newars make up batches of *kwati*, a soup made from up to a dozen types of sprouted beans. Most festival sites attract vendors selling sweets, snacks and fruit, some of which are used as offerings.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Restaurants

In 1955 Kathmandu had only one restaurant. These days, Nepal's hundreds of backpacker restaurants offer some of the world's most varied menus. Travel outside of Kathmandu and Pokhara, however, and you'll quickly find yourself limited to chow mein and daal bhaat.

If you eat *daal bhaat tarkari*, most local restaurants (known as *bhojanalaya*) and roadside stalls will be able to find you some kind of spoon (*chamchah*), but the custom is to eat with your right hand. Daal bhaat is often served on a metal plate called a thali and is an all-you-can-eat deal. If a restaurant advertises a 'homepacking system', this means it can arrange takeaway.

In small local restaurants the cooking equipment is often limited to a couple of gas ring burners and a sweaty bloke with a wok, so if you and your five friends order six different dishes you can expect to be waiting for dinner when breakfast time rolls around the next day. In that situation it makes a lot of sense to order the same dish six times, preferably a few hours in advance. This will not only save time, but also cooking fuel, which is often firewood.

FARANGI FOOD

Although the real local food can be limited in its scope, Kathmandu's restaurants offer an amazing variety of dishes. In the days of 'Asia over-landing', when many travellers arrived in Kathmandu having made a long and often wearisome trip through Asia from Europe, Kathmandu's restaurants had a near mythic appeal.

These days, as most travellers jet straight in from abroad, the food doesn't seem quite so amazing, but restaurants in Kathmandu and Pokhara still give international cuisine a damn good try and they will attempt almost anything from Mexican tacos to Japanese sukiyaki.

This culinary creativity has resulted in a number of hybrid foods that form a unique Nepali 'tourist ghetto cuisine'. Chop suey, for example, comes American-style, with a sweet and sour-ish sauce over crispy noodles ('American chop suey' has a fried egg on top). 'Swiss *rosti*' is a dish of potatoes covered in cheese. Some dishes are obvious ('chicken chilli' is barbecued spicy chicken), others are far more cryptic ('chicken lollipop' is a plate of grilled chicken wings).

Quick Eats

Nepali towns have a wide range of snack foods, from bagels in tourist bakeries to grilled corn on the cob on the street corner. A couple of *samsa* (samosas) or *papad* make a great snack and Newari beer snacks are legendary – try a plate of *sekuwa* (spiced meat) next time you have a cold beer. Stalls everywhere offer a mix of dried peas, chickpeas and puffed rice, flavoured with onion, lemon and chilli. Rice-flour doughnuts called *sel* are also popular. A plate of momos makes a great light meal.

Garam masala (hot mix) is a standard mix of spices that includes cardamom, cloves, fenugreek, coriander, cinnamon, cumin, fennel and pepper. You can buy it premixed in supermarkets.

The *Nepal Cookbook* by the Association of Nepalis in the Americas is a good collection of home recipes. You can get it at www.amazon.com or in Kathmandu.

Food Nepal (www.food-nepal.com) offers an excellent introduction to Nepali food and ingredients, with recipes from mango lassi to chicken chilli.

DOS & DON'TS

- Don't share food from your plate or another's and don't use your own fork or spoon to serve yourself food. Food becomes ritually polluted (*jhuto*) if touched by someone else's hand, plate or utensils.
- When using water from a communal jug or cup don't touch it to your mouth, but rather pour it straight into your mouth without touching it (and without pouring it all over your shirt).
- Don't use your left hand for eating or passing food to others. The left hand is used for washing yourself after defecating and so is considered unclean.
- Do wait to be served.
- Do leave your shoes outdoors when dining in someone's house.
- Do wash your hands and mouth before dining.
- Do ask for seconds when eating at someone's home.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

For a start, the Nepali eating schedule is quite different from that in the West. The morning usually begins with little more than a cup of sweet tea. The main meal is not taken until late morning. Dinner is eaten quite late, generally just before going to bed. In areas where there are few Western visitors, finding food is much simpler if you go along with this schedule.

Hindus have strict rules about keeping food and drink ritually pure and unpolluted. A high-caste Brahmin simply cannot eat food prepared by a lower-caste individual. Putting your used plate on a buffet table, for example, risks making all the food still on the table *jhuto* (polluted).

Plates and glasses must be purified by rinsing with water before they are considered clean. Any leftover food is considered polluted, as is anything that touches another's lips, especially if that person comes from another caste.

In general, when eating in a group, no-one gets up until everyone has finished their food. If for some reason you have to leave early, make your apologies with *bistaai khaanus*, or 'please eat slowly'.

COOKING COURSES

Trekkers Holiday Inn (☎ 01-4480334; www.4free.ch/nepal; Chuchepati) Based at the Hotel Samasara, midway between Kathmandu and Bodhnath, this Swiss-run centre offers a Nepali cookery course every Saturday afternoon for Rs 450, which includes the meal. See p357 for details on how to get there.

Via Via Café (Map p136; www.viaviacafe.com; Kathmandu) This Belgian-Nepali restaurant (see p149) runs weekly cookery courses (Rs 420).

EAT YOUR WORDS

For pronunciation guidelines and other general language phrases see p398.

Useful Phrases

I'm a vegetarian
ma sānhkāhari hun

I don't like spicy food

ma piro khandina/piro nahahnluhos

Can I have the bill?

bill pauna sakchhu?

Nepali Hindus eat very little meat, so vegetarians and vegans won't have a problem finding food in Nepal. Nepal's Buddhist communities occasionally eat meat, as Buddhism doesn't forbid the eating of meat, just the killing of animals, a fine distinction...

The Hindu caste system brings its own dietary restrictions – strict Brahmins, for example, do not eat chicken, buffalo, onion, tomatoes, mushrooms or eggs, or rice if it has been cooked by someone from another caste.

Please bring me a spoon*malai chamchah lyaunuhas***Menu Decoder****NEPALI & NEWARI FOOD**

<i>aloo tahmah</i>	stewlike dish made from potatoes, bamboo shoots and beans
<i>aloo tareko</i>	fried potato with cumin, turmeric and chilli
<i>bandhel tareko</i>	fried wild boar (or pork) with onions, tomatoes and spices
<i>chatamari</i>	rice-flour pancake topped with meat and/or egg, sometimes over-optimistically called a 'Newari pizza'
<i>choyla</i>	roasted, diced <i>buff</i> (buffalo) meat, usually heavily spiced and eaten with <i>chura</i>
<i>chura</i>	beaten rice (think of flat Rice Bubbles!), served in place of rice
<i>chyou ko tarkari</i>	mushrooms with peas, tomatoes and spices
<i>dayakula</i>	meat curry
<i>gundruk</i>	traditional Nepali sour soup with dried vegetables
<i>gurr</i>	made from raw potatoes ground and mixed with spices and then grilled like a large pancake and eaten with cheese
<i>kachila</i>	raw <i>buff</i> mince mixed with oil, ginger and spices
<i>khasi kho ledo</i>	lamb curry
<i>kwati</i>	soup made from a dozen types of sprouted beans and eaten during festivals
<i>mis mas tarkari</i>	seasonal mixed vegetables
<i>momoch</i>	Newari version of Tibetan <i>momo</i>
<i>samay baji</i>	ritual feast of <i>chura</i> , <i>choyla</i> , boiled egg, black soybeans, diced ginger and lentil-flour pancake
<i>sandeko</i>	cold pickles
<i>sekuwa</i>	barbecued meat: <i>buff</i> , pork, fish or chicken
<i>sikarni</i>	sweet whipped yogurt dessert that may include nuts, cinnamon and dried fruit
<i>sukuti</i>	spicy nibble of dried roasted meat
<i>tama</i>	traditional Nepali soup made from dried bamboo shoots
<i>tawkhaa</i>	a jelly of curried meat, served cold
<i>wo</i>	lentil-flour pancake

TIBETAN DISHES

<i>gacok</i>	a hotpot extravaganza named for the pot it's cooked in, normally for a minimum of two or three people; order an hour or two in advance
<i>kothey (kothe)</i>	fried <i>momos</i>
<i>momo</i>	meat or vegetables wrapped in dough and steamed; typical Tibetan dish similar to Chinese dim sum or Italian ravioli
<i>phing</i>	glass noodles, vermicelli
<i>pingtsey</i>	wontons
<i>richotse</i>	momos in soup
<i>sha-bhalay</i>	meat in a deep-fried pancake or pastie
<i>(sya-bhakley)</i>	
<i>shabrel</i>	meat balls
<i>talumein</i>	egg noodle soup
<i>thentuk</i>	similar to <i>thugpa</i> but with noodle squares
<i>thugpa</i>	traditional thick Tibetan meat soup
<i>tsampa</i>	ground roasted barley, mixed with tea, water or milk and eaten dry either instead of rice or mixed with it; a staple dish in the hill country
<i>tsarel</i>	vegetable balls

INDIAN DISHES

<i>bhaji</i>	vegetable fritter
<i>biryani</i>	steamed rice with meat or vegetables

channa masala
*chicken tikka**korma*
makani
malai kofta
matter paneer
nan
palak paneer
pakora
pilau
rogan josh
samosa

chickpea curry
skewered chunks of marinated chicken, often displayed with a noticeable lack of refrigeration in restaurant windows
curry-like braised dish, often quite sweet
any dish cooked with butter, often daal or chicken
vegetable dish of potato and nut dumplings in a rich gravy
unfermented cheese with peas
baked bread
unfermented cheese with spinach in a gravy
fried vegetables in batter
rice cooked in stock and flavoured with spices
Kashmiri lamb curry
pyramid-shaped, deep-fried and potato-filled pasties

Food Glossary

<i>alu</i>	potato
<i>badam</i>	peanut
<i>bhanta</i>	eggplant
<i>bhaat</i>	cooked rice
<i>dahi</i>	yogurt
<i>daal</i>	lentils
<i>dudh</i>	milk
<i>gobi</i>	cauliflower
<i>kerah</i>	banana
<i>kukhara</i>	chicken
<i>khasi</i>	mutton
<i>maachha</i>	fish
<i>masu</i>	meat
<i>murgh</i>	chicken
<i>phul</i>	egg
<i>ram toriya</i>	okra (lady's finger)
<i>roti</i>	bread
<i>sag</i>	spinach
<i>tarkari</i>	vegetable

DRINKS

<i>(chiso) biyar</i>	(cold) beer
<i>chini</i>	sugar
<i>chiya</i>	tea
<i>sodamah kagati</i>	lemon soda
<i>tato panimah kagati</i>	hot lemon
<i>umaahleko pani</i>	boiled water

Nepali uses different words for 'clean' (*saphaa*) and 'ritually clean' (*choko*).

The Nepali word to eat (*khanu*) also doubles as the verb 'to drink' and 'to smoke'.

In rural areas Nepalis often greet each other with *khaanaa khaiyo?* – have you eaten yet?

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