

The Terai & Mahabharat Range



Hanging out in the plains might not be the first thing that comes to mind when visiting the world's most mountainous nation, but the Terai is a fascinating and varied place and most people see only a tiny fraction of it as they rush between the Indian border and the hills. There are plains and jungles, forts and temples, ancient monuments and national parks, wilderness and bustling bazaars, plus the lush green landscape of the Chure and Mahabharat hills. If you thought the Terai was all pancake flat, prepare to be pleasantly surprised.

The vast majority of travellers follow a well-established route through the Terai, from Kathmandu or Pokhara to Royal Chitwan National Park and on to the Indian border crossing at Sunauli. However, more and more people are escaping this touristy circuit and discovering the cities of the Terai – places like Janakpur and Tansen – and the historical birthplace of the Buddha at Lumbini. If you're heading to India, don't restrict yourself to Sunauli – there are four other border crossings between India and Nepal, providing easy access to Delhi, Agra, Varanasi, Lucknow and Darjeeling.

Tourism to the Terai dropped off markedly in the early years of the Maoist uprising, but visitor numbers seem to be slowly creeping upwards. However, the situation remains volatile and the long-term future of tourism in the Terai depends on the government and Maoists finding a political solution to their grievances. At the time of writing, the most obvious signs of the insurgency were the army roadblocks along major highways, but it's essential to check the latest security situation before you visit (see p19).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spot rhinos from the back of another jungle giant – the Indian elephant – in **Royal Chitwan National Park** (p281)
- Visit **Sauraha** (p280) to scrub a jumbo at elephant bathtime
- Hike to **Chepang villages** (p288) on the new trekking route to the Chitwan Hills
- Tour terrific temples and hike to the fabulous Ranighat Durbar from the hill town of **Tansen** (p298)
- See the jungle without the crowds at **Royal Bardia National Park** (p308) in the western Terai
- Support women artisans at the **Janakpur Women's Development Centre** (p312) in Janakpur
- When the hills are peaceful, stay in a traditional Tibetan lodge in lofty **Hile** (p320)



History

Travelling through the Terai today, it's hard to believe that this was once one of the most important places in the subcontinent. In 563 BC, the queen of the tiny kingdom of Kapilavastu gave birth to a son named Siddhartha Gautama and 35 years later, under a Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya in India, Buddhism was born. The Indian Buddhist emperor Ashoka made a famous pilgrimage here in 249 BC, leaving a commemorative pillar at the site of the Buddha's birth in Lumbini.

Nepal also played a pivotal role in the development of Hinduism. Sita, the wife of Rama and heroine of the Ramayana, was the daughter of the historical king Janak, who ruled large parts of the plains from his capital at Janakpur. Janak founded the Mithila kingdom, which flourished until the third century AD, when its lands were seized by the Guphas from Patna in northern India.

The depopulation of the Terai began in earnest in the 14th century, when the Mughals swept across the plains of northern India. Hundreds of thousands of Hindu and Buddhist refugees fled up into the hills, many settling in the Kathmandu valley, which later rose to prominence as the capital of the Shah dynasty. Aided by legions of fearsome Gurkha warriors, the Shahs reclaimed the plains, expanding the borders of Nepal to twice their modern size.

Although the British never conquered Nepal, they had regular skirmishes with the Shahs. A treaty was signed in 1816 that trimmed the kingdom to roughly its current borders. Nepal later regained some additional land (including the city of Nepalganj) as a reward for assisting the British in the 1857 Indian Uprising.

The Terai was covered by swathes of jungle well into the 1950s. The indigenous people of the plains, the Tharu, lived an almost stone-age existence until 1954, when DDT was used to drive malaria from the plains and thousands of land-hungry farmers flocked into the Terai from India and the Nepali hills.

Today, the Tharu are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Nepal, and huge areas of the forest have been sacrificed for farmland and industrial development. Nevertheless, some large patches of wilderness remain, preserved in a series of excellent national parks, and the massive industrial

and agricultural development in the plains is slowly raising the quality of life for the nation, at least in economic terms.

Climate

The Terai has a similar climate to the northern plains of India – hot as a furnace from May to October and drenched by monsoon rains from June to September. Try to visit in winter (November to February) when skies are clear and temperatures are moderate. The annual monsoon rains can severely affect transport in the region – dirt roads turn to mud, dry stream beds become raging torrents and roads and bridges are routinely washed away. Allow extra time for any long-distance journeys and be prepared to fly if necessary to get around these obstacles.

Dangers & Annoyances

There is a lot of misinformation about the safety of travel in the Terai. Tourist offices often insist that everything is safe while embassies claim that it's dangerous to even leave the Kathmandu Valley. In reality, the safety of travel depends on the current status of negotiations between the Maoists and the Nepali government. During ceasefires, everything operates as normal, but violence can flare up quickly so it's important to check the security situation before you visit. There are few areas where travel is particularly risky – the far west of Nepal is the heartland of the Maoist insurgency and attacks on government installations are common, particularly north of the Mahendra Hwy. The hills in the far east of Nepal are another potential flashpoint, particularly close to the border with Sikkim. Things are generally peaceful in the central Terai but there have been attacks in the villages around Royal Chitwan National Park (including Sauraha), and more recently, near Lumbini. For more on security issues see p19).

The most obvious sign of the insurgency for travellers is the network of army checkpoints on all major roads. Foreigners are usually waved straight through, but locals must disembark for questioning and bag checks, which can add hours to journey times. At times of conflict, night-time curfews are imposed across the Terai.

An equally pressing problem for tourists is the risky nature of road transport in the Terai, see p272 for more information. Another

potential problem for travellers is the annual monsoon. Rivers already swelled by melt-water from the mountains are inundated by rainwater and floods are inevitable.

Getting There & Away

The Terai is easily accessible from Kathmandu and Pokhara in Nepal and from West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India. The Indian rail network passes close to several of the most important border crossings and there are frequent bus and air connections from the Terai to towns and villages across Nepal.

AIR

Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC; www.royalnepal.com) and many private airlines offer flights around the Terai. Currently, you can fly from Kathmandu or Pokhara to Nepalganj, Biratnagar, Bharatpur, Bhairawa, Janakpur, Simara (for Birganj) and Bhadrapur (for Kakarbhitta) – see these individual towns for details. Prices for flights around the Terai are also listed on the Nepal Air Fares map, p383.

LAND

All of Nepal's land border crossings are in the Terai. Heading from east to west, you can cross between India and Nepal at the following points:

Border crossing (Nepal to India)	Page
Mahendranagar to Banbassa	p311
Nepalganj to Jamunaha	p307
Belahiya to Sunauli	p290
Birganj to Raxaul Bazar	p302
Kakarbhitta to Panitanki	p322

The Sunauli crossing is by far the most popular route between the two countries, but immigration staff are used to seeing foreign tourists at all the crossings and Nepali visas are available on arrival. You need one passport photo and US dollars cash for the visa fee (currently US\$30 for a single entry visa and US\$80 for multiple entry).

Details of border opening times and on-wards travel into India are included in the

'Crossing the Border' boxed texts under Sunauli, Nepalganj, Birganj, Mahendranagar and Kakarbhitta. For more on crossing between Nepal and India, see p380.

Getting Around

Buses and minibuses are the main form of transport around the Terai with the Maoist ceasefire, night services have resumed between Kathmandu and Pokhara and the main border crossings. However, road safety can be an issue, particularly for night travel – see below for more information.

BICYCLE

On the face of it, the Terai is perfectly suited for cycling – the terrain is pool-table flat, there are villages every few miles and traffic is relatively sparse. However, the condition of the roads leaves a lot to be desired – a sturdy mountain bike is strongly recommended. If you run out of steam along the way, you can usually put your bike on the roof of the bus. See p86 for details of biking routes from Kathmandu to Hetauda and Hetauda to Mugling (p87), as well as general biking information.

BUS

Buses are the main form of transport around the Terai, but road safety is a big concern. Hundreds of Nepalis are killed every year in bus crashes and many expats and NGO workers prefer to fly rather than gamble on the buses. Night buses are by far the worst offenders. To maximise safety, travel in daylight hours and avoid the front seats.

Roof riding is prohibited in the Kathmandu Valley but there is no such proscription in the Terai. Riding on the luggage rack with the wind in your hair can be an exhilarating experience, but you also need to consider deadly hairpin turns and hanging power cables – all in all, it's best to stick to short local bus routes.

Buses in the Terai are divided into 'day' and 'night' services – day buses generally leave between 5am and noon, while more expensive night buses typically depart between 4pm and 6pm. There are separate ticket desks for day and night buses at many bus stations – you'll have to ask around to find the right desk. See p385 for more details on bus travel.

CAR

To avoid the hassle of local bus services, you can hire a car and driver in Kathmandu. Most travel agencies can make arrangements and the going rate for a Toyota Corolla and driver is around Rs 4000 per day, including petrol. On top of this, you must also pay for road tolls and meals and accommodation for the driver.

TRAIN

A single narrow-gauge train line runs between Janakpur and the Indian border. Foreign tourists can't cross into India via this route but the train makes for a great excursion from Janakpur – see p312 for details.

CENTRAL TERAI

Bound by the winding Tribhuvan Hwy from Kathmandu to Hetauda and the dramatic Siddhartha Hwy from Pokhara to Butwal, the central Terai is far and away the most visited part of the plains. The road from Mugling to Narayangarh is the principal route south from the Kathmandu valley and the border crossing at Sunauli is the most popular land route between India and Nepal. On the way, you can detour to Royal Chitwan National Park, the largest and most famous wilderness in Nepal, and the birthplace of the Buddha at Lumbini is just a short bus ride from Sunauli.

NARAYANGARH & BHARATPUR

056

Narayangarh (also spelt Narayangadh and Narayanghat) sits at the junction of the Mugling Hwy and the Mahendra Hwy, which runs the length of Nepal, from Mahendranagar to Kakarbhitta. It's the first major town you come to once you leave the hills and it's an important transport hub, though most people only come here to change buses on the way to Royal Chitwan National Park.

If you do find yourself stopping over, there are several small **mandirs** (temples) along the Narayani River that offer pleasing views of the forested west shore. A more rewarding detour is the 20-minute bus trip to the pilgrimage centre of **Devghat** (p274).

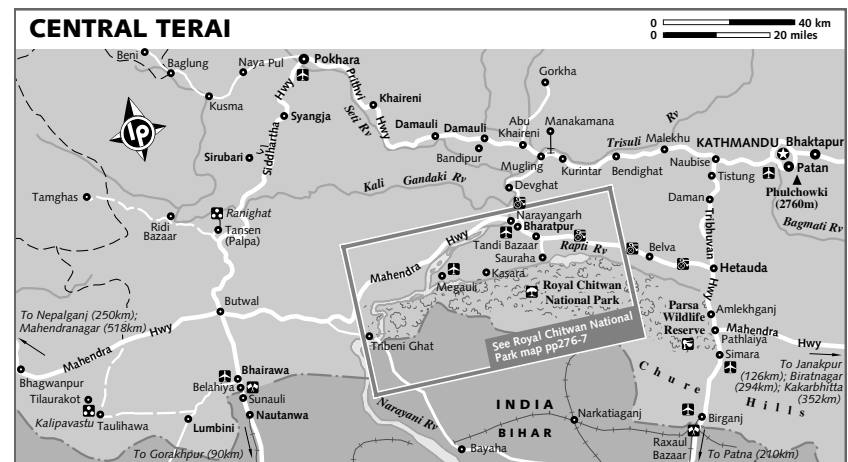
There are no foreign exchange facilities but you can check your email at **Pulchowk Cyber Cafe** (☎ 523953; per hr Rs 25; ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm).

Sleeping

There are several hotels at Pulchowk, the junction of the Mahendra Hwy and the road to Mugling, and more near the Pokhara bus stand.

Royal Rest House (☎ 522898; Pulchowk; s/d with bathroom from Rs 600/750, with air-con from Rs 1000/1200; ♿) Right on the highway at Pulchowk, the Royal has a tandoori restaurant downstairs and good rooms with hot showers upstairs. It's quite popular and it may be full if you arrive late in the day.

Regal Rest House (☎ 520755; Pulchowk; s/d without bathroom Rs 100/150, s/d with bathroom & hot water Rs



200/250) One block west, Regal is very similar. Rooms at the back are preferable to the noisy rooms at the front. The clean rooms have tiled floors and showers are hot.

Hotel Satanchuli (☎ 521151; Pokhara Bus Stand; r without bathroom from Rs 300, d with bathroom & TV Rs 500) This is the smartest option at the Pokhara bus stand. It's very clean and you can jump straight out of bed and onto the bus.

There are a couple of upmarket choices in Bharatpur, which are handy for the airport.

Island Jungle Resort Bharatpur Heights (☎ 01-4220162 in Kathmandu; www.islandjungleresort.com; r with bathroom & TV US\$15; 🍷) Run by the same people as the Island Jungle Resort at Chitwan, this upmarket place has plush rooms with TVs and hot showers, a good restaurant and a swimming pool.

Eating

All the hotels have restaurants and there's a good upmarket choice at Pulchowk.

Kitchen Café (☎ 520453; mains RS 60-200; 🍷 8am-8.30pm) Just before the bridge over the Narayani, this baroque colonial garden restaurant serves the best food in town. The spicy Chinese dishes are particularly recommended and the beers are cold.

Getting There & Away

Bharatpur (2km south of Narayangarh) is the closest airport to Royal Chitwan National Park. There are regular flights to/from Pokhara (US\$44, 20 minutes) and Kathmandu (US\$54, 30 minutes) with **RNAC** (☎ 530470) and several private airlines. In Bharatpur, the airline offices are all on the main road opposite the airport.

The main bus station, known as the Pokhara bus stand, is at the east end of town, on the road to Mugling. Buses run regularly to Pokhara (day/night Rs 120/140, four hours) and Kathmandu (day/night Rs 150/160, four hours). Minivans to both destinations leave from the road between the Mahendra Hwy and the bus station. A few buses also run north to Gorkha (Rs 90, three hours).

There are also regular buses to Butwal (Rs 80, two hours), Sunauli/Bhairawa (Rs 150, three hours), Birganj (Rs 140, three hours), Janakpur (Rs 150, six hours), Nepalganj (Rs 380; eight hours), Biratnagar (day/night Rs 380/400, nine hours), Kakarbhitta (day/night Rs 405/475, 12 hours) and Ma-

hendranagar (Rs 565, 12 hours). Buses also pull into the new bus station in Bharatpur and Pulchowk on the Mahendra Hwy.

For Chitwan, you could take a local bus to Sauraha Chowk/Tandi Bazaar (Rs 10, 20 minutes) and then a rickshaw to Sauraha, but it's usually better to take a taxi all the way from Pulchowk (Rs 600).

Around Narayangarh DEVGHAT

Hidden away in the forest about 6km northeast of Narayangarh, Devghat (Devoghat) marks the confluence of the Kali Gandaki and Trisuli Rivers, two important tributaries of the River Ganges. Hindus regard the point where the rivers meet as especially sacred and many elderly high-caste Nepalis come here to live out their final years and eventually die in the sight of god on the banks of the holy river. Far from being gloomy, it's an uplifting place and the calm, contemplative atmosphere is wonderfully soothing after the hectic pace of the plains.

The sacred confluence was first mentioned in the *Skanda Purana*, written in around the 5th century BC by Indian devotees of Shiva. The best way to see Devghat is to wander around and discover – the modern village is reached by a suspension bridge over the rushing waters of the Trisuli and the streets are lined with ashrams (spiritual training centres) and temples. From about 10am each morning, large crowds of Nepali pilgrims make their way to the exact point where the rivers meet for ritual bathing, wedding rituals, picnics and Hindu cremations.

Western visitors are rare, and as this is a holy place, you should take care to respect local attitudes. Residents are very welcoming but some devout Hindus may be offended by physical contact with non-Hindus, which includes shaking hands and sharing food or drinks. There is nowhere to stay, but there are some basic *bhojanalayas* (snack restaurants) around the suspension bridge.

On the first day of the Nepali month of Magh (in mid-January), thousands of pilgrims flock to Devghat from around Nepal and India to immerse themselves in the river to celebrate the Hindu festival of **Magh Sankranti**, which marks the end of the dark months of winter – see p363.

Getting There & Away

Local buses to Devghat (Rs 7, 20 minutes) leave from near Hotel Satanchuli at the Pokhara bus stand in Narayangarh. If you feel energetic, you can walk back along the eastern bank of the river through the forest.

ROYAL CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK

☎ 056

Royal Chitwan National Park has long been regarded as Nepal's third biggest attraction after trekking and the Kathmandu Valley. This huge and beautiful nature reserve protects 932 sq km of sal forest, water marshes and rippling grassland. The park is one of the last refuges of the endangered one-horned Indian rhino and there are sizeable populations of tigers, leopards and rare Gangetic dolphins.

Before the Maoist insurgency, Chitwan was visited by an impressive 92% of all visitors to Nepal, but tourist numbers have plummeted since 2001. The upmarket lodges inside the park still attract decent numbers of visitors, but several budget resorts in Sauraha have closed and others have dropped their rates significantly.

On one level, the wildlife has probably benefited from the reduced visitor numbers – it's a lot easier to hunt when you don't have an elephant-load of tourists shouting and scaring off your prey. However, poaching has increased significantly since the Nepali army stopped patrolling the park, and the rhino population has been hit particularly badly.

MAKING THE FOREST PAY

During the 1980s and 1990s, Chitwan experienced a wave of poaching and illegal forest clearing, linked to the desperate economic situation in the villages around the park. Army patrols were able to drive off the poachers, but fuel wood gathering proved an ongoing thorn in the side of park wardens, until the creation of the community forests at Baghmara and Kumrose.

Backed by the World Bank and the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, these two areas bordering the national park were replanted with fast growing trees to provide villagers with an alternative source of fire wood and fodder. Ownership and responsibility for the forests was then handed over to local committees, with representatives from every family in the area.

Unlike many of the Nepal government's social policies, the community forests have proved a major success. Forest clearance inside the park has fallen dramatically and the community forests have provided new economic avenues for local people in terms of nature management and eco-tourism.

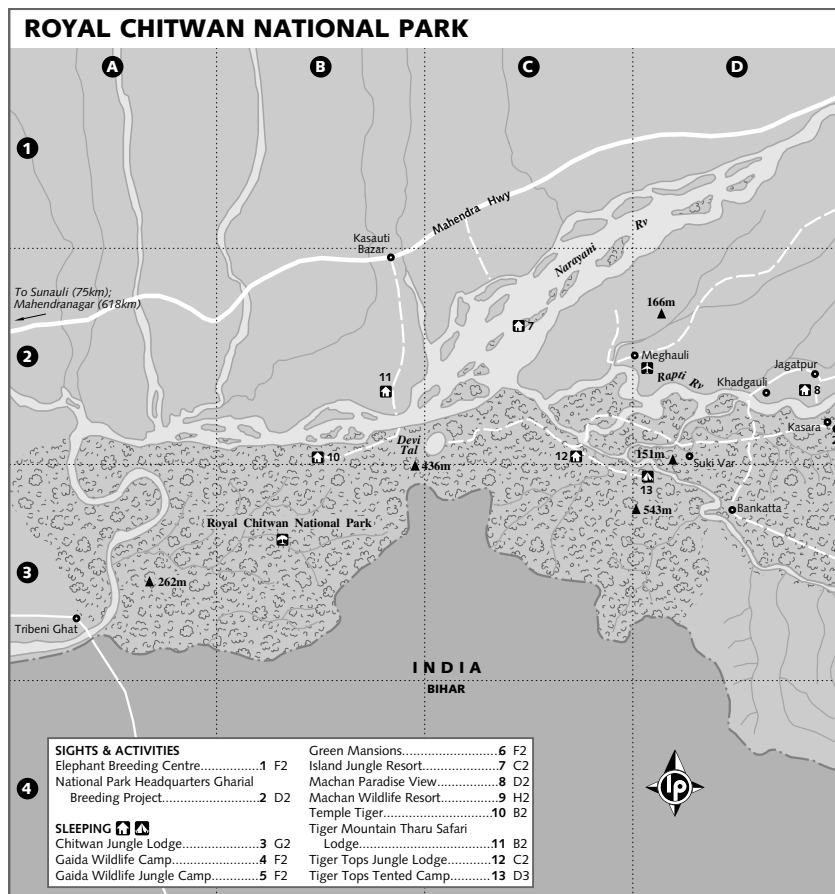
Between them, the two community forests now cover 2500 hectares, providing fuel, fodder and tourism opportunities for more than 2000 local people. Canoe and elephant safaris in Kumrose Community Forest can be arranged in Sauraha and most of Chitwan's signature species have been spotted in the reserves.

Many people visit Chitwan on package tours arranged through travel agents in Kathmandu, Pokhara or overseas. This is by far the easiest approach if you plan to stay at one of the upmarket lodges inside the park.

If you can't afford one of the expensive lodges deep inside the park, the nearby town of Sauraha is an excellent alternative. A small but lively tourist centre has grown up along the river bank about 6km south of Sauraha Chowk (Tandi Bazaar) on the Mahendra Hwy, with hotels, restaurants, bars, moneychangers, travel agents, Internet cafés and dozens of shops selling the full range of Nepali souvenirs, from pirate CDs to tiger pugmark ashtrays.

Careless development has undermined some of the safari atmosphere at Sauraha, but the setting is impressive – perched beside a wide, slow-flowing river with a wall of dense jungle looming tantalisingly on the far bank. An incredible range of jungle activities can be arranged and the surrounding countryside is a peaceful patchwork of rice fields and Tharu villages. In fact, there's probably more to do here than at the big, expensive lodges inside the park.

When planning a visit to Chitwan, try to give yourself enough time for several safaris. The wildlife is unpredictable and you can't rely on sightings every time. Two whole days in the park is really the minimum for wildlife spotting. Be aware that the popular four-day, three-night packages to Chitwan include a day of travel at either end.



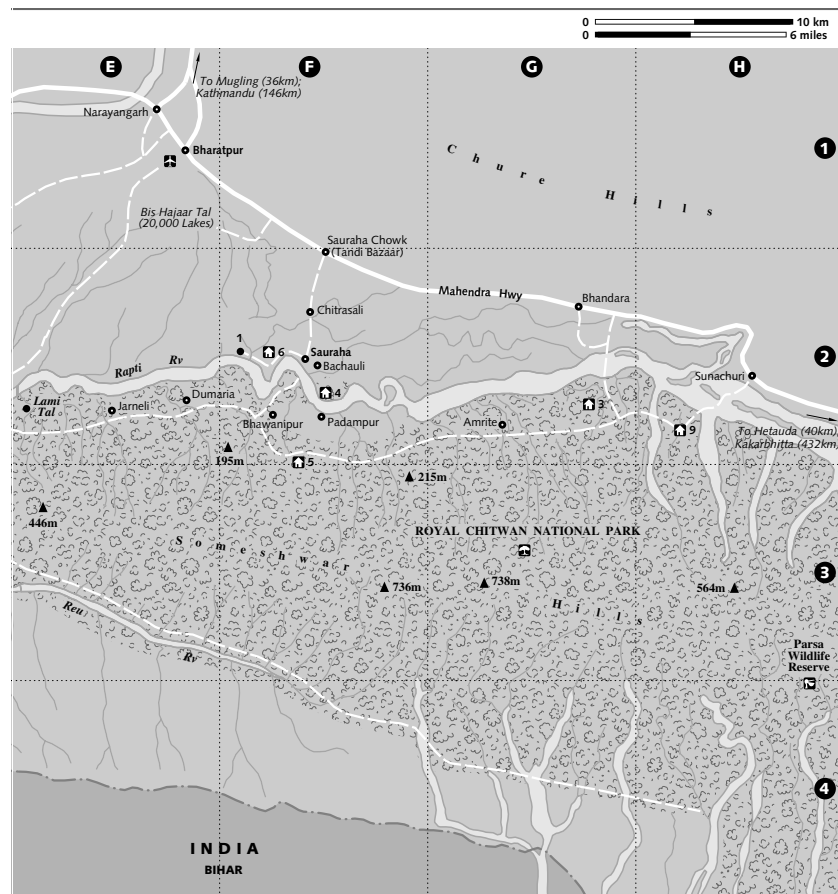
History

Royal Chitwan National Park was created in 1973, but the area has been protected since at least the 19th century as a hunting reserve for Nepali and foreign aristocrats. King George V and his son, the young Edward VIII, managed to slaughter a staggering 39 tigers and 18 rhinos during just one blood-soaked safari to Chitwan in 1911.

Despite all the toffs firing buckshot into the jungle, Chitwan's status as a hunting reserve probably protected more animals than it killed. The biggest threat to wildlife in lowland Nepal has always been habitat loss, and the forest and malarial swamps were preserved to provide cover for game, keeping human encroachment to a minimum.

Until the late 1950s, the only inhabitants of the Chitwan Valley were small communities of Tharu villagers, who were blessed with a natural resistance to malaria. After a massive malaria eradication programme in 1954, land-hungry peasants from the hills swarmed into the region and huge tracts of the forest were cleared to make space for farmland.

As their habitat disappeared, so did the tigers and rhinos. By the mid 1960s, there were fewer than 100 rhinos and 20 tigers. News of the dramatic decline reached the ears of King Mahendra and the area was declared a royal reserve, becoming a national park in 1973. Some 22,000 peasants were removed from within the park boundaries, but it was only when army patrols were introduced to



stop poaching that animal numbers really started to rebound. Chitwan was added to the Unesco World Heritage list in 1984.

At the time of the 2000 census, wildlife populations were looking quite respectable, with 544 rhinos and an estimated 80 tigers, plus 50 other species of mammals and 450 species of birds. Sadly, a lot of that ground has been lost since the start of the Maoist rebellion. Poachers have reduced rhino and tiger numbers by a quarter, selling the animals parts on to middlemen in China and Tibet. One single consignment seized near the Nepal-Tibet border in 2003 contained the pelts of 32 tigers and 579 leopards.

The situation hasn't been helped by the falling visitor numbers, which have put a

massive dent in the livelihoods of Tharu villagers around the park fringes. To make things worse, many resorts were damaged by monsoon floods in 2002, particularly around Sauraha. A swift resolution to Nepal's civil war is essential if Chitwan's endangered animals are to have any chance of survival.

Geography

Royal Chitwan National Park covers an impressive 932 sq km. A further 499 sq km is set aside as the Parsa Wildlife Reserve and new conservation areas have been created in the community forests at Baghmara and Kumrose – see the boxed text p275. Because of the topography, most tourist activities

are restricted to the floodplain of the Rapti River.

As well as the river, there are numerous *tal* (small lakes) dotted around the forest. The most interesting of these, particularly for viewing birds, are **Devi Tal** near Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge and **Lami Tal** near Kasara. There's another group of lakes and pools just outside the park boundary, known collectively as **Bis Hajaar Tal** (literally '20,000 lakes').

Plants

Around 70% of the national park is covered in sal forest, but there are also large areas of *phanta* (grassland), particularly along the banks of the Rapti and Narayani Rivers. Growing up to 8m in height, the local elephant grass provides excellent cover for rhinos and tigers. In the forest, you'll find *shisham*, kapok, *palash*, pipal and strangler fig and scarlet-flowered *kusum* trees, as well as the ubiquitous *sal*, the principal hardwood species in the Terai.

Animals

Chitwan boasts more than 50 different species of mammals, including monkeys, tigers, leopards, sloth bears, wild boar, hyenas, deer, elephants, and rhinos. Bird-watchers can tick off 450 different species of birds and butterfly-spotters have identified at least 67 species of butterfly, some as large as your hand.

The *gaida* (one-horned Indian rhinoceros) is the most famous animal at Chitwan and you stand a good chance of seeing one on an elephant safari, despite the recent upsurge in poaching. Chitwan also has significant populations of tigers, crocodiles and Gangetic dolphins – see the boxed text opposite for more on Chitwan's signature species.

As well as these high-profile animals, you may spot muntjacs (barking deer), chitals (spotted deer), *laghunas* (hog deer) and *jarayos* (sambar) and massive gaurs (Indian wild oxen) skulking in the bushes. Other predators in the park include hyenas and sloth bears, but like the tigers, these animals are threatened by the illegal trade in animal parts for Chinese medicine.

The most commonly seen monkey at Chitwan is the stocky rhesus macaque (the same monkey seen hanging around in Nepali temples) but you also stand a good chance of spotting the larger and more elegant *bandar*

(langur). These agile grey apes were used as the basis for the monkeys in Disney's cartoon of the *Jungle Book* (apart from King Louie, who was plainly an orang-utan and about 3000km from his native home in Sumatra!). Spotted deer often follow the langurs around, taking advantage of their profligate feeding habits.

Birds seen in Chitwan include bulbuls, mynahs, egrets, parakeets, jungle fowl, peacocks, kingfishers, orioles and various species of drongos. Birders should bring a pair of decent binoculars and keep an eye out for rarer species such as scarlet crested sunbirds, emerald doves, jungle owlets and crested hornbills.

Information

Sauraha's **park office and visitor centre** (☎ 521 932; admission per day foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 500/200/20; ☎ 7am-6.30pm) handles admission fees to the park. If you're staying at a lodge inside the park this is usually bundled into the overall charge, but if you stay in Sauraha you have to pay the fee separately.

There's no bank in Sauraha, but several private moneychangers accept pounds, dollars and euros in cash and travellers cheques at reasonable rates. There are a number of STD/ISD phone services in Sauraha and most also offer Internet access, although the connection is very slow (Rs 120 per hour).

When to Visit

The ideal time to visit Chitwan is from October to February, when skies are clear and the average daily temperature is a balmy 25°C. During the monsoon (May to August), many lodges close and tracks through the park become impassable. Whenever you come, remember to pack insect repellent – mosquitoes are an inescapable fact of life in the jungle and malaria is present in some areas of the park.

Dangers & Annoyances

Maoist rebels are active in the area around Chitwan and the army post and telephone exchange at Sauraha have been attacked on several occasions. In June 2005, a public bus was destroyed by a landmine near Narayangarh, killing 38 people. Travel is generally safe during ceasefires, but things can change rapidly so it's essential to check the security situation before you visit.

SIGNATURE SPECIES

Chitwan has some high profile species that everyone wants to see, including the following:

The One Horned Indian Rhino (*gaida*)

Chitwan is one of the last refuges of the rare one-horned Indian rhinoceros. Only about 2000 survive worldwide, most of them in Chitwan and nearby Kaziranga National Park in India. Until recently, Chitwan was actually exporting rhinos to other Terai parks, including Royal Bardia and Sukla Phanta in western Nepal. Sadly, poaching has increased significantly since the start of the Maoist insurgency. In 2000, there were 500 rhinos in the park, but only 372 animals were found in the 2005 census and more kills were reported throughout 2005. Nevertheless, rhinos are still one of the most commonly seen animals on elephant safaris in the park.

Indian Elephants (*hathi*)

The Indian elephant is the largest animal in the subcontinent, reaching five tonnes in weight. There are no longer any wild elephants at Chitwan, but the park has a highly successful breeding programme and dozens of domesticated elephants ferry visitors around the park on wildlife-spotting safaris. This is definitely the most interesting way to explore the park and you can even help wash the elephants at the daily elephant bathtime at Sauraha (see p280).

The Royal Bengal Tiger (*bagh*)

This lean, mean, killing machine is the top predator in the jungles of Nepal and the cunning, intelligence and savage power of the royal Bengal tiger make it one of the most feared animals in the subcontinent. Both locals and foreigners have been attacked by tigers at Chitwan – something to think about before joining a guided walk. There are currently around 60 tigers in Chitwan – sightings are rare as tigers lay low during daylight hours, but keep your eyes peeled.

Marsh Muggers

The most common large reptile in Chitwan, the marsh mugger, is a distant relative of the Australian saltwater crocodile. This small, stocky croc grows to 4m and feeds on anything it can catch, including humans. In case you were wondering, the word 'mugger' originally comes from India – the British borrowed the term after observing marsh muggers dragging unsuspecting villagers to a sudden watery grave!

Ghariahs

Another distant relative of the Australian saltie, the gharial is a bizarre looking beast, with a slender, elongated snout crammed with ill-fitting teeth. In fact, the gharial is perfectly evolved for its diet of river fish – 110 million-year-old fossils have been found with exactly the same body plan. Ghariahs are endangered, but there are breeding programmes at Chitwan and other national parks and young ghariahs have been released into many rivers in the Terai.

Gangetic Dolphins (*susu*)

Perhaps the rarest of all animals at Chitwan, the Gangetic or freshwater dolphin is occasionally seen in the Narayani and Rapti Rivers. This freshwater relative of the oceanic dolphins is almost completely blind and it hunts using sonar in the murky waters of Nepal's rivers. There are estimated to be only a hundred surviving dolphins in Nepal, with fewer than 20 in the waterways of Chitwan.

Another small but significant risk comes from the wildlife in the park. Tigers, leopards and rhinos are all quite capable of killing human beings, and there have been serious attacks on tourists taking guided

walks through the park. Most people have a good experience on jungle walks, but you should be aware that there's a small but significant risk – being chased by a rhino seems a lot less funny when you consider

the phrase 'trampled to death'. See the boxed text p282 for a first-person account of a tiger attack at the reserve!

Bugs are another unwelcome aspect of life in the jungle. Mosquitoes are present in large numbers year round and during the monsoon, the forest comes alive with *jukha* (leeches). See p395 for tips on how to deal with these pests. There is also a small risk of contracting typhus fever from a tick bite – always inspect exposed skin after walking.

Sights

NATIONAL PARK HEADQUARTERS

The main **National Park Headquarters** (☎ 521932; ☎ 7am-6.30pm) is inside the park at Kasara, about 13km west of Sauraha on the south bank of the Rapti River. Most people visit as part of an organised jungle safari and there's a small visitor centre with displays on wildlife and a gharial breeding project where you can see these kooky-looking reptiles up close.

There's also a smaller **National Park Visitors Centre** (☎ 7am-6.30pm) in Sauraha, with displays on wildlife and an office where you can book rides on park elephants. Every lunchtime, dozens of elephants come to the river for their daily bath and the main elephant breeding centre is a short cycle ride west of the centre.

ELEPHANT BREEDING CENTRE

About 3km west of Sauraha on the far side of the small Bhude Rapti River, this interesting **breeding centre** (☎ 580154; foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 50/25/10; ☎ 6am-6pm) supplies most of the el-

ephants for elephant safaris at Chitwan. The elephants spend much of the day grazing in the jungle so come before 10.30am or after 3.30pm if you want to see the indescribably cute baby elephants. Look out for mahouts preparing *kuchiis* – elephant sweets made from molasses and rice wrapped in grass. The breeding centre is an easy walk or cycle along the road past Lun Tara – a canoe ferry carries visitors across the Bhude Rapti River for a nominal charge.

ELEPHANT POLO

About 25km southwest of Narayangarh, the Tharu village of Meghauli is a sleepy place, full of thatched huts and wandering chickens, and there is no tourist development, though plans are afoot to develop the town for cultural tours. However, the town wakes up every December for the annual **Elephant Polo Championships**, a jumbo-sized sporting spectacular held on the Meghauli airstrip. The event attracts teams from around the world, including several countries that don't have native elephants. Few travellers visit at other times, but you can get here by bike from Sauraha or by local bus from Narayangarh.

BIRD EDUCATION SOCIETY

Run by local volunteers, this friendly **bird-watching centre** (☎ 580113; www.besnepal.org; ☎ 7am-5.50pm) should be the first port of call for birders, twitchers and other avian enthusiasts. The centre has a library of bird books and a binocular rental service (Rs 10/80 per hour/day) and they also have guided bird-watching excursions every Saturday from 7am to 11am. There's no charge but donations help fund the activities.

THARU CULTURAL SHOW

Most of the big park lodges put on shows of traditional Tharu songs and dances for guests, including the popular stick dance, where a great circle of men whack their sticks together in time – it's the Nepali equivalent of Morris dancing! It's very much a tourist experience, but the shows are fun and they provide employment for local people. In Sauraha, there's a nightly performance at the **Tharu Culture Program**, near the Rainforest Guest House. The show starts at 7.30pm each evening and tickets cost Rs 60.

PACHYDERM POLO *Bradley Mayhew*

One of Nepal's more unusual spectator sports is the annual World Elephant Polo Championships, held every November at Tiger Tops in Meghauli. Eight international teams compete during the week-long tournament, though local heroes the 'Tiger Tops Tuskers' are always firm favourites. Each game consists of two 10-minute *chukkas* of playing time, with a 10-minute interval. Players are tied onto the elephants by rope but if they happen to fall off their elephant, play is stopped while they remount. Scotland are the current reigning world champions, which is a bit odd.

Each team consists of elephants with a range of speeds – the best player tends to go on the fastest, smallest elephant. Each elephant has a *mahout* (driver), as well as a player with a 2m mallet. As the website says 'it's slower than horse polo but faster than you might think!'

Elephants seem to love the game, so much so that the initial use of soccer balls had to be abandoned after the animals realised how much fun it was to stamp on and explode the balls. One of the first rules made it a foul for any elephant to lie down in front of the goal mouth, since scoring then becomes almost impossible.

It may come as no surprise to hear that the sport was allegedly invented during a heavy bout of drinking... For more details see the website www.elephantpolo.com.

THARU VILLAGES

Sauraha is surrounded by small Tharu villages that provide a glimpse of life on the Terai plains. You can explore many of the villages by bike or on foot, but resist the urge to hand out sweets, pens and money. If you want to help local people, shop in the village shops or eat in village *bhojanalayas*. Farming is the main industry and many people still decorate their houses with Mithila paintings and adobe bas-reliefs of animals. The nearest Tharu village is **Bachauli**, east of Sauraha towards Gaida Wildlife Camp.

Activities

There are loads of ways to keep busy at Chitwan. The following sections cover the most popular options, but special trips can be arranged for bird-watchers and other special interest groups.

ELEPHANT RIDES

Lumbering through the jungle on the back of a five tonne jumbo is by far the best way to see wildlife in the park. Elephant-back safaris offer a fantastic vantage point high above the tall grasses of the *phanta* and the wildlife is much more tolerant of elephants than of noisy jeeps or walkers.

Riding an elephant is thrilling rather than comfortable. Elephants move with a heavy, rolling gait and three or four passengers are crammed into each wooden *howdah* (riding platform). Each elephant is controlled by a *pahit* (mahout), who works with the same elephant throughout its life.

There are both private and government-owned elephants in the park but there isn't much difference in price and all safaris run in the early morning or late afternoon.

Government-Owned Elephants

The national park has its own herd of domesticated elephants, and jungle safaris (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 1000/400/200) leave the visitor centre at Sauraha daily at 8am and 4pm. There are no advance bookings so you should come to the national park visitor centre at 6am or 1pm to buy a ticket. Safaris last 1½ hours and run through the dense *phanta* along the Rapti River, a favourite feeding ground for deer and rhinos.

Privately Owned Elephants

Most of the lodges inside the park have their own elephants and elephant safaris are included in most package tours. In Sauraha, you can arrange inexpensive elephant safaris through **Unique** (☎ 580080) and **United** (☎ 580219). Both run morning and afternoon safaris in the Kumrose Community Forest, a buffer zone on the east edge of the park with decent wildlife populations. Safaris last 2½ hours and the cost is Rs 550, plus the park fees.

JUNGLE WALKS

Visitors are allowed to enter the park on foot with a mandatory guide and this can be a fantastic way to get close to the wildlife. However, several people have been attacked by rhinos and tigers over the years – see the

ELEPHANT BATHTIME

There are few experiences that create such a feeling of childlike wonder as helping to bath an elephant. Every day from 11am to noon, the elephants in Sauraha march down to the river near the Riverside Hotel for their morning scrub and everyone turns out to watch the spectacle. If you bring your swimming costume, you can join in the fun. There's no better way of cooling off on a hot day than sitting on the back of a submerged elephant and shouting *chhop!* – if you get the accent right you'll be rewarded with a refreshing trunk-full of cold water! Lodges with their own elephants offer similar elephant bathtimes at similar times.

CHASED BY A TIGER *Joop van Pijkeren, Netherlands*

We were some of the first tourists to enter the park early in the morning and it was still misty. We hadn't been walking long when our guide suddenly gave us a signal. We froze and saw a small yellowish animal running away a few metres in front of us. We initially thought it was a leopard, but suddenly a huge tiger leapt out in front of us and brought down one of our guides with its claws. We were terrified!

The tiger disappeared into the bush then wheeled around for a second attack – we could see its enormous head coming through the bush and hear it roaring. Our guides beat the tiger back with walking sticks while we stood terrified behind them. Then one of our guides hit the tiger hard on the nose and it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. We were all alive, we had survived a tiger attack in Nepal and we had a second chance at life.

We decided to continue the walk – after all, what were the chances of getting attacked by a tiger twice in one day? Minutes later we saw the footprints of an adult tiger and cub – obviously the tigress had a baby and was protecting it.

boxed text above for a first-person account of a tiger attack in Chitwan. Generally, the bigger the group, the safer the walk, but the experience of your guide counts for a lot. Levels of experience vary and some of the guides have a worryingly devil-may-care attitude to creeping up on rhinos.

Walks can be arranged through any of the lodges or travel agents in Sauraha. The going rate is Rs 400 for a half-day and Rs 600 to Rs 800 for a full day and you'll also have to pay the daily park fees.

You can also arrange overnight trips to the Kumrose Community Forest for Rs 500 per person. Walkers spend the night on top of the wildlife viewing tower, enveloped by the noises of the jungle. Supper, breakfast and a sleeping bag are included in the price.

CANOEOING

An altogether more relaxing way to explore the park is on a canoeing trip on the Rapti or Narayani River. You have a good chance of spotting water birds and crocodiles and if you get really lucky, you might even catch a glimpse of a rare Gangetic dolphin. Canoe trips from Sauraha cost Rs 850 per person, which includes a one-hour trip down river, followed by a two-hour guided walk back to Sauraha, with a stop at the elephant breeding centre.

4WD SAFARIS

It may not have quite the same romance as riding through the jungle on the back of an elephant, but jeep safaris are another popular way to explore the national park. Animals are less phased by the rumble of

jeep engines than you might suspect and you'll have the opportunity to get much deeper into the jungle.

The route for safaris depends on the current security situation and the state of the roads after the monsoon – popular destinations include Bis Hajaar Tal, Lami Tal and the gharial crocodile-breeding centre near Kasara. Half-day safaris start at Rs 800 per person. You'll pay Rs 8000 per jeep for a full-day safari, so try to get a group together to reduce the cost.

CYCLING

You can't cycle inside the park itself, but the surrounding countryside is ideal for bicycle touring. You can visit dozens of small Tharu farming communities where you're guaranteed to be mobbed by enthusiastic children. Another possible destination is Bis Hajaar Tal, a collection of bird-filled lakes and ponds about 1½ hours northwest of Sauraha, accessible via the Mahendra Hwy.

Mountain bikes made in India can be rented from various shops in Sauraha for around Rs 70 per half day and Rs 140 per full day.

For information on a mountain bike trip that passes Chitwan see p87.

SWIMMING

There are some excellent swimming holes and rivers to splash around in at Chitwan, but you need to be a little careful as marsh muggers are not averse to the odd human meal. The golden rule is only swim where there are large numbers of people. The northern bank of the Rapti River is a popular

spot for a dip, but watch out for the current and avoid the south bank. Seek local advice before swimming elsewhere in the park.

If you've brought your swimming costume, don't miss the chance to help out at elephant bathing – see p280.

Sleeping

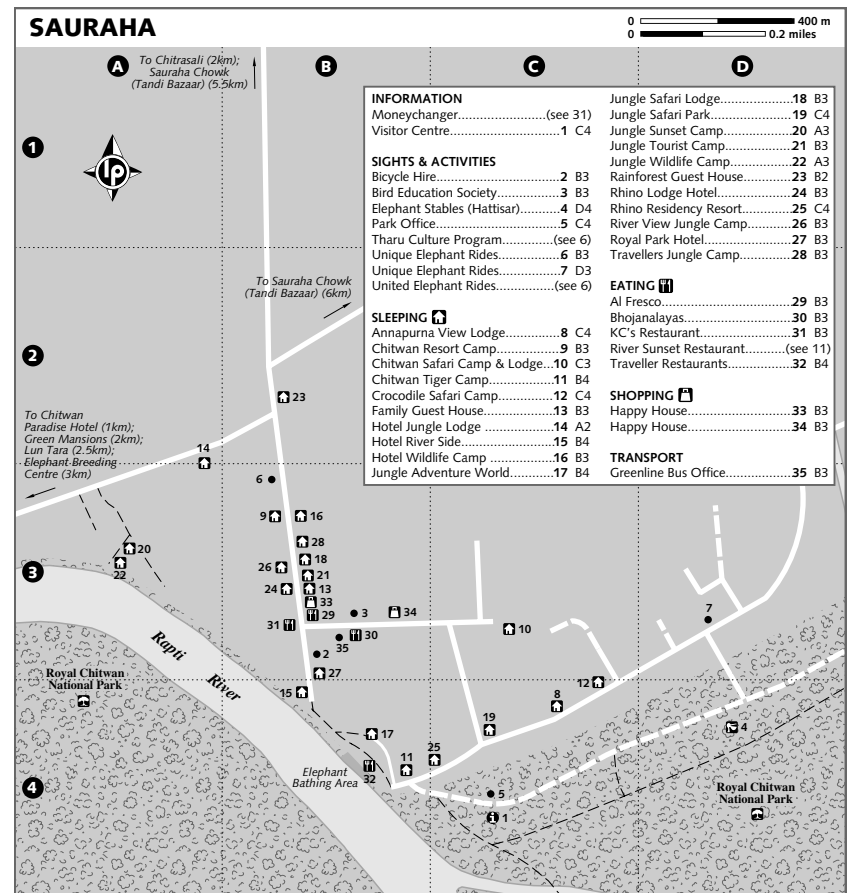
You can stay either inside the park, or at Sauraha, the small traveller centre on the north shore of the Rapti River. Wherever you stay, be aware that visitor numbers are greatly reduced at Chitwan. You may prefer the company of an organised tour to being the only guest at a lodge outside the park.

One important consideration at Chitwan is when to shower – almost all of the lodges

use environmentally friendly solar showers, but these only provide hot water at the end of the day, not in the morning. Another consideration is mosquitos – most places have nets but bring repellent or you *will* get bitten.

INSIDE THE NATIONAL PARK

By far the most atmospheric way to visit Chitwan is to stay at one of the upmarket resorts inside the park. The resorts are expensive, but it's hard to put a price on the experience of staying deep in the forest, surrounded by the sounds of the jungle. Most of the lodges offer a choice of Tharu-style jungle cottages or comfortable safari tents, all with private bathrooms and hot showers. The lodges all have bars and restaurants but



there are few other mod cons, reflecting the 'getting back to nature' ethos.

Most people visit the lodges on package tours arranged from Kathmandu or Pokhara. The standard package last three days and two nights and the rates include all meals and activities once you arrive, including elephant rides, jungle walks, canoe trips and cultural shows. Drinks are not included and you may also have to pay the park entry fees (see p278). Transport to the resorts is also extra, and it can be expensive as most transfers involve a rented car and driver. You can make arrangements directly through the resorts or go through a travel agent in Kathmandu or Pokhara.

The following rates are based on two people sharing – if you come alone, you'll pay a 50% surcharge. All the lodges inside the park charge 13% government tax. Most of the park resorts have lowered their rates because of falling visitor numbers, and this is reflected in the prices quoted here. It may be worth inquiring about additional discounts, but as most visitors arrive on prepaid package tours, there is no real incentive for the lodges to cut prices for walk-in guests.

Easily the most famous accommodation at Chitwan, the three **Tiger Tops lodges** (☎ 01-4361500 in Kathmandu; www.tigermountain.com) are run by Tiger Mountain, which also manages the Tiger Mountain Lodge in Pokhara and the Karnali Jungle Lodge and Tented Camp at Bardia. The company has a deserved reputation for high standards and the facilities, guides and overall ethos are superb. Rates at all the lodges include meals and activities, but not park fees. The Jungle Lodge and Tented Camp close from May to September, when the jungle roads become impassable. Children aged three to 10 pay half the adult rates.

Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge (packages per person per night US\$350; discounts available May-Sep) The original tree-top guesthouse that forged the Tiger Tops brand. The famous stilt houses are still some of the most characterful accommodation anywhere in Nepal and everything is constructed from local materials. The lodge sits beside the small Reu Khola at the western end of the park and the spacious rooms have solar-powered lights and fans and solar-heated water. There are always elephants wandering about the place, adding to the jungle atmosphere.

Tiger Tops Tented Camp (packages per person per night US\$200; discounts available May-Sep) 3km east of the Jungle Lodge in the serene Surung Valley, this feels much more like a traditional jungle safari and it's easy to imagine what life must have been like for the *pukkah sahibs* (colonial gentlemen) who came here to hunt in the early 20th century. The comfortable safari tents have twin beds, modern bathrooms and small balconies and there's a delightful raised bar and restaurant.

Tiger Mountain Tharu Safari Lodge (packages per person per night US\$200; discounts available May-Sep; 📍) This is the newest addition to the Tiger Tops family. Located outside the park boundary on the north bank of the Narayani River, it doesn't have quite the same jungle feel as the other Tiger Tops lodges but rooms are contained in attractive Tharu-style long houses, decorated with Mithila paintings, and there's a stylish restaurant and pool.

Temple Tiger (☎ 01-4221637 in Kathmandu; www.catmando.com/temple-tiger; packages per person per night US\$250) On the south bank of the Narayani River in the west of the park, Temple Tiger offers raised wooden cabins with thatched roofs and private bathrooms, each with a private viewing platform looking over the *phanta*. Rates are high but the camp is surrounded by dense jungle – it's the real safari deal. Children under 12 are charged 50%. Park fees are extra.

Island Jungle Resort (☎ 01-4220162 in Kathmandu; www.islandjungleresort.com; 3-day/2-night package per person US\$230; discount of 20% Jun-Sep) This place has a superb location on a large island in the middle of the Narayani River at the western end of the park. The cottages at the main resort are simple but tasteful and decorated with animal paintings. There's a lovely riverside breakfast terrace, plus the obligatory Tharu-style restaurant and bar. Children aged three to 10 are charged 50%. Rates include park fees.

Gaida Wildlife Camp (☎ 01-4215409/4215431 in Kathmandu; www.visitnepal.com/gaida; safari tents/bungalows per person US\$100/110, not incl park fees; 📍 Oct-May) Gaida is the closest lodge to Sauraha and it's the only park accommodation on the north bank of the Rapti River. Visitors have a choice of appealing timber bungalows at the main lodge or safari tents at the Gaida Wildlife Jungle Camp, across the river at the base of the Sameshwar hills. Wildlife is not particularly prolific at the

main camp, but there are loads of animals around the jungle camp. You can stay in both as part of the same package. There's an extra camping fee of US\$7 per person per night for the jungle camp.

Chitwan Jungle Lodge (☎ 01-4422240 in Kathmandu; www.chitwanjunglelodge.com; 3-day/2-night package US\$220, additional nights US\$100) Set on the south bank of the Rapti River in the eastern part of Chitwan, this sensitively-themed resort makes extensive use of thatch and natural materials. There's a very inviting open-air bar and restaurant and the spacious rooms are lined with reed matting. Rates include park fees and children pay half rates. The resort is closed from June to August.

Machan Wildlife Resort (☎ 01-4225501; www.nepalinformation.com/machan; package rates per person 1-/2-nights US\$110/220, additional nights US\$90, discounts of 30% May-Sep; 📍) At the eastern end of the park, this attractive place is the closest resort to the Parsa Wildlife Reserve. Wildlife is plentiful around the resort and guests stay in well-designed, timber-frame bungalows with bathrooms, set among the trees. The striking Mithila paintings on the walls were created by women from the villages around Janakpur. Facilities here include a delightful natural swimming pool, a bar and restaurant and a video library of wildlife films.

For more creature comforts, **Machan Paradise View** is a large, modern hotel-style resort set in large grounds near the park headquarters at Kasara, charging the same rates. Park fees are extra.

SAURAHA

Most independent travellers to Chitwan stay in the village of Sauraha, on the northern fringes of the park. There are dozens of lodges and resorts here, from upmarket package tour places to simple cottage resorts run by local villagers. However, visitor numbers are significantly down from the levels seen before the start of the insurgency. It may be some time before the tourism revival seen in Kathmandu and Pokhara spills over to Chitwan.

Most of the resorts and hotels are strung out along the National Park boundary or the road to Chitrasali, but there are also some laid-back options on the road to the Elephant Breeding Centre. Most resort names are made up of some combination of the words jungle, safari, wildlife, river,

DISCOUNTS

At the time of writing, most of the lodges at Sauraha were offering significant discounts on their printed rates – as much as 50% in some cases. If lodges offer discounts, we have mentioned this in the reviews. Places that don't offer discounts have usually dropped their prices as low as they can go, but it may still be worth asking when you check in. In these difficult times, competition is doubly fierce and most of the lodges send jeeps to the bus stand at Chitrasali to jostle for customers. The villagers of Sauraha are some of the friendliest people in Nepal so try not to let this colour your view of the place.

park, resort, lodge and camp – read the signs carefully to make sure you are going to the right place.

Budget

All the budget options are very similar so choosing between them is often just a spot decision. Most lodges consist of simple mud-and-thatch cottages with small verandas, set around a central restaurant in a small tropical garden. You'll normally have a choice of shared or private bathrooms and most places have solar powered showers which only run hot after a few hours of morning sunshine. Call ahead to make sure the following places are open for business before turning up at the door.

Jungle Adventure World (☎ 580064; jaw_resort@hotmail.com; cottages Rs 500, discounts of 20%) Handy for the park entrance and the riverside restaurants, this place has recently been taken over by Buddhist owners, which explains all the prayer flags and Tibetan wall hangings. The bungalows are very inviting and each has a solar shower.

River View Jungle Camp (☎ 580096; adhikari46@hotmail.com; cottages from Rs 400) A decent place, with several different styles of cottages and a long garden with viewing towers looking over the river. The mood is calm and the rooms are tidy.

Travellers Jungle Camp (☎ 580013; tiger@gnet.com.np; s/d with bathroom Rs 200/400, r with tub Rs 500) Across the road, Travellers Jungle Camp has its own elephant stand and cottages are decorated with bird murals. Rooms are spic

and span, as are the grounds, and these are the cheapest bathtubs in town.

Hotel Wildlife Camp (☎ 580322; www.hotelwildlifecamp.com; cottages with bathroom Rs 300, r in villa Rs 500-1000; discounts of 20%) Rates are refreshingly low at this big package place on the road north from the bazaar. The hotel is set in a neatly manicured garden full of royal palms and you have a choice of tidy modern cottages or two-storey villas with balconies. It's often full so call ahead.

Annapurna View Lodge (☎ 580072; 2-bed cottages Rs 100, s/d with bathroom from Rs 150/200) Opposite the army post, this is one of the better budget places and the pleasant garden is divided into small squares by miniature hedges. Rooms are in long blocks and all have fans, mozzie nets and bathrooms.

Crocodile Safari Camp (☎ 580053; cottages with bathroom Rs 150-200) Back from the river near the park entrance, this is another option for travellers who are watching the pennies. It's fairly rustic but the owners are friendly and the cottages are clean.

Lun Tara (☎ 580145; www.luntara-nepal.com; r without bathroom Rs 300, with bathroom US\$10-20) If you're a getting-back-to-nature kind of person, look no further than Lun Tara, about 3km west of Sauraha near the Elephant Breeding Centre. Everything here has been designed with utmost consideration for the environment. The Tharu-style cottages have lots of home comforts, the restaurant serves tasty Thai, Italian and Nepali meals and various wellness activities are available on site. The connection to Chitrasali and Sauraha is by horse and cart.

Chitwan Safari Camp & Lodge (☎ 580078; cottages Rs 300) Set among mustard fields at the back of the village, this place benefits from a quiet location and friendly local owners. It's a short walk from both the bazaar and the park entrance.

Family Guest House (☎ 580081; old&wild@hotmail.com; r without bathroom Rs 250) Close to the main bazaar, this small village-style resort has clean, economically priced rooms in an intimate garden.

Chitwan Resort Camp (☎ 580082; ☎ 01-4227711 in Kathmandu; r with bathroom Rs 400, discounts of 20%) The best of several very similar places on the road leading north from the bazaar, Chitwan Resort Camp has attractive cottages with latticed verandas, set in a maze of tiny topiary.

Hotel Jungle Lodge (☎ 580006; ☎ 01-4443599 in Kathmandu; www.hjlchitwan.com; r with bathroom from Rs 500, discounts of 20%) A long-established place in a shady garden on the northwest edge of Sauraha. Rooms are in raised huts with bathrooms, wooden floors and verandas. It's all quite tasteful and there's a big central restaurant.

Rainforest Guest House (☎ 580007; sharad2029@yahoo.com; cottages without bathroom Rs 100, r with bathroom Rs 200-300) At the northern end of town, this place has a wide choice of rooms, from basic thatched cottages to hotel rooms with bathrooms in a modern concrete block.

Jungle Sunset Camp (☎ 580112; jungle_sunset@hotmail.com; cottages with shared bathroom Rs 150, r with private bathroom Rs 200-300) A cheap and cheerful option right on the river bank, with a modern hotel block at the back and simple cottages at the front. It's just off the road to the Elephant Breeding Centre.

Jungle Wildlife Camp (☎ 580093; junglewcamp@yahoo.com; r with bathroom Rs 250) Next door, this place has two green hotel blocks in a modest garden and a sundeck right by the water. Rooms are simple but clean with mosquito nets, fans and large bathrooms with solar showers.

Jungle Tourist Camp (☎ 580030; www.adventurechitwan.com.np; cottages Rs 300, discounts of 20%) Out on the edge of the village, this isn't a bad choice. Clean rooms with bed nets and lino floors are set in a small garden.

Midrange

Most of the midrange lodges are set up for visitors on package tours, but all give out rooms to independent travellers if there are vacancies. With the current discounts, some of these places are excellent value – you can get a top notch room with private bathroom and balcony for as little as US\$10/15 per single/double.

Many hotels offer their own packages, with accommodation, meals and various jungle activities. The standard package lasts three days and two nights – you'll have to make your own way to Sauraha, but lodges will pick you up from Chitrasali. Alternatively, you can book an all inclusive package with transfers by bus, plane or car through any travel agency in Pokhara or Kathmandu.

Rhino Residency Resort (☎ 580095; ☎ 01-4420431 in Kathmandu; www.rhino-residency.com; 3-day/2-night package US\$200, s/d room only US\$50/60,

discounts of 50%; ☎ ☎) Right by the entrance to the national park, this elegant resort has rooms in slate-roofed bungalows with flagstone patios. The styling falls somewhere between English Regency and Malay Colonial and there's a pool, bar and restaurant. Discounts extend to the tour packages.

Royal Park Hotel (☎ 580061; www.royalparkhotel.com.np; 1-day/2-night packages US\$80, r only per night US\$20) Set in grounds you could get lost in, this appealing upmarket hotel has an open-air bar, a restaurant full of old photos and rooms in elegant, widely spaced cottages or two-storey villas in the garden. Rates include breakfast and there's a tiny pool, though it's not always full. Rooms are the best in town for wheelchair users.

Hotel River Side (☎ 580009; hrriverside@hotmail.com; downstairs r with bathroom Rs 500, 1st-/2nd-fl r US\$15/25, discounts of 30%) This big, modern block by the river is much more attractive once you get round the back. There's a riverside restaurant, a garden full of hammocks and a good selection of well-maintained rooms with carpets, reed furniture and powerful fans.

Rhino Lodge Hotel (☎ 580065; rhinolodge@wlink.com.np; downstairs/1st-fl r with bathroom US\$10/15, discounts of 30%) A large modern two-storey place set in a large, well-kept garden that runs most of the way to the river. Rooms on the second floor have garden and river views. It's popular with package groups so book in advance.

Jungle Safari Lodge (☎ 580046, in Kathmandu ☎ 01-4416300; www.nepal-safari.com; r from US\$50, with air-con & TV US\$40, discounts of 50%; ☎ ☎) Set back from the road in a huge garden, this is more like a hotel than a jungle resort. Rooms are cavernous and extremely comfortable and some have bathtubs. The cottages here are currently not in use.

Chitwan Paradise Hotel (☎ 580048, in Kathmandu ☎ 01-4444544; paradise@mos.com.np; 3-day/2-night package US\$60, cottages only Rs 800, discounts of 20%) Down the road to the Elephant Breeding Centre, this calm and modern place has a lovingly manicured lawn that could have been trimmed with nail scissors. Rooms are in tidy, modern bungalows and a portion of the profits goes to rural communities.

Chitwan Tiger Camp (☎ 580060; www.chitwanti.gercamp.com; standard/deluxe r with bathroom Rs 400/800, discounts of 20%; ☎ ☎) A timely refurbishment is raising standards at Tiger Camp, but

the riverside restaurant is still the main attraction. Rooms are housed in an odd assortment of buildings: deluxe rooms are upstairs, standard rooms are downstairs.

Jungle Safari Park (☎ 580128; in Kathmandu ☎ 01-4263054, www.islandjungleresort.com; r with bathroom Rs 500-1000, discounts of 30%) The location by the army camp may put some people off, but the brick cottages here are modern and well looked after and the lodge arranges its own elephant safaris. Ask about package rates including activities.

Green Mansions (☎ 580088, in Kathmandu ☎ 01-4221854; green@mansions.wlink.com.np; 3-day/2-night packages US\$190, additional nights US\$80, discounts of 20%) An upmarket option near the Elephant Breeding Centre, Green Mansions is pleasantly low-key and the smart tiled cottages are tastefully styled with plenty of local trim.

Eating

Most lodges have restaurants and there are several independent places in the main bazaar at Sauraha. All serve jungle-themed cocktails and a familiar menu of travellers fare – Nepali, Indian, Italian, Mexican, you know the drill. One unusual European dish to join the throng is *patatje oorlog* – an unlikely-sounding combination of chips, mayonnaise, ketchup, onions, and peanut-sauce, invented in Holland.

Al Fresco (mains Rs 50-200; ☎ 6am-10pm) Probably the best of the terrace restaurants, with two levels, street-side views and all your traveller favourites.

KC's Restaurant (mains Rs 70-300; ☎ 6am-10pm) The most upmarket choice at Sauraha, KC's is set in a Spanish-style hacienda with an open terrace and a fire pit at the back. The chefs here cook up a feast and the menu runs from Nepali and Indian curries to pizzas and pasta.

There's another cluster of laid-back traveller restaurants on the sandy banks of the river that get quite busy around elephant bathing and sunset. Probably the most popular is **River Sunset Restaurant** (meals Rs 40-200; ☎ 6am-10pm), attached to Chitwan Tiger Camp.

For real bargain basement meals, there are a few rustic *bhojanalayas* in the bazaar.

Shopping

Souvenir shops in Sauraha sell the usual range of Tibetan, Kashmiri and Nepali arts and crafts. Local specialties include tiger

pugmark ashtrays and wood carvings of elephants and rhinos, including dubious mating scenes. For something a bit more upmarket, head to **Happy House** (☎ 580026; 🕒 7am-9pm) near the Al Fresco Restaurant (there's a branch near the Bird Education Society). This small, family-run business produces its own honey (in various delectable varieties) and sells gorgeous Mithila paintings produced by women's craft co-operatives near Janakpur.

Getting There & Away

AIR

When there is sufficient tourist demand, Yeti has daily scheduled flights from Kathmandu to the tiny runway at Meghauri for US\$82, but you'll need to make advance arrangements with your lodge for a pick-up as there is nothing in Meghauri. If you're bound for Sauraha, it's better to fly into Bharatpur near Narayangarh and take a taxi. RNAC and several private airlines offer daily flights to Bharatpur from Kathmandu (US\$54 to US\$70, 30 minutes) and Pokhara (US\$44, 20 minutes). A taxi from the airport to Sauraha will cost around Rs 600. Travel agents and hotels can make bookings.

BUS

By far the easiest way to reach Chitwan is by tourist bus from Kathmandu or Pokhara. In either direction, the journey takes six to seven hours and the fare is Rs 300 to Rs 350,

depending on which travel agent you book with. Buses leave from the Mustang bus stand in Pokhara and the Thamel end of Kantipath in Kathmandu at 7am. The final stop is Chitrasali, about 5km from Sauraha – jeeps and hotel touts wait at the bus park to transfer new arrivals to Sauraha for Rs 50. There's no obligation to commit to staying at any particular resort, regardless of what the touts say. In the opposite direction, buses leave Chitrasali at 9.30am. Any hotel or travel agent can make bookings.

A more comfortable option is the daily air-con bus operated by **Greenline** (☎ 560126), which runs to Kathmandu or Pokhara for US\$10 including brunch. From Kathmandu or Pokhara it leaves at 7.30am; from Chitrasali, it leaves at 8am.

You can pick up public buses to Kathmandu and Pokhara and destinations in the Terai at Sauraha Chowk (also known as Tandi Bazaar), on the Mahendra Hwy about 6km north of Sauraha. However, it's usually easier to take a local bus to Narayangarh (Rs 10, 20 minutes) and change there – see p274 for more information.

CAR

Travel agents and upmarket lodges can arrange transfers to Chitwan by private car. The going rate for a car and driver is around US\$60 and the journey from Pokhara or Kathmandu takes about five hours. Cars usually drop guests off at the turn-offs to

the resorts and you must complete the journey by lodge 4WD or elephant!

RAFT

A rather more interesting way to arrive at Chitwan is by river raft. Most of the big Kathmandu rafting operators offer trips down the Trisuli and Narayani Rivers, culminating at the national park, usually as part of a package tour. Don't expect wild white water – the rafting experience is more of a leisurely drift – but there are some fine views and the sandy beaches along the river-side offer great camping spots.

Mugling is the main embarkation point on the Prithvi Hwy, about halfway between Kathmandu and Pokhara. It takes two or three days to raft down to Chitwan. Most people combine rafting with a safari package in the national park – expect to pay around US\$80 per person for the rafting section of the trip. Most rafting companies (see p90) can make arrangements – however, trips only run if there is enough demand.

Getting Around

BICYCLE & MOTORCYCLE

Several shops in Sauraha rent out bicycles that are perfectly good for exploring the surrounding villages; the going rate is Rs 140 per day.

A few places rent out decrepit motorbikes for Rs 150 per hour or Rs 500 per day, but make sure the bikes start up properly before heading off into the Styx.

JEEP

Shared jeeps to Chitrasali cost Rs 50 but they only leave to coincide with the departure of the tourist buses. A reserve jeep will cost Rs 200 to Chitrasali, Rs 400 to Sauraha Chowk/Tandi Bazaar and Rs 600 to the airport at Bharatpur.

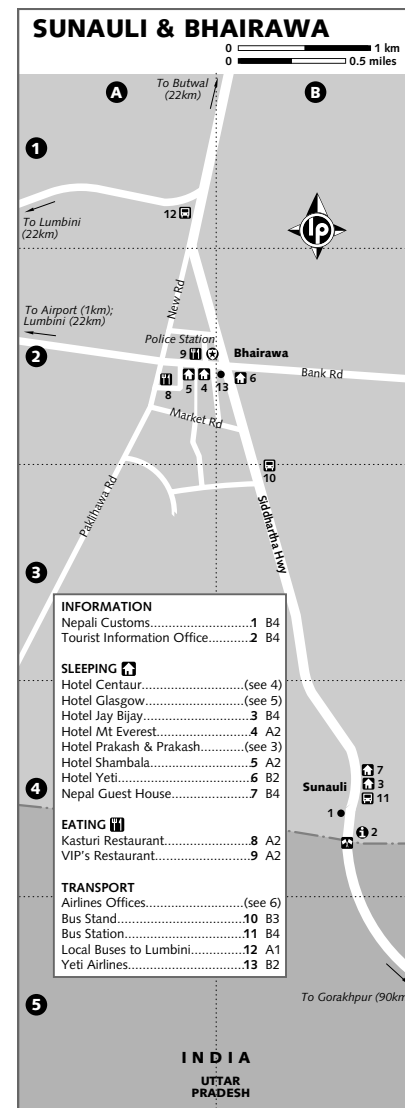
RICKSHAW

A rickshaw from Sauraha Chowk/Tandi Bazaar to Sauraha will cost around Rs 70, but allow 40 minutes for the journey.

SUNAULI & BHAIRAWA

☎ 071

About 165km southwest of Narayangarh, Sunauli (pronounced 'so-nor-li') is the most popular border crossing between India and



WALKS IN THE CHITWAN HILLS

After the success of the Sirubari village tourism project near Daman, the Nepal Tourism Board has created a new network of trekking routes in the hills north of Chitwan. Several Chepang, Magar and Gurung villages have been developed as destinations for cultural tourism, with accommodation in village homestays, cultural activities and treks to mountain viewpoints. So far, the development has been very low-key, and the walks offer a much more authentic experience of Nepali life than the established trekking routes around Everest and Annapurna.

The main trailheads for walkers are **Shaktikhor**, accessible by local bus from Narayangarh, and **Hugdi**, near Kurintar on the Prithvi Hwy. From either starting point you can follow a long loop around the top of the ridge, visiting the Rana-era fort at **Uppardangadhi** and the dramatic Himalayan viewpoint at **Siraichuli** (1945m). On the way you'll pass through a string of traditional villages; locals are very friendly, if a little bemused by the sight of foreigners.

Because of the poor transport links, most people stay at least one night, but two days will give you more time to explore this interesting area. Simple homestay accommodation is available in **Hattibang**, on the trail up from Hugdi, and in Shaktikhor, where you can also hire guides. Alternatively, you can make all the arrangements through a travel agency in Kathmandu, Pokhara or Sauraha. As elsewhere, the safety of walking in this area depends on the status of the Maoist insurgency. See www.welcomenepal.com/trpap/areas_chitwan.html for more information.

Bhairawa is also the starting point for trips to Lumbini, the historical birthplace of Gautama Buddha and an increasingly popular place to break the journey between India and Nepal. If you want to visit Lumbini, you can skip both Sunauli and Bhairawa and stay in one of the friendly guesthouses at Lumbini Bazaar.

Orientation & Information

Most people use Sunauli for both sides of the border, but the Nepali border post is actually at Belahiya, about 4km south of Bhairawa. Buses run directly from the border to most major towns in Nepal so there's no need to go into Bhairawa unless you don't like the look of the hotels in Belahiya. To further confuse things, Bhairawa is also known as Siddharthanagar but you can usually get away with Bhairawa for the town and Sunauli for the border.

The Government of Nepal runs a small **tourist information office** (☎ 520304; 🕒 10am-5pm Sun-Fri) on the Nepal side of the border. Bhairawa has several banks but it's usually easier to change money at the border. There are several net cafés around the junction of Bank Rd and New Rd in Bhairawa, charging Rs 25 per hour. Net cafés in Sunauli are slower and much more expensive.

Sleeping

There are plenty of hotels at Belahiya, but the border post is noisy, dusty and plagued by mosquitoes – bring coils or a mozzie net

or end up as supper. All in all, Bhairawa is a much more wholesome place to stay.

SUNAULI/BELAHIYA

All the hotels are strung out along the road to Bhairawa.

Hotel Jay Bijay (☎ 523029; r with/without bathroom Rs 250/150) A quite bright, friendly place, with dated but cheerful décor. Rooms are simple but reasonably clean.

Nepal Guest House (☎ 520876; 4-bed dm Rs 50, r with bathroom & cold/hot shower Rs 150/240) Travellers on a tight budget need look no further. Rooms here are pretty basic, but good for the money, and there's also a pretty decent restaurant.

Hotel Prakash & Prakash (☎ 526994; www.hotelprakash.com; s/d with bathroom Rs 800/1000, with air-con Rs 1200/1500; 🍷) Unexpectedly posh for this locale, this business-class hotel is further up the road towards the border. It's popular with Indian travellers and the guest rooms are spacious and reasonably quiet.

BHAIRAWA

Most of the hotels in Bhairawa are strung out along Bank Rd, which runs west off the Siddhartha Hwy.

Hotel Centaur (☎ 527266; Bank Rd; r with bathroom Rs 200) A typical no-frills, budget place. Rooms are reasonably large and clean but showers are cold.

Hotel Glasgow (☎ 523737; mermaid@mos.com.np; Bank Rd; s/d with TV & bathroom Rs 500/700, with air-con Rs 1000/1200, discounts of 20%; 🍷) The best place in

town. Hotel Glasgow has attentive staff, an excellent restaurant, huge rooms and properly hot showers. Rooms are pretty much perfect and you have the option of air-con.

Hotel Shambala (☎ 520167; Bank Rd; r with bathroom from Rs 400, with TV & air-con from Rs 800; 🍷) A solid, midrange choice on the main street. There's a restaurant and rooms have fans, phones and hot showers.

Hotel Mt Everest (☎ 520410; hotelmteverest@yahoo.com) Rates and facilities are similar at this affiliated hotel down from the Shambala.

Hotel Yeti (☎ 520551; hotelyeti@wlink.com.np; cnr Bank Rd & Siddhartha Hwy; s/d US\$30/35, s/d with air-con US\$35/45, discounts of 25%; 🍷) This is the preferred choice of upmarket tour groups and it's very modern and comfortable. All rooms have TVs, phones and reliably hot showers.

Eating

All the hotels have restaurants serving the usual range of Nepali, Indian and continental dishes. In Sunauli there are a few small restaurants near the bus station.

Kasturi Restaurant (snack meals from Rs 50; 🕒 7am-8pm) One of several upmarket *misthan bandhars* (Indian snack restaurants) along Paklihawa Rd, this place serves excellent vegetarian curries and *dosas* (lentil-flour pancakes), as well as Indian sweets.

VIPs Restaurant (Bank Rd; mains Rs 50-120; 🕒 8am-9pm) If you must have meat, try this small Indian, Nepali and Chinese place around the corner on Bank Rd.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Yeti Airlines (☎ 527527) and other private airlines offer flights between Kathmandu and Bhairawa (US\$90, 40 minutes, daily). Bhairawa airport is about 1km west of town, easily accessible by rickshaw. Most **airline offices** are around the junction of Bank Rd and the Siddhartha Hwy.

BUS

Buses for Kathmandu and Pokhara leave regularly from both Belahiya and Bhairawa. For other destinations, you're best off going to Bhairawa. Be suspicious of travel agents in India or Nepal who claim to offer 'through tickets' between the two countries. Everyone has to change buses at the border. For more on this see p381.

There are regular day and night buses to Pokhara (day/night Rs 230/270, eight hours) and Kathmandu (day/night Rs 230/280, eight hours) via Narayangarh (Rs 150, three hours). Minivans to Pokhara/Kathmandu cost Rs 305/300.

A slightly more comfortable option is the daily **Golden Travels** (☎ 520194) air-con bus to Kathmandu (Rs 525); it leaves Kathmandu at 7.30am and Sunauli at 7am.

From the **bus stand** in Bhairawa, buses leave every 15 minutes to Butwal (Rs 28, 30 minutes) where you can change for destinations in the western Terai. Heading east, there's a 6.10am bus to Janakpur (Rs 320, eight hours), a 5am bus to Biratnagar (Rs 470, 10 hours) and a 4.15am service to Kakarbhitta (Rs 520, 12 hours).

Local buses for Lumbini (Rs 25, 1½ hours) and Taulihawa (Rs 50, three hours) leave from the junction of the Siddhartha Hwy and the road to Lumbini, about 1km north of Bank Rd.

Getting Around

Regular jeeps and local buses shuttle between the border and Bhairawa for Rs 7. A rickshaw will cost Rs 20.

LUMBINI

☎ 071

As the historical birthplace of Gautama Siddhartha Buddha, Lumbini is one of the most important religious sites in the world. The man who would later achieve enlightenment under a Bodhi tree, inspiring a global philosophy of peace and reflection, was born under a sal tree in Lumbini in the month of May in 563 BC.

Despite being an important destination for pilgrimages, Lumbini is nothing like Haridwar, Mecca or Lourdes. Pilgrims here come in a slow, respectful trickle and many stay on to meditate in the monasteries surrounding the sacred site. That said, Lumbini has undergone a major renaissance over the last few years, and new monasteries are springing up here faster than you can say 'om mani padme hum'.

The centre of Lumbini is the Maya Devi Temple, which marks the exact spot where Queen Maya Devi of Kapilavastu gave birth to Gautama Siddhartha. Surrounding the temple is a sacred garden containing the pillar of Ashoka as well as the ruined

CROSSING THE BORDER

Border Hours

The Nepali side of the border is open 24 hours, but the Indian border post is only staffed from 6am to 10pm. After 7pm and before 7am, you may need to go searching for the immigration officials on either side.

Foreign Exchange

Several moneychangers on the Nepali side of the border exchange Nepali and Indian rupees, and cash and travellers cheques in US dollars, UK pounds and euros. Shops and hotels on both sides of the border accept Indian and Nepali rupees at a fixed rate of 1.6 Nepali rupees to one Indian rupee.

Onward to India

All travellers bound for India must change buses at the border. From the bus station on the Indian side of the border, there are direct morning buses to Delhi (INRs 405, 24 hours) and Varanasi (INRs 150, 10 hours). There are also buses to Gorakhpur (INRs 50, three hours) where you can connect with the Indian broad-gauge railway.

CHINESE TEAM TO SHOOT THE BUDDHA!

Bradley Mayhew

Scan the Nepali newspapers and you'll come across some great news stories. Our favourite headline was the eye-catching 'Chinese team to Shoot the Buddha!', actually a Chinese documentary film crew that had arrived in Lumbini.

foundations of dozens of ancient stupas and monasteries. Extending for miles around the sacred garden is a huge park known as the Lumbini Development Zone, designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange in 1978. It's a work in progress but the grounds are already full of landscaped lakes and Buddhist monasteries, constructed by Buddhist communities from around the world.

You can easily spend one or two days exploring the site so it's well worth an overnight stay. There are hotels all around the perimeter of the Development Zone and plenty of small guest houses in the peaceful village of Lumbini Bazaar, directly opposite the main entrance to the site.

History

After years of work at Lumbini, archaeologists are now fairly certain that Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, was indeed born here in 563 BC. A huge complex of monasteries and stupas was erected on the site by his followers and the Indian emperor Ashoka made a pilgrimage here in 249 BC, erecting one of his famous pillars.

Shortly after this, some unknown cataclysm affected Lumbini. When the Chinese pilgrim, Fa Hsien (Fa Xian), visited in AD 403, he found the monasteries abandoned and the city of Kapilavastu in ruins. Two hundred years later, Hsuan Tang (Xuan Zang), another Chinese pilgrim, described 1000 derelict monasteries and Ashoka's pillar, shattered by lightning and lying on the ground. However, the site was not entirely forgotten. The Nepali king, Ripu Malla, made a pilgrimage here in 1312, possibly leaving the nativity statue that is still worshipped in the Maya Devi Temple.

Mughal invaders arrived in the region at the end of the 14th century and destroyed the remaining 'pagan' monuments at both Kapilavastu and Lumbini. The whole region

then returned to wilderness and the sites were lost to humanity, until the governor of Palpa, Khadga Shumsher Rana, began the excavation of Ashoka's pillar in late 1896.

Lumbini is now creating a new archaeology for itself in the Lumbini Development Zone – if explorers rediscover the site in a thousand years, they'll find the ruins of dozens of vast 21st century monasteries, reflecting Buddhist cultures from across the globe.

Dangers & Annoyances

Travel around Lumbini is generally safe, but Maoists have carried out several attacks in the area during the latest upsurge in violence, including at Taulihawa. As elsewhere, check the security situation before wandering off into the countryside.

Sights

MAYA DEVI TEMPLE

The revered **Maya Devi Temple** (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 50/10/free; ☎ 6am-5.30pm) sits on the exact site of the birth of the Buddha, according to Buddhist scholars. Excavations carried out in 1992 have revealed a succession of ruins on the site dating back at least 2200 years, including a commemorative stone on a brick plinth, matching the description of a stone laid down by Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC. There are plans to raise a grand monument on the site, but for now, the ruins are protected by a plain brick pavilion.

If you remove your shoes, you can walk around the ruins on a raised boardwalk. The focal point for pilgrims is a famous sandstone carving of the birth of the Buddha, reputedly left here by the Malla king, Ripu Malla, in the 14th century, when Maya Devi was worshipped as an incarnation of the Hindu mother goddess. The carving has been worn almost flat by centuries of veneration, but you can just discern the shape of Maya Devi grasping a sal branch and giving birth to the Buddha, with Indra and Brahma looking on. There's a modern reproduction in the Bihari monastery near the temple.

The pond beside the temple is believed to be where Maya Devi bathed before giving birth to the Buddha and dotted around the grounds are the ruined foundations of a number of brick stupas and monasteries,

dating from the 2nd century BC to the 9th century AD.

Opposite the temple are two small Buddhist monasteries: the **Dharma Swami Maharaj Buddha Vihar** (☎ 580132) was constructed by pilgrims from Mustang in Nepal, while the **Nepal Buddha Vihara** (☎ 580172) was constructed by monks from Bihar in India. You can pick up incense and other bits of Buddhist paraphernalia at the religious **market** on the pathway to the temple.

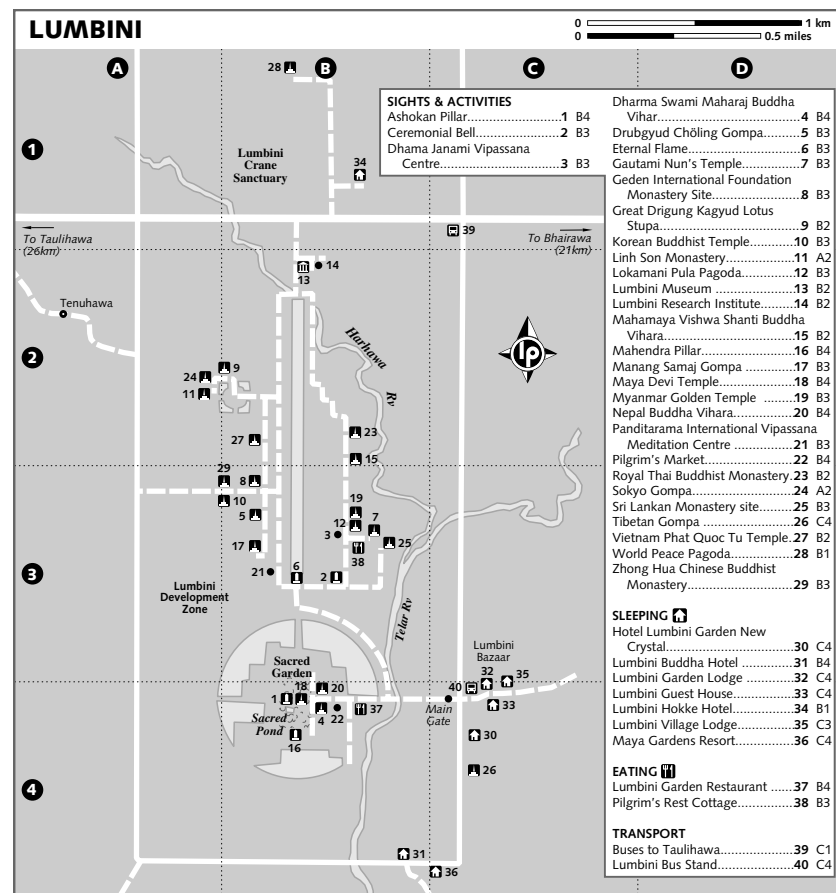
ASHOKAN PILLAR

The Indian emperor Ashoka visited Lumbini in around 249 BC, leaving behind an inscribed sandstone pillar to commemorate the occasion. After being lost for centu-

ries, Ashoka's pillar was rediscovered by the governor of Palpa, Khadga Shumsher Rana, in 1896. The 6m high pink sandstone pillar has now been returned to its original site in front of the Maya Devi temple – the pillar isn't much to look at, but it is highly revered by Nepali Buddhists. King Mahendra of Nepal tried to match the feat with his own **column** in the 1980s, but it languishes, largely forgotten, at the south end of the park.

BUDDHIST MONASTERIES

Since the Lumbini Development Zone was founded in 1978, Buddhist nations from around the world have constructed extravagant monasteries around the birthplace of



THE BIRTH OF THE BUDDHA

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was the son of Suddhodana, ruler of Kapilavastu, and Maya Devi, a princess from the neighbouring kingdom of Devdaha. According to legend, the pregnant Maya Devi was travelling between the two states when she came upon a pond of extraordinary beauty, surrounded by flowering sal trees. After bathing in the cool water, she suddenly went into labour, and just had time to walk 25 steps and grab the branch of a tree for support before the baby was born. The year was 563 AD and the location has been positively identified as Lumbini.

After the birth, a seer predicted that the boy would become a great teacher or a great king. Eager to ensure the later, King Suddhodana shielded him from all knowledge of the world outside the palace. At the age of 29, Siddhartha left the city for the first time and came face to face with an old man, a sick man, a hermit and a corpse. Shocked by this sudden exposure to human suffering, the prince abandoned his luxurious life to become a mendicant holy man, fasting and meditating on the nature of existence. After some severe austerities, the former prince realised that life as a starving pauper was no more conducive to wisdom than life as a pampered prince. Thus was born the middle way.

Finally, after 49 days meditating under a Bodhi tree on the site of modern-day Bodhgaya in India, Siddhartha attained enlightenment – a fundamental grasp of the nature of human existence. He travelled to Sarnath, near Varanasi, to preach his first sermon, and Buddhism was born. Renamed Buddha ('the enlightened one'), Siddhartha spent the next 46 years teaching the 'middle way' – a path of moderation and self-knowledge through which human beings could escape the cycle of birth and rebirth and achieve Nirvana, a state of eternal bliss.

The Buddha finally died at the age of 80 at Kushinagar, near Gorakhpur in India. Despite the Buddha's rejection of divinity and materialism, all the sites associated with his life have become centres for pilgrimage and the Buddha is worshipped as a deity across the Buddhist world. The ruins of Kapilavastu were unearthed close to Lumbini at Tilaurakot (see p297), and devotees still cross continents to visit Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar in India. More recently, the site of Devdaha, the home of Maya Devi, was identified on the outskirts of the Nepali town of Butwal.

the Buddha. Each reflects the unique interpretation of Buddhism of its home nation and together the monasteries create a fascinating map of world Buddhist philosophy.

The site is *extremely* spread out, so hire a bicycle in Lumbini Bazar or rent one of the waiting rickshaws at the entrance to the archaeological zone. Unless otherwise stated, all the monasteries are open daily during daylight hours.

West Monastic zone

The West Monastic Zone is set aside for monasteries from the Mahayana school. Starting at the **Eternal Flame** (just north of the Maya Devi Temple), follow the dirt road along the west bank of the pond to the **Panditarama International Vipassana Meditation Centre** (☎ 580118; www.panditarama-lumbini.info), where serious practitioners of meditation can study for a nominal donation.

Heading north, a track turns west to the **Drubgyud Chöling Gomba** (☎ 580241), a classic Tibetan-style gompa built in 2001 by Bud-

dhist from Singapore and Nepal. The mural work inside is quite refined and a gigantic stupa is under construction next door. A small track veers south to the tasteful **Manang Samaj Gomba** (☎ 580135), a giant *chörten* (Tibetan reliquary stupa) constructed by Buddhists from Manang in northern Nepal.

Further west is the elegant **Zhong Hua Chinese Buddhist Monastery** (☎ 580264), one of the most impressive structures at Lumbini. Reached through a gateway flanked by Confucian deities, this elegant pagoda-style monastery looks like something from the Forbidden City. Not to be outdone, the government of South Korea is building a huge new **Korean Buddhist Temple** (☎ 580123) on the other side of the road.

Just north of the Chinese temple is the charming **Vietnam Phat Quoc Tu Temple** (☎ 580178), due to be completed in 2006. The pagoda-style monastery is beautifully landscaped and the dragon tiled roof is delightful. Nearby is a new complex of stupas and monastery buildings being constructed

by the Austrian **Geden International Foundation**. New monasteries are also planned by the governments of Mongolia and Bhutan.

Further north is a second group of Mahayana monasteries, set around an L-shaped pond. The truly extravagant **Great Drigung Kagyud Lotus Stupa** (☎ 580275; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) was constructed by the German Tara Foundation and the domed ceiling of the main prayer room is covered in some inspired Buddhist murals.

Behind the German monastery is the **Sokyo Gomba** (☎ 580111), a traditional Tibetan-style gompa built by the Japanese Sokyo Foundation. The new **Linh Son Monastery** (☎ 580198) is being constructed by French Buddhists next door.

East Monastic Zone

The East Monastic Zone is set aside for monasteries from the Theravada school. The area is less developed than the western zone and the track is bumpier, but many of the monasteries have peaceful woodland settings.

Close to the north end of the pond, the **Royal Thai Buddhist Monastery** (☎ 580222) is an imposing *wat* (Thai-style monastery) built from gleaming white marble. Next door is the rather plain and austere **Mahamaya Vishwa Shanti Buddha Vihara** (☎ 580144), constructed as a joint venture between Japanese Buddhists and the Indian Mahabodhi Society.

A short cycle ride south is the **Myanmar Golden Temple** (☎ 580179), one of the oldest structures in the compound. There are three prayer halls here – the most impressive is topped by a corn-cob-shaped *shikhara* (tower), styled after the temples of Bagan. Nearby is the **Lokamani Pula Pagoda**, a huge gilded stupa in the southern Burmese style, inspired by the Shwedagon Paya in Yangon.

Behind the stupa is the modest **Gautami Nun's Temple** (☎ 580177), the only monastery in the compound built for female devotees. Across the road is the small **Dhama Janami Vipassana Centre** (☎ 580282), where followers of the Theravada school can practice meditation.

Further south, a track leads down to the site earmarked for the new **Sri Lankan Monastery** (☎ 580193). A short walk south from here takes you back to the Eternal Flame, passing a huge **ceremonial bell**, inscribed with Tibetan characters.

LUMBINI MUSEUM

Tucked away at the back of the compound, near the bridge at the north end of the pond, this **museum** (☎ 580318; foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 50/10/10; ☎ 10am-3pm Wed-Mon) is devoted to the life of the Buddha, with artefacts and photos from Buddhist sites around the world, from Kathmandu to Candy.

Across the road is the **Lumbini Research Institute** (☎ 580175; liri@mos.com.np), but this is only open to serious scholars of Buddhist history.

WORLD PEACE PAGODA & LUMBINI CRANE SANCTUARY

Outside the main compound, but easily accessible by bike, the gleaming white **World Peace Pagoda** (☎ daylight hr) was constructed by Japanese Buddhists at a cost of US\$1 million. Near the base of the stupa is the grave of a Japanese monk, murdered by anti-Buddhist extremists during the construction of the monument.

The surrounding wetlands are protected as part of the **Lumbini Crane Sanctuary** and you stand a good chance of seeing rare sarus cranes stalking through the water meadows. There's no formal entrance to the park and no entrance fee – just stroll into the damp meadows behind the pagoda.

Tours

Recently, a number of traditional villages around Lumbini have been developed for grassroots tourism as part of the **Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme** (TRPAP; ☎ 01-4269768; www.welcomenepal.com/trpap). The project is just getting off the ground but several of the lodges and hotels around the Development Zone now run village tours with a focus on traditional lifestyles and livelihoods.

Lumbini Village Lodge arranges interesting tours that really get under the surface of life in the Terai. Guides are available for Rs 500 per day, or you can get a map (Rs 20) and make your own way by bike.

Festivals & Events

The most important Buddhist celebration at Lumbini is the annual **Buddha Jayanti** festival in April or May, when busloads of Buddhists from India and Nepal come here to celebrate the birth of the Buddha. Pilgrims also come here to worship each

purnima (the night of the full moon) and **as-tami** (the eighth night after the full moon).

Many Hindus regard the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu and thousands of Hindu pilgrims come here on the full moon of the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May) to worship Maya Devi as **Rupa Devi**, the mother goddess of Lumbini.

Sleeping

It is possible to day trip to Lumbini from Bhairawa, but there are plenty of places to stay around the compound.

BUDGET

Most of the budget options are in Lumbini Bazaar, the small village opposite the entrance to the Lumbini Development Zone. All are simple but very clean, and all serve homestyle Nepali meals.

Lumbini Village Lodge (☎ 580432; lumbinivillage.lodge@yahoo.com; r without bathroom per person Rs 100, s/d with bathroom Rs 250/350) This charming lodge has a central courtyard shaded by a mango tree and big, clean rooms with fans and window nets. Internet access is available for Rs 80 per hour, you can rent bikes for Rs 100 per day, and the owners run tours of surrounding villages.

Lumbini Garden Lodge (☎ 580146; r with/without bathroom Rs 300/200) A few doors down, this is a tidy, family-run place with small, clean rooms. Some get more sunlight than others so see a few before deciding.

Lumbini Guest House (☎ 580142; s/d/tr Rs 250/300/400) On the other side of the main bazaar, this place is a bit more upmarket but still good value. Some rooms have squat toilets and some have western-style toilets so you have the choice.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Most of the upmarket hotels are on the main road around the outside of the Development Zone. Unless otherwise stated, rooms at all the following hotels have bathrooms, TVs and air-con.

Lumbini Buddha Hotel (☎ 580114; lama_rajit@hotmail.com; s/d US\$15/20; 🍷) In a small area of woodland at the south end of the Development Zone, this calm, institutional place has rooms in safari-style buildings linked by raised walkways.

Maya Gardens Resort (☎ 580220; bmaya@kghouse.com.np; s/d from US\$60/70; 🍷) Set in large grounds about 500m southeast of the site, this up-

market resort offers very comfortable rooms in calm surroundings. There's a good restaurant. Ask about discounts.

Hotel Lumbini Garden New Crystal (☎ 580145; lumcrystal@ntc.net.np; s/d from US\$90/99; 🍷) Partner hotel to the New Crystal in Pokhara, this huge, swish place is almost opposite the gate to the Development Zone. It's aimed at well-heeled pilgrims and all sorts of religious paraphernalia is available in the foyer.

Lumbini Hokke Hotel (☎ 580236; subhokke_bt看wlink.com.np; s/d US\$90/120; Apr–Aug; 🍷) Built with real style, the Hokke targets wealthy Japanese pilgrims who come to pray at the nearby World Peace Pagoda. It looks a bit like a traditional Japanese village and rooms come Western-style or Japanese-style, with tatami floors, paper partitions and Japanese furniture. The restaurant serves top-notch Japanese set meals.

Eating

Most people eat at their hotels, but there are a few restaurants in the development zone serving snack meals and cold drinks.

By the main car park, **Lumbini Garden Restaurant** (📞 6am–6pm) is a modern red-brick place serving the usual mix of cold Cokes and veg thalis (plate meals).

Pilgrim's Rest Cottage (📞 6am–6pm), near the Burmese stupa, serves good value Nepali set meals to hungry pilgrims and school groups.

Getting There & Away

Local buses run regularly between Lumbini and the local bus stand in Bhairawa (Rs 25, 1½ hours). The road to Lumbini is lined with traditional farms and tall mango trees – a perfect setting for a bit of roof riding.

To reach Taulihawa from Lumbini, take a local bus to the junction with the Bhairawa road (Rs 5) and change to a bus bound for Taulihawa (Rs 25, 1½ hours).

If you need to be in Bhairawa in a hurry, taxis in Lumbini Bazaar charge Rs 500 to the main Bhairawa bus stand and Rs 600 to the border at Belahiya.

Getting Around

The best way to get around the compound is by bicycle – Lumbini Village Lodge in Lumbini Bazaar charges Rs 100 per day for fairly reliable Chinese Hero bikes.

If you can't get a bike, a rickshaw can be a good alternative. Loads of rickshaw-wallahs loiter near the entrance to the development zone, charging Rs 50 to Rs 150 per hour, depending on your bargaining skills.

TAULIHAWA & TILRAKOT

About 27km east of Lumbini, Taulihawa is another sleepy Terai town, but nearby Tilaurakot has been identified as the historical site of **Kapilavastu**, where Gautama Siddhartha spent the first 29 years of his life. For years, archaeologists waged an ongoing battle with a rival site at Piprahwa in India, but the discovery of artefacts dating back to the time of the Buddha at Tilaurakot have pretty much sealed the deal.

The site sits in a peaceful meadow, about 3km from Taulihawa, on the banks of the Banganga River, and you can still see the foundations of a large residential compound and the remains of the city moat and walls. However, the ruins have degraded over the centuries and it takes a certain amount of imagination to visualise the city of extravagant luxury that drove the Buddha to question the nature of existence.

Entry to the site is free and the surrounding farm land looks much the same today as it did in the time of Siddhartha Gautama. It isn't hard to imagine Siddhartha walking out through the imposing city gateway for the first time and seeing an old man, a sick man, a hermit and a corpse.

About 400m from the ruins, a small **museum** (☎ 076-560128; entry Rs 15; 🕒 10am–5pm Wed–Mon) displays some of the artefacts found at the site, including a large collection of coins and pottery.

Taulihawa was the victim of a major Maoist assault in 2006. Check locally to make sure travel is safe before visiting from Lumbini.

Sleeping & Eating

There are plenty of basic food stalls in Taulihawa and there are reasonably clean, inexpensive rooms at **Lumbini Hotel** (s/d without bathroom Rs 80/100), on the road to Tilaurakot. There are no facilities at Tilaurakot so bring water and food from Taulihawa.

Getting There & Away

Lumbini lies a few km off the road from Bhairawa to Taulihawa. To reach Taulihawa from Lumbini, catch a local bus to the junc-

tion (Rs 5, 10 minutes) and change to a bus bound for Taulihawa (Rs 25, 1½ hours).

Tilaurakot is 3km north of Taulihawa. At the end of the bitumen the museum is on the left and the ruins are 400m away down a dirt track on the right. A rickshaw from Taulihawa will cost Rs 30.

THE SIDDHARTHA HWY

Most travellers heading north from Sunauli to Pokhara follow the Mahendra Hwy to Narayangarh then the Prithvi Hwy from Mugling to Pokhara, but a more interesting route is the dramatic Siddhartha Hwy, which winds through a series of landslide-scarred valleys between Butwal and Pokhara. Public buses run fairly regularly on this route, but the road is often blocked by landslides and floods during the monsoon. There are several temples at either end of the highway where drivers toss coins from their windows to pray for a safe journey.

Butwal

☎ 071

Butwal is fairly typical Terai town – hot, flat, dusty and crowded – but it sits at a very important junction. From here, the Mahendra Hwy runs east to Kakarbhitta and west to Mahendranagar and the Siddhartha Hwy runs north to Pokhara and south to Bhairawa/Sunauli. Even if you don't stop here, it's quite likely that you'll pass through town on your way across the plains.

There isn't a great deal to see, but the **old town** on the west bank of the Tinau River is worth exploring. A small pedestrian suspension bridge leads across the river from just west of Traffic Chowk. If you follow the Siddhartha Hwy north into the spooky looking Tinau Gorge, you'll come to a series of dramatic **waterfalls**, reached by another mini-suspension bridge.

Archaeologists have recently identified a village just east of Butwal as the site of the kingdom of **Devdaha**, home to the mother of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. So far, only limited excavations have been carried out, but there's a small memorial park on the site, signposted off the Mahendra Hwy towards Narayangarh.

INFORMATION

Numerous Internet centres on the main road near Traffic Chowk offer slow Internet

access for Rs 30 per hour. The Nabil Bank on Traffic Chowk has an ATM that takes international cards.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are plenty of hotels north of Traffic Chowk on the main road in the centre of town.

Hotel New Gandaki (☎ 540928; d without bathroom Rs 250) On the alley behind Traffic Chowk, this is a reliable cheapie – rooms are old but OK for the money.

Hotel Siddhartha (☎ 540380; s/d with bathroom Rs 500/700, s/d with air-con Rs 1000/1200; ♿) One of the better choices in town, the Siddhartha is bright and friendly and rooms have big TVs and hot showers – ask for one at the back away from the traffic noise. There's also a good restaurant.

Hotel Royal (☎ 542730; s/d with bathroom Rs 400/500) Across Traffic Chowk from the Siddhartha, Hotel Royal has compact but reasonably cosy rooms and an above-average restaurant.

There are lots of cheap and cheerful restaurants along the main road in Butwal, plus a few more interesting options in the old town.

Kasturi Misthan Bhandar (meals from Rs 40; ☎ 7am-8pm) This simple *misthan bhandar* (sweet shop and snack house) serves a wide range of sticky Indian sweets and healthy south Indian vegetarian meals.

Nanglo West (☎ 546184; Samaya Devi Tole; mains Rs 50-250; ☎ 9am-8pm) Hidden away in the old

MISTHAN BHANDARS

An unlikely blend of sweet shop and vegetarian restaurant, *misthan bhandars* offer the full range of Indian sweetmeats, from *gulab jamun* (dough balls in sweet syrup) to *barfi* (milk and nut fudge) and *halwa* (soft fruit slices). Alongside these sweet treats, you'll find the spicy vegetarian flavours of South Indian cuisine – *dosas* (lentil flour pancakes), *idly* (steamed rice cakes) and *vadai* (gram flour donuts), all served with coconut chutney and *sambar* (a spicy dipping sauce with cinnamon and tamarind). If you travel for any length of time in the Terai, you'll find yourself visiting *misthan bhandars* quite regularly for a break from the daal bhaat, chow mein and chilli chicken.

town on the west bank of the river, this sophisticated Nepali restaurant is run by the same people as Nanglo West in Tansen. The menu features some interesting regional specialities.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

All long-distance buses leave from the main bus park, just south of Traffic Chowk. There are buses every half hour or so to Kathmandu (day/night/minibus Rs 207/261/282, seven hours) and Pokhara (day/night/minibus Rs 160/210/240; five hours) via Mugling and the Prithvi Hwy. There are also several daily buses on the scenic route to Pokhara via Tansen (Rs 50, two hours).

Along the Mahendra Hwy, there are regular buses to Narayangarh (Rs 80, two hours), Nepalganj (Rs 215-247, four hours) and Mahendranagar (Rs 467, nine hours). Kia minibuses zip along the hwy to Narayangarh for Rs 130.

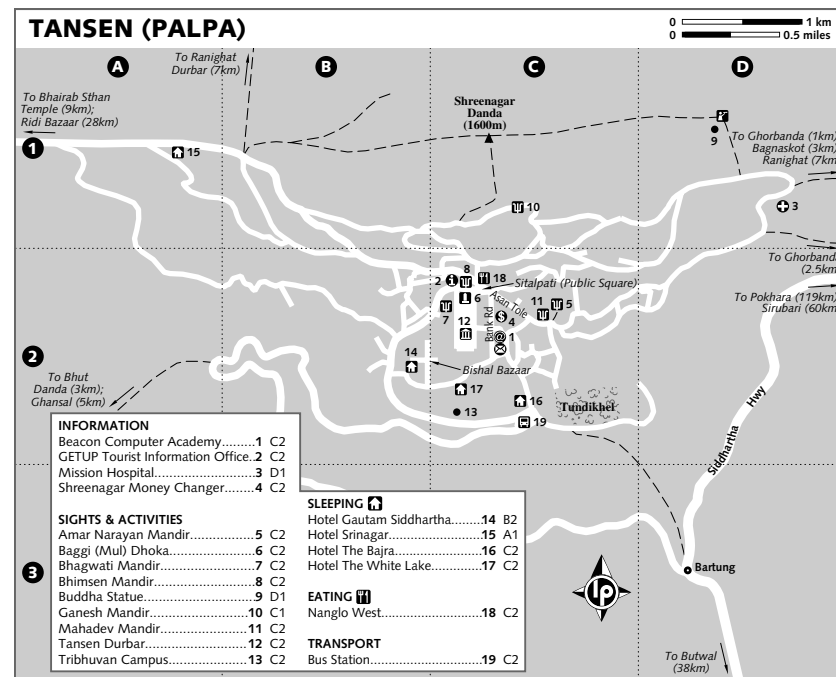
Local buses leave for Sunauli/Bhairava (Rs 28, 30 minutes) every 10 minutes.

Tansen (Palpa)

☎ 075

The former capital of the Magar kingdom of Tanahun, Tansen (Palpa) is a romantic medieval hill town, perched high above the Kali Gandaki River on the road between Butwal and Pokhara. The narrow, winding streets are full of Newari shop-houses and temples and most of the centre is too steep for cars, which all adds to Tansen's charm. Few tourists make it out this way, but it's easy to fill several days exploring the town and there are some excellent walks in the hills. Sadly, Tansen has been targeted by Maoists on several occasions, including a major assault on the Tansen Durbar compound in 2006. Check locally to make sure travel is safe before venturing here from Kathmandu or Pokhara.

Until the rise of the Shahs, Tanahun was one of the most powerful kingdoms in Nepal. Troops from Palpa even came close to conquering Kathmandu in the 16th century under the leadership of King Mukunda Sen. The power of the Magars waned in the 18th century and Tansen was reinvented as a Newari trading post on the trade route between India and Tibet. Metalworking and weaving *dhaka*, the fabric used for traditional Nepali jackets and



topis (cloth hats), are still important local industries.

The tourist office can recommend some excellent walks to viewpoints and villages around Tansen and there are great views over the bowl-shaped Madi Valley from several points around town. A sheet of mist normally hangs over the valley till mid-morning, earning it the nickname 'White Lake'. For sweeping Himalaya views, head up to Shreenagar Danda, the forested peak above Tansen – see the boxed text p301.

ORIENTATION

Tansen is virtually maze of narrow alleys, but getting lost is part of the pleasure. The main road snakes around the western edge of town, but most places of interest are tucked away on the cobbled streets of the old town. The most important landmark is the octagonal pavilion in the middle of Sitalpati, the main market square. The main shopping street is Bank Street (Makhana Tole), running south from Sitalpati; the bus stand is about 500m south of the centre on the main road.

INFORMATION

Enterprising locals have set up an excellent tourist information service, **Getup** (Group for Environmental & Tourism Upgrading Palpa; ☎ 521341; getup@hons.com.np; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun-Fri), about 30m west of Sitalpati. Staff can arrange guided trips to metalworking centres and fabric workshops and the office also sells excellent trekking maps (Rs 10) for short treks around Tansen, including the classic loop to Ranighat – see p301 and the boxed text, p301 for more information.

For foreign exchange, the best option is **Shreenagar Money Changer** (☎ 7.30am-6pm) on Bank Rd, just east of Sitalpati. There are several Internet cafés on Bank Rd but power cuts are common – the best connection is at **Beacon Computer Academy** (☎ 520239; per hr Rs 35; ☎ 7am-8pm).

For more information on Tansen, visit www.tansenpalpa.net.

SIGHTS

For a little visited hill town, Tansen is packed with interesting sights.

Sitalpati

The main market square in Tansen is dominated by a curious octagonal pavilion, used for public functions in the days when Tansen was ruled by the governors of the Shah regime. At the northwest corner of the square, the small, two-tiered **Bhimsen Mandir** is sacred to the Newari god of trade and commerce. Several shops on the square, and along nearby Bank Street, sell *dhaka* fabric and local metalware.

Amar Narayan Mandir

At the bottom of Asan Tole (the steep road running east from Sitalpati), the Amar Narayan Mandir is a classic three-tiered, pagoda-style temple. The mandir was built in 1807 by Amar Singh Thapa, the first governor of Tansen, and it's considered to be one of the most beautiful temples outside the Kathmandu Valley. Note the erotic scenes on the roof struts and the alternating skulls and animal heads on the lintel. Devotees come here every evening to light butter lamps in honour of the patron deity, Lord Vishnu.

At the start of the steps to the Amar Narayan Mandir is the smaller **Mahadev Mandir**, sacred to Shiva. It's built in the same tiered Newari style and inside, a pot of water drips continually onto a stone lingam. Local women fill their brass *gaagri* (water ewers) at the waterspout behind the temple.

Leather items and shoes should be removed before entering either temple.

Tansen Durbar

Probably the most striking building in Tansen, this bureaucratic-looking palace was built for the provincial governor in 1927. A fan of pomp and circumstance, the governor used to ride out to greet his subjects on an elephant through the huge gateway on the south side of Sitalpati (known locally as **Baggi Dhoka** or **Mul Dhoka**). The Durbar is now the administrative centre for the local government but it's heavily fortified and foreigners are only allowed to peek in through the gate.

Bhagwati Mandir

This large modern-looking temple is hidden in a courtyard on the west side of the Durbar, but it sits on the site of several older shrines. As the only shrine dedicated to Durga, the

patron saint of the Newars, it's probably the most popular temple in town. The idols from the temple are paraded through town on chariots each August as part of the Bhadra Krishna Nawami festival.

SLEEPING

There are some cheap 'hotel and lodging' places around the bus station, but they're all pretty awful – most of the decent choices are uphill in the old town.

Hotel The Bajra (☎ 520443; s/d with bathroom Rs 150/250) Just uphill from the bus park, this cheerful cheapie has a good Nepali restaurant and basic rooms with cold showers (hot water is available by the bucket).

Hotel The White Lake (☎ 520291; s/d without bathroom Rs 200/300, s/d with bathroom Rs 400/600, deluxe s/d Rs 900/1200) The deluxe rooms here are very comfortable, but the cheaper rooms are overpriced. However, the welcome is friendly, the restaurant serves decent grub and the terrace at the back has excellent valley views.

Hotel Gautam Siddhartha (☎ 520280; d/tr without bathroom Rs 150/250) Nearby, on the small square known as Bishal Bazaar, this small local hotel is a good find. The owners run a Nepali restaurant downstairs and rooms are plain but clean.

Hotel Srinagar (☎ 520045; www.hotelsrinagar.com; s/d with bathroom & TV US\$24/32; discounts of 30%) The most luxurious option, about 2km away on the ridge above town, a 20-minute walk west of the summit. Although rather isolated, rooms are sumptuous, the views are sensational and there's a good restaurant.

EATING

All the hotels have restaurants, but it would be a shame to leave Tansen without sampling the Nepali delights at **Nanglo West** (☎ 520184; Nepali mains Rs 50-250; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm), on the north side of Sitalpati. As well as familiar staples like *daal bhaat*, you can sample the local *choyla* (dried buffalo or duck meat with chilli and ginger), served with *chura* (flattened rice) and spiced potatoes in curd. The restaurant is styled like a Nepali house and diners sit on low cushions (shoes should be removed at the door).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus station** is at the southern entrance to Tansen and the ticket office is at the east end of the stand. Buses to Pokhara (Rs 130,

WALKS AROUND TANSEN

Tansen is set in the middle of fantastic walking country and the tourist office **GETUP** (p299) can recommend some excellent walks in the surrounding hills.

One of the nicest short walks is the one-hour stroll up **Shreenagar Danda**, the 1600m-high hill directly north of town. The trail starts near the small **Ganesh mandir (temple)** above Tansen and climbs steeply through open woodland to the crest of the hill. When you reach the ridge, turn right; a 20-minute stroll will take you to a modern **Buddha statue** and a viewpoint with fabulous views over the gorge of the Kali Gandaki River and the Himalaya.

Another short and easy walk is the two-hour stroll to the **Bhairab Sthan Temple**, 9km west of Tansen. The courtyard in front of the temple contains a gigantic brass trident and inside is a silver mask of Bhairab, allegedly plundered from Kathmandu by Mukunda Sen. The walk follows the road from Tansen to Tamghas.

If you fancy something more challenging, the three-hour walk to the village of **Ghansal** passes several hilltop viewpoints, emerging on the highway about 3km south of Tansen. The walk is mainly downhill and there are spectacular valley views from Bhut Dada, about halfway along the route. GETUP sells a map (Rs 10) with a detailed description of the trail.

Other possible destinations for walks include **Ghorbanda**, a traditional potters village northeast of Tansen on the way to Pokhara and **Bagnaskot**, on the ridge east of Gorkhekot, which has a small Devi temple and a wonderfully exposed hilltop viewpoint. You can also follow the old **trade route** from Tansen to Butwal – GETUP has a map (Rs 10) with a detailed description of the trail. All three walks can be completed in a day if you get an early start.

four hours) leave at 5.30am, 6.15am and 9.30am, or there are regular services down to Butwal (Rs 50, two hours) from 6.30am to 5pm. Local buses for Ridi Bazaar (Rs 50, two hours) leave fairly regularly during the same hours – get an early morning start if you want to get back the same day.

Around Tansen

As well as the popular walks around Tansen (see the boxed text above), there are a few interesting villages that you can reach on foot or by bus.

RANIGHAT

The most famous sight near Tansen is probably the **Ranighat Durbar** on the east bank of the Kali Gandaki. Fancifully referred to as Nepal's Taj Mahal, this crumbling baroque palace was built in 1896 by Khadga Shamsher Rana, an ambitious politician who was exiled from Kathmandu for plotting against the prime minister. Khadga made another abortive attempt to seize power in 1921 and was exiled again, this time to India. After his departure, the Durbar was stripped of most of its valuable fittings, but the building still stands, slowly fading on the banks of the Kali Gandaki.

You can walk to the Durbar in around four hours along an easy-to-follow trail,

beginning in Gorkhekot at the east end of Shreenagar Danda. The route down to the river is mainly downhill, but the return leg follows a steeply ascending trail on the next ridge, emerging near Hotel Srinagar. GETUP sells an excellent route guide and map (Rs 10). Rafting trips on the Kali Gandaki sometimes make it as far as the palace – see p97.

RIDI BAZAAR

About 28km northwest of Tansen by road (or 13km on foot), the Newari village of Ridi Bazaar sits at the confluence of the Kali Gandaki and Ridi Khola. As a sacred confluence, Ridi is a popular destination for pilgrimages, and the site is further sanctified by the presence of *saligrams* – the spiral fossils of ancient sea creatures, distantly related to the modern nautilus – revered as symbols of Vishnu.

Pilgrims believe that if they fast and worship for three days and take a ritual bath in the Kali Gandaki, all their sins will be forgiven. The most important feast day is **Magh Sankranti** (see p363), the first day of the Nepali month of Magh (mid-January), when hundreds of devotees bathe in the icy waters of the Kali Gandaki to mark the passing of winter. Worshippers also gather every *ekadashi* (the 11th day after the full moon).

The principal religious monument in Ridi is the **Rishikesh Mandir**, founded by Mukunda Sen in the 16th century. According to legend, the Vishnu idol inside was discovered fully-formed in the river and has miraculously aged from boy to man. The temple is on the south bank of the Ridi Khola, near the bus stand.

To reach Ridi on foot, take the trail leading northwest from the Tansen–Tamghas road near Hotel Srinagar. Buses to Ridi (Rs 50, two hours) leave from the public bus stand in Tansen.

SIRUBARI

About 80km northwest of Tansen, the remote Gurung village of Sirubari has been developed as a destination for cultural tourism by the Nepal Tourism Board. Far from a tacky tourist experience, this is more like a rural homestay – accommodation and meals are provided by local farmers and the only way in is on foot, via a four-hour trek from Syangja on the Siddhartha Hwy. The village is full of traditional stone buildings, including a charming gompa (Buddhist monastery), and there's a rugged viewpoint nearby at **Thumro** (2300m) overlooking the full sweep of Himalayan peaks. The villagers are mainly Buddhist and most families have at least one member in the Gurkha Regiments.

The trail to the village begins at the small village of Arjunchaupari near Syangja, on

the road between Pokhara and Tansen. However, few people in Sirubari speak English and you may have problems if you drop in unannounced. The easiest way to visit is to make advance arrangements with a travel agent in Kathmandu or Pokhara – they'll arrange your accommodation and a guide and put you on the right bus to the trailhead.

BIRGANJ

☎ 051

Unlovely would be a good way to describe Birganj. As the main transit point for freight between India and Nepal, the town is mobbed by trucks, deafened by car horns, jostled by rickshaws and choked by traffic fumes. Most of Nepal's exports leave the country via the hectic border crossing at Raxaul Bazaar, but travellers tend to skip this crossing entirely in favour of the much saner border crossings at Sunauli and Kakarbhitta.

If you can get over the heat and noise, there are some interesting buildings dotted around town. The fanciful **clock tower** in the centre of town is covered in Buddhist and Hindu iconography and just west is the popular **Gahawa Maysan Mandir**, sacred to Durga. On the other side of Main Rd is the **Ghariaarwa Pokhari**, a sacred pond used by locals as an impromptu swimming pool. Nearby is **Bal Mandir**, a meeting hall styled after the Buddhist stupa at Bodhnath, and

further south is a colourful **Shiv Temple** with a giant statue of Lord Shiva.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Birganj follows a simple grid system. Main Rd runs through the middle of town to the Indian border and most of the hotels are on the streets running west. The bus stand is at the end of Ghantaghar Rd (New Rd), which runs east from the clocktower at the north end of town.

There's a government-approved **money-changer** (☎ 7am–7pm) opposite Hotel Makalu on the corner of Campus Rd and Main Rd. You can change US dollars, euros, UK pounds and Indian and Nepali rupees, but only in cash. For travellers cheques, try the **Nepal Bangladesh Bank**, further along Campus Rd.

Fast Internet access is available from **Shree Shyam Cyber Cafe** (☎ 529947; per hr Rs 20; ☎ 6.30am–8.30pm), around the corner from Hotel Kailas.

SLEEPING

There are a number of noisy budget places near the main bus stand, and a handful of more upmarket choices in the centre.

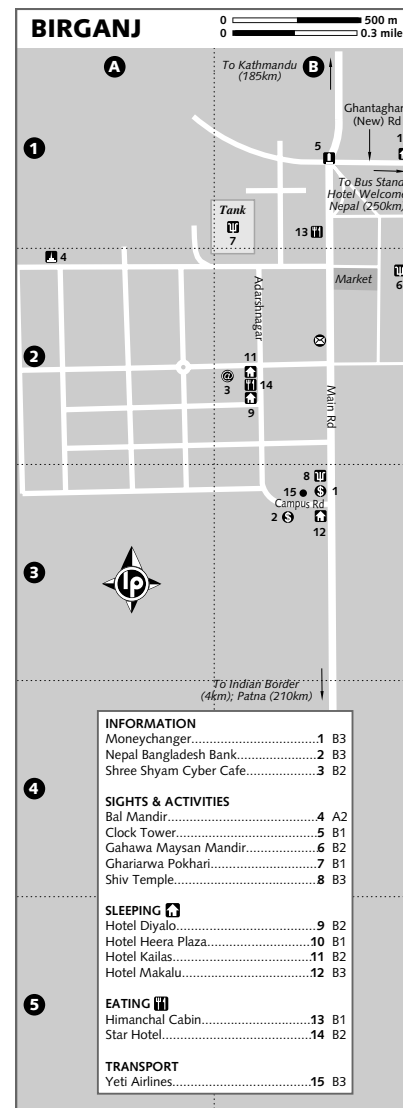
Hotel Welcome Nepal (☎ 524057; Ghantaghar Rd; s/d without bathroom Rs 125/150, d with bathroom Rs 300–250) The most salubrious choice in this area, Hotel Welcome Nepal gets slightly less traffic noise than the places right next to the bus stand.

There are more hotels further west along Ghantaghar Rd and Main Rd.

Hotel Kailas (☎ 522384; Adarshnagar; s without bathroom Rs 100, s/d with bathroom from Rs 280/430, r with air-con Rs 990; ☎) Bellboys in bow ties and chintzy '60s décor add charm at this big budget hotel one block west of Main Rd. Rooms are moderately tasteful and the attached Dewan-E-Khas restaurant serves tasty Indian and Chinese food.

Hotel Diyalo (☎ 522370; vishuwa@nepalexpo.com; Adarshnagar; r with bathroom Rs 400, with air-con Rs 600–1000; ☎) Almost next door to Hotel Kailas, this big institutional place has large, uncluttered rooms and a cosy little restaurant. The styling is a bit dated but rooms are comfortable.

Hotel Makalu (☎ 523054; hmakalu@atcmail.com.np; cnr Campus & Main Rds; r with bathroom Rs 800, with air-con from Rs 1200; ☎) This recommended business-class hotel is very calm and relaxed – just



what you need in hectic Birganj. Rooms have TVs, carpets and 24-hour hot showers and there's a very good restaurant.

Hotel Heera Plaza (☎ 523988; giris@atcnet.com.np; Ghantaghar Rd; s/d with bathroom & TV Rs 700/800, with air-con Rs 1200/1400; ☎) Midway between the clock tower and the bus station, this gigantic place feels a bit like a 1970s airport

CROSSING THE BORDER

Border Hours

The Nepali side of the border is open 24 hours but the Indian side is usually only staffed from 4am to 10pm, though you may be able to find someone to stamp you through outside these times. Nepali visas are available on arrival from the Nepal immigration office but payment must be in US dollars.

Foreign Exchange

There are no facilities at the border but there are banks and moneychangers in Birganj.

Onwards to India

The border is 5km south of Birganj and it's about 500m from the Nepali border post to the bus station in Raxaul Bazaar. Most people take a rickshaw straight through from Birganj (Rs 40). From Raxaul, there are regular buses to Patna (INRs 90, five hours) or you can take the daily Mithila Express train to Kolkata's Howrah train station – it leaves Raxaul at 10.20am, arriving into Howrah at 5am the next morning. Seats cost INRs 276/748/1165 in sleeper class/air-con 3-tier/air-con 2-tier.

lounge but rooms are comfortable and well cared for.

EATING

All the hotels have restaurants, or try the following places in the town centre.

Star Hotel (Adarshnagar; meals Rs 40-100; ☎ 9am-9pm) Between the Kailas and Diyalo hotels, this simple tandoori canteen serves cheap and tasty *thalis* (Indian plate meals) and tandoori chicken.

Himanchal Cabin (Main Rd; mains under Rs 60; ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm) Close to the clock tower, this reliable *misthan bhandar* (sweet shop and snack house) serves Indian sweets and tasty south Indian vegetarian snacks.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Yeti Airlines (☎ 525389; Campus Rd) and other private carriers fly daily between Simara (the airport for Birganj) and Kathmandu (US\$64; 20 minutes).

Buses leave from the large and hectic bus stand at the end of Ghantaghar Rd. There are plenty of day and night buses to Kathmandu (day/night Rs 225/280, nine hours), and Pokhara (day/night Rs 225/270; nine hours), via Narayangarh (day/night Rs 140/150, three hours). There are also regular buses to Janakpur (Rs 140, five hours) and Hetauda (Rs 65, two hours).

THE BUDDHA OF BARA

At the start of 2005, nobody had heard of Ram Bahadur Banjan. By the end of the year, thousands of Nepali Buddhists were hailing the 16-year-old Tamang boy as the second incarnation of the Buddha. Followers of the teenaged lama claim that Banjan has been meditating without food or water in the forest east of Birganj for at least six months. Although that sounds unlikely, the Nepali government asked the Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology to investigate the claim, and if necessary, declare a miracle. Before any conclusions could be reached, Banjan mysteriously disappeared, most likely spirited away by his followers to a location more conducive to inner reflection. However, this is unlikely to be the end of the story – check the Nepali news media for the latest developments.

GETTING AROUND

Rickshaws charge Rs 40 to go from town to the Nepali border post and on to Raxaul Bazaar. Alternatively, you can take a tempo or tonga (horse cart) from the bus station to the Nepali border post for Rs 8 and then walk to the Indian side.

THE TRIBHUVAN HWY

From Birganj, the easiest and fastest route to Kathmandu or Pokhara is along the Mahendra Hwy to Narayangarh and then north to Mugling, but when were the best travel experiences ever easy? It's much more fun to take the winding and dramatic Tribhuvan Hwy, which leaves the Mahendra Highway at Hetauda, just east of Chitwan. The road is sometimes blocked by floodwaters and landslides after the monsoon, but the scenery is breathtaking and you can stop on way at Daman for some of the best Himalayan views in Nepal. For details of the mountain bike ride along this route see p86.

Hetauda

☎ 057

The bustling town of Hetauda marks the junction between the flat Mahendra Hwy and the steep, spectacular Tribhuvan Hwy. From here, a Heath-Robinson cableway carries cement and gravel uphill from the Terai to satisfy Kathmandu's insatiable appetite for construction. There isn't any great reason to stop here except to change buses, but the locals are friendly and the town is known for its brassware, particularly the brass *gaagri* pots that locals use to store water.

There are no foreign exchange facilities but several Internet cafés on the main road offer Internet access for Rs 30 per hour.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are several cheap lodges by the bus stand, but quieter rooms are available around Mahendra Chowk on the main road.

Neelam Lodge (☎ 520900; Main Rd; s/d without bathroom Rs 90/140, s/d with bathroom Rs 170/250) On the main road, about 200m north of Mahendra Chowk, this simple lodge is a favourite stop for traders from the hills. There are no frills but the rooms are clean and the welcome warm.

Hotel Seema (☎ 520124; seema@mos.com.np; Main Rd; s/d with bathroom & TV Rs 600/800, s/d with air-con Rs 1500/2000; ☎) This big, modern business-

class hotel is a short walk south of Mahendra Chowk. The restaurant cooks up excellent Indian and Chinese food and the rooms have a touch of class, with carpets, TVs and hot showers.

Motel Avocado & Orchid Resort (☎ 520429; www.orchidresort.com; Tribhuvan Hwy; Nissan hut s/d Rs 350/500, hotel s/d from Rs 500/800, deluxe s/d from Rs 1200/1600, discounts of 20%; ☎) Further north, where the Tribhuvan Hwy leaves Hetauda, this quirky resort is set in a peaceful garden of rhododendron and avocado trees. Accommodation is in Nissen huts or in two plush hotel blocks at the back of the garden and the cheerful restaurant has a notebook where cyclists and motorcyclists have recorded their travels through Nepal.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The main bus stand is just west of Mahendra Chowk. There are regular morning and afternoon buses to Pokhara (Rs 250/270, six hours), and Kathmandu (day/night Rs 200/210, six hours) via Narayangarh (Rs 75/90, one hour). You can also pick up services to destinations east and west along the Mahendra Hwy. Local buses and minibuses run regularly to Birganj (Rs 65, two hours).

Buses along the Tribhuvan Hwy leave from a smaller bus stand, just north of Motel Avocado. There are buses every hour or so to Kathmandu (Rs 200, eight hours) via Daman (Rs 90, four hours) until around 2pm. Rickshaws and auto-rickshaws can ferry you from town to the bus stand for Rs 30.

Daman

☎ 057

Perched 2322m above sea level, with clear views to the north, east and west, Daman boasts what is arguably *the* most spectacular outlook on the Himalaya in the whole of Nepal. There are unimpeded views of the entire range from Dhaulagiri to Mt Everest from the concrete **viewing tower** (admission foreigner/Nepali Rs 20/10) inside the Daman Mountain Resort. Alternatively, head to the helipad at the Everest Panorama Resort.

There are several interesting detours from Daman. About 1km south of the village, towards Hetauda, a trail leads west through the forest to the tiny **Shree Riksheshwar Mahadev Mandir**, sacred to Shiva. On the way, you can drop into a gorgeous little **gompa** (Buddhist monastery) in a glade

WALKS AROUND DAMAN

Beyond Daman, the Tribhuvan Hwy plunges into the heavily cultivated Palung Valley, an idyllic patchwork of mustard, rice and millet fields, small orchards, trickling streams and peaceful villages of brick and stone houses. Few people pass through the area, let alone take time to explore it, but this is probably the closest place to Kathmandu where you can experience Nepal as it was before the Internet cafés and banana pancakes.

The valley is a fascinating base for walks and mountain biking trips. Most towns in the area have basic lodges and *bhojanalayas* (snack restaurants). Just equip yourself with a decent topographical map and go explore. Probably the best starting point for walks is **Shikharkot**, about 40km south of Naubise. There are several rustic lodges on the main road and buses between Kathmandu and Daman pass through several times a day.

Sadly there have been clashes between government forces and Maoist rebels in this area. Make sure that things are calm before setting off into the hills.

of trees draped with thousands of prayer flags. From the highway, it's 1km to the gompa and 1.5km to the temple.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are just a few places to stay, but all budgets are catered for.

In the middle of the village are three simple guest houses – **Everest Hotel & Lodge**, **Hotel Daman & Lodge** and **Gauri Shankar Hotel & Lodge** – owned by local families and sharing a single phone number (☎ 057-540387). All offer Nepali meals and simple rooms in rustic village houses – don't be surprised if you end up sleeping near a pile of onions! Single/double rooms cost Rs 100/200, and daal bhaat is Rs 50.

Daman Mountain Resort (☎ 01-4438023 in Kathmandu; safari-style tents Rs 400, r with/without bathroom Rs 800/700) This ageing resort at the start of the village is a more comfortable option. It's not the Savoy, but rooms are clean and cosy and the viewing tower has the best views in Daman. The tents are probably best avoided in winter.

Everest Panorama Resort (☎ 057-540382, ☎ 01-4415372-3 in Kathmandu; s/d US\$70/80, discounts of 20%)

Easily the most charming place to stay in Daman, this upmarket mountain resort offers tasteful cottages with sun decks scattered across a sunny hillside facing the Himalaya. All the rooms have heaters, TVs, hot showers and mountain views and you can arrange guided walks, mountain biking and pony treks. Reception is a 200m walk from the highway along a winding boardwalk.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave Daman every hour or so from 7am to 2pm to Kathmandu (Rs 175, four hours) and Hetauda (Rs 90, four hours). Alternatively, this is one of the most spectacular (and gruelling) mountain-bike routes in Nepal (see p86 for details).

WESTERN TERAI

The Mahendra Hwy runs west from Butwal to meet the Indian border at Mahendranagar, passing through one of the least developed parts of Nepal. Few travellers pass through the area and fewer still stop to investigate its little-visited national parks. Unfortunately, western Nepal is also the heartland of the Maoist insurgency. Bridges, telephone exchanges, government offices and army bases have been attacked on numerous occasions and it's important to check the security situation before planning any trips through this area.

NEPALGANJ

☎ 081

Few travellers use the border crossing at Nepalganj (Nepalgunj), even though the Indian city of Lucknow is just four hours away by bus. Nepalganj is a fairly typical Nepali border town – mobbed by traders and full of cheap hotels and contraband goods – but the border crossing is hassle free and there are good bus and air connections on to other parts of Nepal.

If you find yourself spending time in Nepalganj, take a stroll through the old bazaar. Shop windows are crammed with smuggled goods and there are half a dozen small temples strung out along the main road through the bazaar. Probably the most interesting is the garish **Bageshwari Mandir**, devoted to Kali. Nearby is a large pond with a pavilion containing a gaudy **statue** of Mahadev (Shiva).

As the main administrative centre for the region, Nepalganj is a popular target for rebel attacks. The centre of town is heavily fortified and it's wise to check the security situation before attempting to cross the border here.

Orientation & Information

Nepalganj is 16km south of the Mahendra Hwy and 6km north of the Indian border. It's about 1km from the Nepali border post at Rupaidha Bazaar – walkable, but easier by rickshaw.

Most of the hotels in Nepalganj are strung out along Surkhet Rd near the Birendra Chowk roundabout. The bus stand is 1km northeast of Birendra Chowk and the airport is 6km northwest.

A couple of places on Surkhet Rd offer slow Internet access for Rs 40 per hour.

Sleeping & Eating

Most hotels are on the main road north of Birendra Chowk.

Manakamana Guest House (☎ 520664; Surkhet Rd; d with bathroom Rs 150) Budget travellers will find rudimentary rooms with fans and cold showers at this basic lodge on the main road.

Hamro Guest House (☎ 520818; Surkhet Rd; d without bathroom Rs 100-200, with bathroom Rs 300-500) Many Indian tourists choose this cheap and informal place, set around a courtyard just north of Birendra Chowk.

Hotel Pahuna Ghar (☎ 522358; Surkhet Rd; d with bathroom/hot water Rs 250/400) North of the centre towards the bus stand, this reliable mid-range place offers a choice of budget rooms with cold showers or deluxe rooms with marble floors, TVs and hot showers.

Hotel Sneha (☎ 520119; hotel@sneha.wlink.com.np; Surkhet Rd; s/d with air-con US\$30/36, discounts of 25%; ☎) This big old-fashioned conference hotel is set in sprawling grounds on the way to the border. The huge rooms are set around a courtyard full of royal palms. Unfortunately, the hotel is often booked out for government meetings.

CROSSING THE BORDER

Border Hours

Both sides of the border are open from 4.30am to 9pm, but you may be able to cross later if you can find the immigration officials.

Foreign Exchange

There are several moneychangers on the Nepali side of the border, but they only exchange Indian and Nepali rupees. The Nabil Bank in Nepalganj may be able to exchange other currencies.

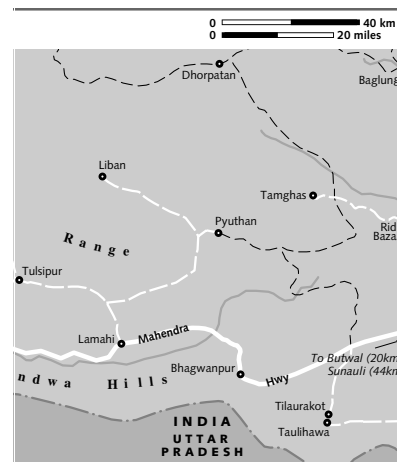
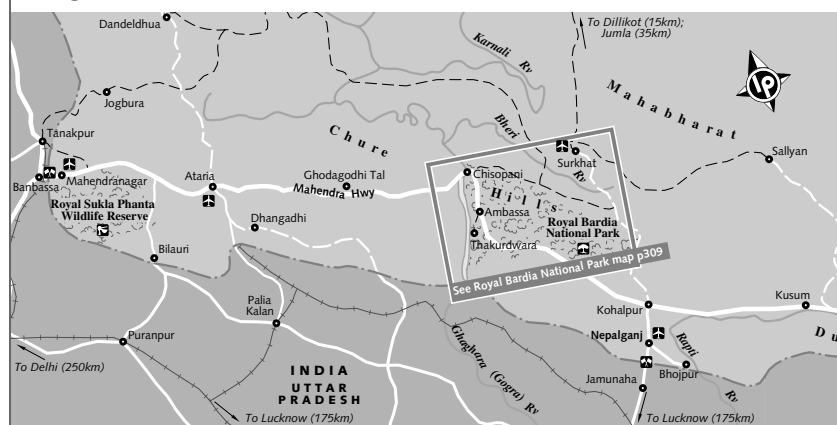
Onward to India

For Rs 50 you can take a rickshaw from the Nepalganj bus stand to the border at Jamunaha and on to the bus stand in Rupaidha Bazar. From here, buses and share taxis run regularly to Lucknow (INRs 160, seven hours). The nearest point on the Indian rail network is Nanpara, 17km from the border.

All the hotels have restaurants, but there are several upmarket eateries on the main road.

Kitchen Hut (☎ 524349; mains Rs 50-200; ☎ 10am-9.30pm) This bright and bustling place has the best food and atmosphere in town. The menu runs the gamut from *dosas* to momos.

WESTERN TERAI



Getting There & Away

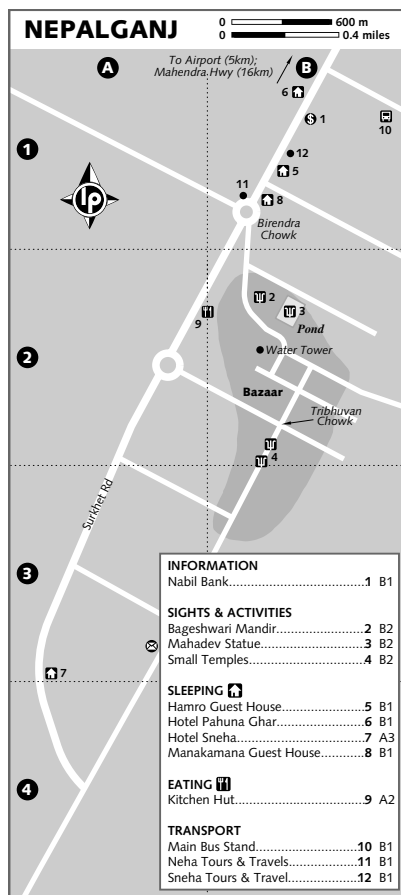
AIR

Nepalganj is the main air hub for western Nepal. **RNAC** (☎ 520767) has four weekly flights to Kathmandu (US\$103 to US\$122, two hours) and numerous flights to small airstrips in the interior, including Jumla (US\$61 to US\$69, 45 minutes) and Dolpa (US\$81 to US\$91, 45 minutes). Most of the private airlines also fly to Kathmandu for around US\$109.

If the airline offices are closed, try **Neha Tours & Travels** (☎ 523525) or **Sneha Tours & Travels** (☎ 522507) on the main road.

BUS

The well-organised **bus stand** is about 1km northeast of Birendra Chowk. Buses to Kathmandu (day/night Rs 450/540, 12



ROYAL BARDIA NATIONAL PARK

☎ 084

About halfway between Butwal and Mahendranagar, **Royal Bardia National Park** (☎ 429719; admission per day foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 500/200/20) is the largest untouched wilderness in the Terai. The park protects 968 sq km of sal forest and whispering grassland, bordering the Geruwa and Karnali Rivers. The atmosphere is wonderfully tranquil and with the current slump in tourism, you may well have the whole place to yourself.

There are estimated to be around 22 royal Bengal tigers and 100 one-horned rhinos at Bardia but these animals are elusive and sightings are rare. Other mammals in the park include grey langurs, rhesus macaques, leopards, civets, hyenas, sloth bears and barking, spotted, sambar and hog deer. Bardia also has more than 250 species of birds, including the endangered Bengal florican and sarus crane. Gharial and marsh mugger crocodiles and Gangetic dolphins are occasionally spotted on rafting and canoe trips along the Geruwa River.

Be warned that Maoist rebels are active on the fringes of the national park. Visitor numbers have plummeted since the start of the insurgency and most people visit on organised tours, which only run when the army and rebels are observing a ceasefire.

Orientation & Information

Park fees should be paid at the **park headquarters** (☎ 429719; ☎ 6am-5pm Sun-Fri) is about 13km south of the Mahendra Hwy in the village of Thakurdwara. The bumpy access road leaves the highway at Ambassa, about 500m before the Amreni army checkpoint.

Most of the safari lodges are close to Thakurdwara, but because of the poor condition of the roads, visitors usually arrange to be transferred to the lodges by 4WD. Note that much of the park is inaccessible from May to September because of flooding.

Sights & Activities

Most people visit Bardia on an **elephant safari** and this is by far the most exciting way to explore the park. Rides on the park elephants (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 1000/400/200) should be booked in advance at the park headquarters. Jeep safaris can be arranged directly through the lodges for around Rs 4000 per jeep.

Guided walks will get you even closer to the wildlife, but this can be a risky activity with angry rhinos around. Any of the lodges can arrange a guide, but rates will depend on the number of people in the group. **Boat trips** along the Geruwa River cost Rs 500/200/50 by canoe and Rs 1000/4000/100 by inflatable raft.

The park headquarters has a small **information centre** (admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Sun-Fri) and a breeding centre for marsh mugger and gharial crocodiles. Also located here is the intriguing **Tharu Museum** (admission foreigner/Nepali Rs 50/5; ☎ 10am-4pm Sun-Fri), which explores the customs and rituals of the Tharu people.

The Karnali river is also famous for *mahaseer*, the giant South Asian river carp, which can reach 80 kilos in weight. Anglers can obtain fishing permits (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 500/100/20) at the park headquarters. However, be aware that the World Wildlife Foundation is campaigning for the *mahaseer* to be added to the world list of endangered species because of overfishing and pollution.

Sleeping & Eating

With the collapse of tourism in the Terai, most people visit Bardia on organised package tours. Independent travellers should call ahead to make sure resorts are open for business. Most places are currently offering discounts of up to 40%, though this usually doesn't apply to package rates.

Bardia Jungle Cottages (☎ 429714; in Kathmandu 01-4428552; shakti@travels.wlink.com.np; cottages with/without bathroom from Rs 300/250) Right opposite the park entrance, this friendly, low-key resort has a large, shady garden, a restaurant and comfortable thatched cottages with ceiling fans. In these more quiet times, you'll appreciate being so close to the park headquarters.

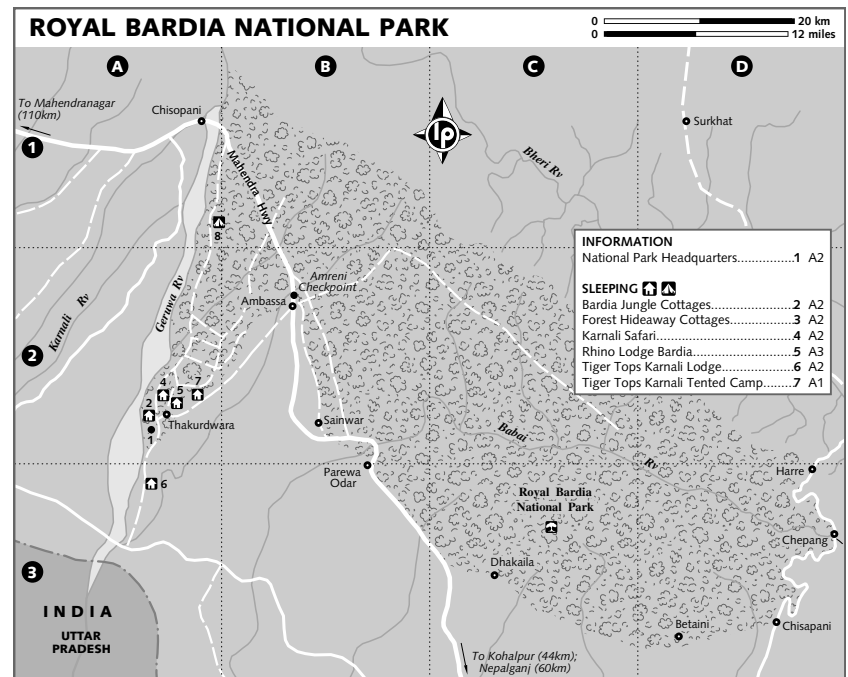
Forest Hideaway Cottages (☎ 429716; ☎ 01-4225973 in Kathmandu; www.foresthideaway.com; 4/5 day packages incl meals & activities US\$155/206) About 1km north of the park headquarters, this cosy Tharu-style resort is one of the best choices at Bardia. The grass-roofed cottages have solar power and rates include meals, activities, park fees, transfers from Ambassa and an onward bus ticket to your chosen

hours) and Pokhara (day/night Rs 400/520, 12 hours) leave early in the morning or early in the afternoon; all buses run via Narayangarh (day/night Rs 380/400, eight hours). Buses for Mahendranagar (Rs 300, six hours) leave hourly from 5.30am until 2pm in the afternoon.

Local buses to Thakurdwara (for Royal Bardia National Park) leave at 11.20am and 1.30pm (Rs 126, three hours).

Getting Around

Shared *tempo*s (three-wheelers) and tongas run between the bus stand and the border for Rs 15. A cycle-rickshaw costs Rs 50 to the airport and Rs 40 all the way to Rupaidha Bazaar in India.



THARU HOMES

The indigenous Tharu people of the western Terai are masters of improvisation. Villagers make almost everything they need using the natural materials around them. Even houses are built up from woven twigs and grass coated in thick layers of river mud. As well as being extremely environmentally friendly, the mud acts as a natural heat shield, keeping the homes surprisingly cool, even in summer. The same technique is used to produce most of the furniture inside, from cupboards and bedsteads to the water cooler and wood-fired kitchen range. However, fresh layers of mud must be applied throughout the year to fill in cracks and replace material washed away by the monsoon rains.

destination in Nepal. Package rates are discounted by 15% from May to September.

Rhino Lodge Bardia (☎ 429720, ☎ 01-4701200 in Kathmandu; rhinolodge@nepal-safari.com; cottages with bathroom Rs 150-500) About 4km from the park entrance, this place looks much nicer now that the garden has grown in. Accommodation is in tidy thatched bungalows with small verandas and meals are often taken on the lawn.

Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge (☎ 01-4361500 in Kathmandu; www.tigermountain.com; GPO Box 242, Kathmandu; package rates per night US\$200) Run by the same team as Tiger Tops in Chitwan, this recommended top-end lodge only opens when a package group is in town. Accommodation is in stylish Tharu-style cottages near Thakurdwara or safari tents deep inside the park overlooking the Karnali River. Package rates include meals and all activities (park fees and local transfers are extra).

Getting There & Away

The slump in tourism has meant that most people visit Royal Bardia on a package tour from Kathmandu. If you intend to make your own way to the park, call ahead to make sure the resorts are open and arrange a pick up from Thakurdwara. The nearest airport is at Nepalganj (see p307).

To reach Bardia by public transport, head to Nepalganj and change to a local bus to Thakurdwara (Rs 126, three hours) – buses leave Nepalganj at 11.20am and 1.30pm

and Thakurdwara at 7am and 9am. Change at Ambassa for buses to Mahendranagar (Rs 100, 2 1/2 hours).

JUMLA

Hidden away in the foothills of the Sisne Himalaya, the tiny village of Jumla (2370m) is the trailhead for treks to the remote Karnali region in the far northwest of Nepal. From the airstrip in Jumla, it takes three to four days to reach **Rara National Park** (admission foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 1000/100/free) with its famous sky-blue lake. Sadly, the hills around Jumla are controlled by Maoist rebels and travel in this area cannot currently be recommended. Should the security situation improve, Kathmandu trekking agencies should be able to arrange guides and porters.

The only realistic way to reach Jumla is by air. RNAC flies twice weekly between Jumla and Nepalganj (US\$61 to US\$69, 45 minutes).

ROYAL SUKLA PHANTA WILDLIFE RESERVE

Tucked against the Indian border, **Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve** (☎ 099-521309; admission per day foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 500/200/20) covers 305 sq km of sal forest and phanta along the banks of the Bahini River. The terrain is similar to Royal Bardia National Park and the reserve has tigers, rhinos, crocodiles, wild elephants and Nepal's largest population of *barasingha* (swamp deer), currently numbering around 2000, as well as large numbers of migratory birds.

Visiting Sukla Phanta was always difficult, and since the closure of the only park lodge, camping is the only way to stay overnight. The few visitors who make it to the park generally come on day trips from Mahendranagar with a hired car and driver. Elephant rides (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 1000/500/200) can be booked at the park headquarters, but call ahead to make sure somebody will be around.

The best time to visit is November to January; the main vehicle track within the park is impassable from June to September because of monsoon flooding.

MAHENDRANAGAR

☎ 099

As the most westerly border crossing between Nepal and India, Mahendranagar

offers an interesting back route to Delhi and the hill towns of Uttaranchal. This is one of the more relaxing border crossings and the town itself is surprisingly pleasant. Unfortunately for travellers, the Maoist insurgency affects travel throughout this region. Most people head straight for the border, but the little-visited Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve is a short drive east of the airport.

Dangers & Annoyances

Mahendranagar is the gateway to western Nepal, but travel in the region is fraught with difficulties. Maoist rebels have staged numerous attacks on bridges and civic institutions in recent years and vehicles on the Mahendra Hwy are subject to regular army searches, adding hours to journey times. Everything returns to normal during ceasefires, so check the security situation before you visit.

The annual monsoon brings a whole new set of challenges, from flooded roads to collapsed bridges. Even during the dry winter season, the road from Nepalganj to Mahendranagar is a notorious accident black spot. Be prepared for long delays, particularly during the monsoon.

Road travel at night is risky anywhere in Nepal and particularly hairy in a region where buses have been targeted by roadside bombs. Be aware that travel by road may sometimes be impossible because of structural damage to bridges following Maoist attacks.

Orientation & Information

Mahendranagar is just south of the Mahendra Hwy, about 5km east of the Indian border. From the Nepali border post at Gaddachauki, it's about 1km to the Indian border post at Banbassa – a rickshaw is probably the way to go.

It's laid out on a simple grid system. The main road runs east to west and the roads leading south are labelled 'Line 1' to 'Line 5'. The bus stand is right on the Mahendra Hwy so there's no need to come into the centre unless you plan to stay the night.

The Government of Nepal runs a small **tourist information centre** (☎ 523773; ☎ 7am-6.30pm) on the Nepal side of the border. If you need a Hotmail fix, several computer centres on Line 5 offer fast net access for Rs 40 per hour.

Sleeping & Eating

There are lots of cheap hotels near the bus stand, plus more upmarket options on the roads leading south from the main street.

Royal Guest House (☎ 523799; d without bathroom Rs 160) This basic place is the best of the grungy hotels directly opposite the bus stand.

Hotel New Anand (☎ 521693; Line 3; s/d with bathroom from Rs 300/500) Above a small shopping arcade, this good value cheapie offers simple rooms with a geyser, a TV and a comfy chair to watch it from.

Hotel Sweet Dream (☎ 522313; Mahendra Hwy; d with bathroom Rs 350-450, with air-con Rs 1000; ♿) On the highway about 100m east of the bus station, this friendly midrange place has

CROSSING THE BORDER

Border Hours

The Nepali side of the border is open to tourists 24 hours, but before 7am and after 5.30pm you may need to go searching for the Nepali officials. The Indian side of the border is only open to vehicles 5am-6am, noon-2pm and 5-6pm.

Foreign Exchange

There's a small bank counter near the Nepali customs post but it only exchanges Indian and Nepali rupees.

Onward to India

From the Indian border post, it's an INRs 10 rickshaw ride to the bus station in Banbassa, where you can pick up long-distance buses to Delhi (INRs 156, 10 hours). Local buses and shared jeeps serve Almora, Nainital and other towns in Uttaranchal. There's also a slow metre-gauge train to Bareilly, where you can pick up trains to other destinations in India.

comfortable rooms with carpets and a decent restaurant. The colour scheme is a bit overpowering but the welcome is warm.

Most people eat at their hotels, or there are several simple Nepali *bhojanalayas* on Line 4.

Getting There & Away

The airport is 3.5km from the centre but flights to Nepalgunj and Kathmandu have been suspended indefinitely.

The bus station is about 1km from the centre on the Mahendra Hwy. Long-haul buses leave for Kathmandu (Rs 735, 16 hours) at 5am, 8.30am and 2.15pm. There's also a single Pokhara service at 10.30am (Rs 728, 16 hours). Local buses run regularly to Nepalgunj (Rs 300, six hours), passing the turn off to Royal Bardia National Park.

Getting Around

Buses, tempos and tongas run regularly between the bus station and the border for Rs 10 to Rs 15. Taxis can be hired for trips to Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve for Rs 4000 per day.

EASTERN TERAI

Bound by the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal, the eastern Terai is broadly a mirror image of the west. The rolling hills of the Mahabharat Range are squeezed between the dry eastern plains and the Himalaya,

and the Mahendra Hwy cuts east to meet the Indian border at Kakarbhitta, providing easy access to Sikkim and Darjeeling.

The eastern portion of the Terai sees more visitors than the west, but it's still a peaceful and untouched region, at least as far as tourism goes. Probably the most famous spot is Janakpur, with its ancient Sita temple and rich tradition of Mithila painting. Politically, things aren't quite so peaceful. Maoist rebels operate in the hills and travel north of the Mahendra Hwy is often impossible due to skirmishes between rebels and government soldiers. Check the security situation before embarking east. This includes the border crossing to India at Kakarbhitta.

JANAKPUR

☎ 041

Janakpur has been a centre for Hindu pilgrimages since at least the 4th century BC, when the story of Sita, wife of Rama and daughter of King Janak of Mithila, was written down in the Ramayana. Even today, the town feels closer to the Hindu towns of India than the tribal townships of Nepal – there's nowhere better to get a real feel for life in the plains.

On one level, Janakpur is a tourist town, but almost all the tourists are pilgrims from India. The streets are dotted with pilgrims' hostels and the huge Janaki temple attracts pilgrims from across the subcontinent. The best time to visit is during the Hindu festival

of Sita Bibaha Panchami (see p366), when vignettes from the Ramayana are acted out in the streets, bringing the ancient myth vividly to life.

The other lure in Janakpur is Mithila culture. Janakpur was once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Mithila, a territory now divided between Nepal and India, and more than two million people in the area still speak Maithili as their native tongue. The people of Mithila are famous for their wildly colourful paintings. Mithila art is primitive, in the Fine Art sense, and it offers a fascinating window onto rural life in the Terai – see the boxed text p315.

Janakpur is actually the third city on this site. The city mythologised in the Ramayana existed around 700 BC, but it was later abandoned and sank back into the forest. Simaraungarh grew up in its place, but this city was also destroyed, this time by Muslim invaders in the 14th century. Modern Janakpur is a busy, bustling bazaar town, with winding narrow streets, more rickshaws and bicycles than cars and a real sense of energy and purpose. Many people visit on the way to/from Kakarbhitta and you can make a fascinating detour south to the Indian border (though not across it) on the old metre-gauge train to Jaynagar.

Orientation

About 20km south of the Mahendra Hwy, Janakpur is a maze of narrow, winding streets – the telecom tower and water tower

are useful landmarks. The official centre of town is the Janaki Temple in the middle of the bazaar, but most of the hotels are further east on the road running up to Bhanu Chowk and the train station.

If you come in on the highway, you'll arrive at Ramanand Chowk, topped by a giant metal sculpture of crossed elephant tusks. The town centre is east of the junction while the bus stand is due south at Zero Mile Chowk.

Information

There's a small and informal **tourist office** (☎ 520755; ☎ 10am-4pm Sun-Thu, 10am-3pm Fri) upstairs in an arcade near the station on Bhanu Chowk. It closes an hour earlier from November to January.

There's nowhere to change money but **Royal Cyber & Communications** (☎ 525441; Station Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) is a reliable net-café.

Sights

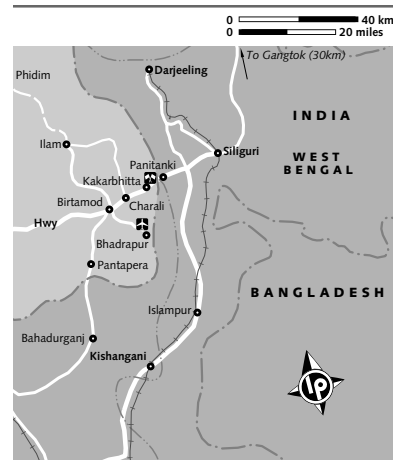
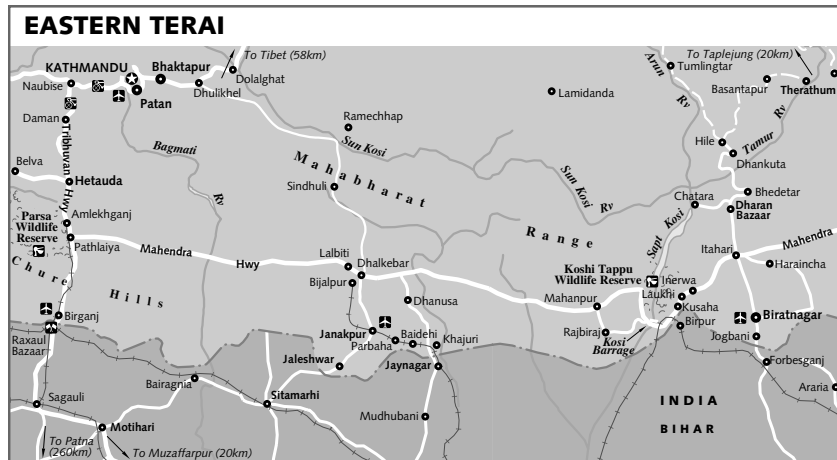
JANAKI MANDIR

Janakpur's most important temple is dedicated to Sita, the wife of Rama and heroine of the Ramayana. According to the ancient text, Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka and her husband sped south to save her, aided by the loyal monkey god, Hanuman. Although Rama and Sita were historical figures, Hindus regard Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu and Sita as an incarnation of Lakshmi.

Built in extravagant baroque Mughal style, the **Janaki Mandir** is believed to stand on the exact spot where King Janak found the infant Sita lying in the furrow of a ploughed field. In fact, the temple only dates to 1912, but it feels much older with its arches, domes, turrets and screens. It looks a little like a glorious wedding cake, designed for a maharajah.

A steady stream of pilgrims files in through the gatehouse to pay homage to the Sita statue in the **inner sanctum** (☎ 5-7am & 6-8pm). It's a much calmer process than the blood-thirsty goings-on at Nepal's Shaivite temples and many people come here to sit in the cool cloisters and contemplate the lessons of the Ramayana. The temple is particularly popular with women, who wear their best and most colourful saris for the occasion.

Vendors sell coloured powders and religious objects on the square in front of the temple and the surrounding street market





has the usual lively hubbub of a plains town bazaar. Look for unusual Indian imports such as *pani phul* (fresh water chestnuts).

RAM SITA BIBAHA MANDIR

Almost next door to the Janaki Temple, this rather bizarre **temple** (admission Rs 2, camera fee Rs 5, video Rs 21; ☎ 5am-9pm) marks the spot where Rama and Sita were married. The temple is topped by a modernist interpretation of a tiered pagoda roof and the walls are glass so you can peer in at the kitsch life-sized models of Sita and Rama.

RAM MANDIR & DANUSH SAGAR

Hidden away in a stone courtyard southeast of the Janaki Mandir, the **Ram Mandir** is a

much older structure, built in the classic tiered pagoda style of the hills. The main temple is sacred to Rama but there are several smaller shrines to Shiva, Hanuman and Durga dotted around the compound. It's busiest in the early evening, when the courtyard is filled with incense smoke and music.

Opposite the entrance are a series of ghats (steps for ritual bathing) leading down into the **Danush Sagar**, the largest ceremonial tank at Janakpur. There are small shrines all around the perimeter and vendors in front sell flower garlands, tikka powder, sacred threads and other ritual objects for pujas (prayers). Nearby is the small **Janak Mandir**, sacred to the father of Sita.

OTHER TEMPLES & PONDS

There are numerous other temples and ponds scattered around the outskirts of town, accessible on foot or by rickshaw.

Over on the other side of town, Hanuman is worshipped in the form of a live rhesus macaque at the **Big Monkey Temple**. The previous monkey grew to 60kg before finally succumbing to morbid obesity and its replacement seems well on the way to following it. It's easy to miss the temple – the gateway is almost opposite the **cinema**, about 100m south of Ramanand Chowk.

If you head west from Ramanand Chowk, you'll reach two more ceremonial tanks – **Bihar Kunda** and **Ratan Saga Kunda**.

TRADITIONAL VILLAGES

The sugar cane fields and Mithila villages around Janakpur form a lush and magical mosaic. Many of the villages are built in the traditional Mithila style, with adobe walls decorated with colourful paintings of people and animals. Probably the easiest village to reach from Janakpur, is **Kuwa**, about 1km south of Murali Chowk. People are very friendly, as long as you aren't too intrusive with your camera, and you can drop in on the Janakpur Women's Development Centre – see the boxed text below. If you feel like roaming further a field, **Dhanusa**, 15km northeast of Janakpur, marks the spot where Rama allegedly drew Shiva's magic bow.

MITHILA ART

As the former capital of the kingdom of Mithila, it's appropriate that Janakpur is striving to preserve the ancient art of Mithila painting. More commonly associated with Bihar in India, Mithila painting is part decoration, part social commentary, recording the lives of rural women in a society where reading and writing are reserved for high-caste men. Scenes in Mithila paintings record the female experience of life in the Terai – work, childbirth, marriage and the social network among village women.

Traditionally, Mithila paintings were used for decoration – you can still see houses across the Terai with abstract patterns or complex scenes of village life painted in white and ochre on the mud walls. More recently, Mithila painting has taken off as a collectable art form, creating a whole new industry for women in impoverished rural communities.

One of the best known social projects is the **Janakpur Women's Development Centre** (☎ 521080; www.catgen.com/jwdc; ☎ 10am-5pm Sun-Fri, 10am-4pm Dec-Jan), just outside Janakpur in the village of Kuwa. Around 50 Mithila women are employed at the centre, producing paper paintings, papier-mâché boxes and mirrors, screen-printed fabrics and hand-thrown ceramics. The work is delightful and the money raised goes directly towards improving the lives of rural women. You can meet the artisans and buy directly from the centre – a rickshaw from Janakpur to the centre will cost Rs 30.

Festivals & Events

By far the most interesting time to visit Janakpur is during **Bibaha Panchami** (Vivaha Panchami) on the fifth day of the waxing moon in November/December. Tens of thousands of pilgrims descend on the town to celebrate the re-enactment of Sita's marriage to Rama and there are processions and performances of scenes from the Ramayana in the streets. **Rama Navami** (March/April), celebrating Rama's birthday, is also accompanied by a huge procession.

On the day before Holi in March, **Parikrama** involves a ritual walk around the town's ring road, attracting thousands of pilgrims. **Holi** itself can get very boisterous but be warned: foreigners are not exempt from a ritual splattering with coloured powder and water. If you visit during **Tihar** (Deepawali) in October/November, you'll see Mithila women repainting the murals on their houses.

Sleeping & Eating

All the following hotels have attached restaurants. Because of all the standing water in the holy ponds, mosquitos come out with all guns blazing. Slap on the DEET or light a coil if you want a decent night's sleep.

Kathmandu Guest House (☎ 521753; Bhanu Chowk; s/d without bathroom Rs 100/200, s/d with bathroom Rs 150/250) A reliable cheapie. Rooms have fans, mosquito nets and clean bathrooms with squat toilets.

Hotel Sukh Sagar (☎ 520488; d without bathroom Rs 200, s/d with bathroom from Rs 250/275) In the bazaar opposite the Janaki Temple, this simple pilgrim's hostel has reasonably clean rooms and hot water by the bucket. There's an inexpensive veg curry house downstairs.

Hotel Rama (☎ 520059; Mills Area Chowk; d with bathroom Rs 300-400, d with air-con Rs 800; ♿) A hike from the centre but excellent value for money, Hotel Rama is about 500m north of Bhanu Chowk. It's popular with NGOs, which is always a good sign, and the rooms are large, clean and painted in soothing shades of lilac.

Hotel Welcome (☎ 520646; Station Rd; s/d with bathroom Rs 300/450, s/d with air-con Rs 1000/1600; ♿) Slightly run down, but still reasonably good value. The location is convenient and some rooms have cheerful Mithila-inspired paintings on the walls. Rooms with air-con cost just Rs 500 if you don't use the air-conditioner.

Hotel Manaki International (☎ 521540; hotel manaki@hotmail.com; Shiv Chowk; s/d with bathroom Rs 1000/1200, s/d with air-con Rs 2000/2500; ♿) The only really upmarket choice in Janakpur, the Manaki International has cavernous deluxe rooms with all mod cons and more modest standard rooms with hot showers but no air-con.

Rooftop Family Restaurant (Station Rd; mains Rs 50-200; ☎ 9am-10pm) Facing the small Janak Mandir, this upmarket place claims to be 'the only choice of smart people' in Janakpur and we're inclined to agree. The Chinese and Indian food is excellent.

If you're looking for nightlife, there are several **pool halls** near the Rooftop Family Restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Buddha Air (☎ 041-525022) and other private airlines have daily flights between Janakpur and Kathmandu (US\$76, 25 minutes). Airline offices are around Bhanu Chowk and the airport is a Rs 70 rickshaw ride south of the centre.

Buses leave from the dusty main bus station southwest of Zero Mile Chowk, a Rs 30 rickshaw ride from central Janakpur. There are day and night buses east to Kakarbhitta (day/night Rs 270/300, five hours) and north to Kathmandu (day/night Rs 350/370, 10 hours) via Narayangarh (day/night Rs 150/170, six hours). A single bus leaves daily for Pokhara (Rs 325, 10 hours) and there are several morning buses for Biratnagar (Rs 160, four hours). Local buses run hourly to Birganj (Rs 140, five hours) until about 3pm.

The station at the north end of Station Rd is the starting point for train rides to local villages – see below for details.

KOSHI TAPPU WILDLIFE RESERVE

☎ 025

This **Wildlife Reserve** (☎ 530897; admission per day foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 500/200/20) was founded in 1976 to protect a small triangle of *phanta* (grassland) and *tappu* (small islands) in the floodplain of the Sapt Kosi River, the last habitat of the endangered *arna* (wild water

buffalo). At the south end of the reserve, the Kosi Barrage funnels the floodwaters of the Sapt Kosi into a single channel to minimise flood damage in Bihar.

It's a wonderfully serene spot and most travellers who visit are bird-watchers in search of rare species such as the Bengal florican and sarus crane. At least 439 species of birds have been recorded here and migratory species from Siberia and Tibet take up residence from November to February. *Arna* tend to hang out on the tappu and you may also spot deer, wild boars, pythons and crocodiles. There are thought to be a handful of Gangetic dolphins in the Sapt Kosi but they are very rarely seen.

Most visitors come on organised tours from Kathmandu or Pokhara, which include bird-watching walks, elephant rides, boat trips, accommodation and meals at the tented camps inside the park and transfers from Biratnagar airport. There are few facilities for independent travellers.

Information

The **reserve headquarters** (☎ 530897; ☎ 10am-5pm) at Kusaha has an interesting information centre and museum, with elephant, deer and guar skulls and a desiccated gharial. This is where visitors pay the daily park entry fees.

Sights & Activities

As with other national parks in the Terai, the most popular way to explore is by elephant. Elephant safaris can be arranged at the park headquarters for Rs 1000/400/200 (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali). All the lodges can arrange tours of the *tappu* (river islands) by canoe or *dunga* (wooden boat) – the going rate for a boat and driver is about Rs 1500, covering up to five passengers.

Every lodge has a resident ornithologist who leads bird-spotting walks around the park, usually included in the package rates. If you come here independently, ask about hiring a guide at the park headquarters.

Sleeping

There are several lodges, but call ahead to make sure they're open before turning up at the front door. As well as the package rates, you'll have to pay the park entry fee, the park camping fee (Rs 300 per person) and 13% tax.

Koshi Camp (☎ 01-4429609 in Kathmandu; www.kosicamp.com; 3-day/2-night package per person US\$189) A popular choice for birders, Koshi Camp is located on the western edge of the park, near several water holes. It's refreshingly small and low-key and accommodation is in comfortable safari tents.

Aqua Birds Unlimited Camp (☎ 01-4413470 in Kathmandu; aquabirds@csl.com.np; 3-day/2-night package US\$175) Again, the focus here is on our feathered friends. The resident bird-watching guides are very experienced and accommodation is big safari tents with solar-powered hot showers. Ask the camp about the migratory birds festival that they put on most years in February, depending on tourist demand and the security situation. **Koshi Tappu Wildlife Camp** (☎ 01-4226130 in Kathmandu; www.koshitappu.com; explore@mos.com.np; package per person US\$125) This peaceful jungle camp sits out on the northeastern edge of the reserve. Guests stay in simple safari tents and there's no electricity, but the jungle atmosphere is very appealing. A small water course flows through the grounds so you can watch birds from the comfort of the bar.

Getting There & Away

Almost everyone comes here on a package tour with a pre-arranged pick up from Biratnagar airport. If you want to visit under your own steam, the park headquarters is about 3km south of the Mahendra Hwy, signposted 16km northeast of the Kosi Barrage.

ITAHARI

Itahari is an undistinguished town at the junction of the Mahendra Hwy and the roads to Biratnagar and Hile. All long-distance buses along the Mahendra Hwy pull into the well-organised bus stand and there are fast and frequent local services to Biratnagar and places along the road to Hile.

If you get stuck overnight, the **Jaynepal Hotel** (☎ 580113; s/d without bathroom Rs 200/250, r with bathroom Rs 350-450) is right by the roundabout at the turn off to Dharan Bazaar. A rickshaw from the bus stand will cost Rs 30.

BIRATNAGAR

☎ 021

Biratnagar is the second-largest city in Nepal, but it still feels like a small provincial town. There's lots of heavy industry on the road leading south to Biratnagar from the

RIDING THE RAILS

From the train station in Janakpur, a slow metre-gauge train runs east across the Indian border to the dusty plains town of Jaynagar. Only Indians and Nepalis can actually cross the border, but the train ride provides a delicious taste of the subcontinent.

This must be one of the last trains in Asia where people routinely ride on the roof. Passengers are crammed into very square inch of the carriages and bicycles and boxes hang from every window so there's often nowhere else to go. It's a breezy ride up top, but the train passes through some wonderfully unspoiled countryside, stopping at a series of small Terai villages. Along the way you'll see farmers ploughing with bullock carts, children chasing beside the train with paper kites and families winning rice in the courtyards of tiny thatched homes.

Foreigners can travel as far as Khajuri (2nd-/1st-class Rs 16/32, three hours), about 21km southeast of Janakpur. Trains leave Janakpur at 6.45am, 11.30am and 3.20pm, returning from Khajuri at around 8.40am, 12.40pm and 4.30pm. If you fancy getting down and stretching your legs, the train stops in the villages of Parbaha (2nd/1st class Rs 7/12, 8km, 30 minutes) and Baidehi (2nd/1st class Rs 10/18, 12km, one hour). To return to Janakpur, you can take the next train or hop on a local bus.

Mahendra Hwy but the centre of town is surprisingly calm and manageable. Most of the goods produced here go straight across the border to India – the nearest border crossing open to travellers is Kakarbhitta.

Biratnagar doesn't have any must-see sights, but the town is a major air hub for flights to the eastern hills and there are daily

air connections to Kathmandu. Jute used to be grown around here in large quantities, but the Tharu and Danuwar villagers who produced the fibres have lost out to mechanised industry. If you find yourself killing time here, drop into the gaily-painted **Hanuman Mandir** and **Kali Mandir** near the public market.

Information & Orientation

Biratnagar is about 22km south of the Mahendra Hwy. The official centre of town is Traffic Chowk and the municipal market is just north on Main Rd. Most of the hotels are further west on Malaya Rd, which runs south to the border. The bus stand is a Rs 30 rickshaw ride southwest of the centre and the airport is a Rs 60 ride northwest.

For foreign exchange, try **Lumbini Bank Ltd** (Himalaya Rd; ☎ 10am-2.30pm Sun-Thu, till 12.30pm Fri). Several Internet cafés at Traffic Chowk offer fast connections for Rs 25 per hour.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people stay near the noisy bus stand, but Traffic Chowk is a more upbeat and welcoming area.

Dhankuta Lodge (☎ 522925; s/d with bathroom from Rs 160/200) Don't expect frills at this rudimentary place opposite the bus station. Rooms are dingy but tolerable; try to get one at the back, away from the traffic noise.

Hotel Geetanjali (☎ 527335; Malaya Rd; s/d with bathroom Rs 350/450) Not far from the bus stand, above some cane furniture shops, this place has big, clean rooms with concrete floors and a reasonably priced restaurant.

Hotel Namaskar (☎ 521199; hotelnamaskar@wlink.com.np; Main Rd; s/d with bathroom Rs 600/800, s/d with air-con Rs 1000/1200; 🍷) The smartest option at Traffic Chowk, Namaskar is set in a quiet courtyard. It's run by devotees of Sai Baba and rooms are large and inviting. The restaurant here is one of the best in town.

Hotel Swagatam (☎ 524450; swagat@bcn.com.np; s/d with TV & bathroom Rs 550/700, r with air-con Rs 1200-1500; 🍷) About 500m south of the bus station, this bright pink hotel is covered in bougainvilleas. The bar and restaurant has a nice ambience and the rooms are chintzy but comfortable. Air-con rooms have tubs and carpets.

Getting There & Away

RNAC (☎ 524661) and several private airlines offer flights between Biratnagar and Kath-

mandu (US\$81 to US\$96, one hour). RNAC also flies three times a week to Taplejung (US\$64 to US\$85, 30 minutes). Travel agents around Traffic Chowk can make bookings. A rickshaw to the airport will cost around Rs 60.

The **bus stand** is a Rs 10 rickshaw ride southwest from Traffic Chowk. There are regular day and night buses to Kathmandu (day/night Rs 475/495, 12 hours) via Narayanganj (day/night Rs 380/400, nine hours), and several buses leave every morning for Birganj (Rs 252, seven hours) and Janakpur (Rs 160, four hours). There are also regular services along the Mahendra Hwy to Kakarbhitta (Rs 120, 3½ hours).

Local buses run regularly to Dharan Bazaar (Rs 40, one hour) throughout the day. There are also early morning buses to Dhankuta (Rs 140, three hours) and Hile (Rs 170, 3½ hours).

DHARAN BAZAR TO HILE

About 17km north of Itahari, Dharan Bazaar marks the start of yet another dramatic route into the hills. From here, a decent tarmac road runs north into the foothills of the Himalaya, providing access to a series of attractive hill towns and trekking trailheads. Sadly, this is another area with Maoist problems and you should check the security situation carefully before venturing north of Dharan Bazaar.

Dharan Bazaar

☎ 025

Just off the Mahendra Hwy, at the foot of the Chure hills, Dharan feels like a hill town that has been transported to the plains. You'll see lots of tribal women wearing their wealth in the form of heavy gold jewellery and the overall mood is prosperous and upbeat – you'd never realise that an earthquake almost destroyed the place in 1988. Dharan is famous for its metalworkers, who produce high quality cauldrons and *gaagri* (brass water jugs) for villages in the hills.

Dharan is also one of the *shakti peeths*, marking the spot where part of the body of Shiva's first wife, Sati, fell after she was consumed by flames. There are several important Shaivite temples northeast of the centre in the village of Bijayapur. Set among dense bamboo thickets down the path beside the four-tiered concrete tower, **Budha Subba Mandir**

contains a curious collection of mud-covered rocks, said to represent the reclining body of Mahadev (Shiva). The smaller **Dantakali** and **Pindeshwar** temples are both on the road leading south from the small roundabout with the concrete football. To reach Bijayapur, take the steps leading uphill near the Panas Hotel, or charter an auto-rickshaw.

Several net cafés around Bhanu Chowk (the square with the bus stand and clocktower) offer fast net access for Rs 30 per hour. The Nabil Bank has an ATM that accepts foreign cards.

SLEEPING & EATING

Accommodation in Dharan is very limited – there are a few cheap hotels near the bus stand and one decent midrange choice about three blocks north.

Hotel Naya Yug (☎ 524797; r with/without bathroom Rs 250/200) Don't be put off by the red lights in the windows – this is actually a fairly respectable cheapie. There's a small restaurant and rooms are simple but perfectly adequate.

Hotel Panas (☎ 523204; Chata Chowk; s/d Rs 400/500) Three blocks north of Bhanu Chowk, near the steps to Bijayapur, this decent midrange place has comfy rooms with TVs, fans, hot showers and thick blankets.

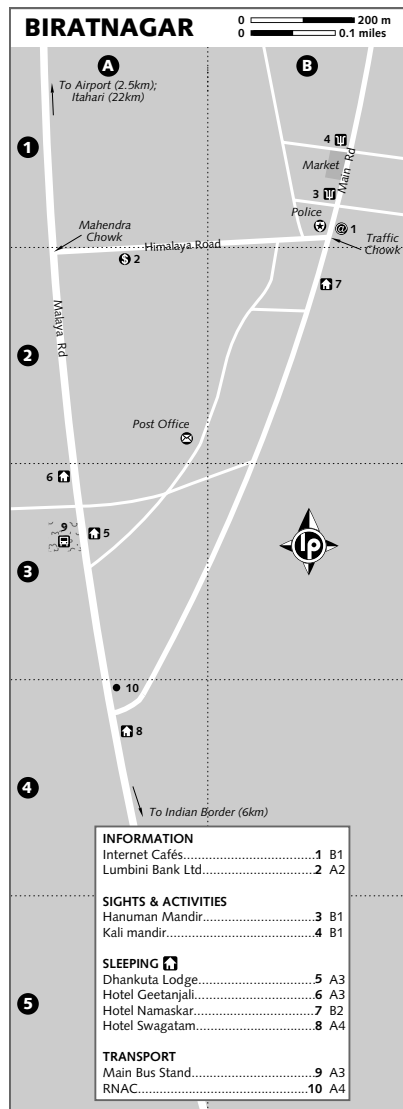
For meals, there are lots of cheap daal bhaat and chow mein places around the bus stand.

House of Sweets & Snacks (snack meals under Rs 50; ☎ 7.30am-8pm) For cheap and tasty *dosas* and other South Indian favourites, try this popular *mishnan bhandar* on the road north from Bhanu Chowk.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Buses leave regularly from Bhanu Chowk for Kathmandu (day/night Rs 475/527, 15 hours) and Biratnagar (Rs 40, one hour). Heading north, local buses run regularly from 4am to 4pm to Bhedatar (Rs 50, one hour), Dhankuta (Rs 95, two hours) and Hile (Rs 118, 2½ hours). Early morning buses continue from Hile to Basantpur and Therathum, but check the security situation before venturing out this far. See p99 for details of treks from Basantpur to The Hide Out and rafting on the Tamur River.

Expect to pay around Rs 300 for an auto-rickshaw from the bus stand to Bijayapur and back.



Bhedetar

Bhedetar isn't much more than a cluster of wooden shacks and army buildings on the road to Dhankuta, but the location – perched at 1420m with soaring views over Everest and Makalu – is dramatic. There are giddy views over the Terai and mountains from the 20m-high **viewing tower** (foreigner/SAARC/Nepali Rs 50/10/5; ☎ daylight hr) on the bluff behind the army post; these days, the entry fee is rarely collected.

There's nowhere to stay, but several tin-roofed *bhojanalayas* serve simple, filling meals, *tongba* (millet beer) and local 'wine' (ie spirits). If you come here by car or motorcycle, watch out for drunk drivers.

Dhankuta

☎ 026

About 50km above Dharan, Dhankuta is a dusty bazaar town, sprawled along an east-facing ridge. It's an important stop for traders from the hills, particularly on Thursdays for the weekly *haat bazaar* (village market), but it dozes quietly the rest of the time. There's a small **museum** (entry Rs 10; ☎ 10am-5pm Sun-Fri) with displays on tribal culture at the top of the bazaar, but you'll need local help to find it.

Maoists are active in this area, but if the security situation improves, it may be possible to walk in the surrounding hills. There's a viewpoint with modest mountain views just south of the centre; take the right fork above the bus station and follow the obvious trail that branches left up the hillside.

Most travellers who visit are bound for loftier locations such as Hile or the remote trekking routes around Kanchenjunga.

Maoists have staged several raids on the police post at Dhankuta in recent years – check that things are safe before you leave Dharan.

SLEEPING & EATING

If you do choose to stop here, there are several decent 'hotel and lodging' places on the main street.

Hotel Parchaya (☎ 520593; s/d Rs 100/175) Along the ridge at the north end of town, this friendly wooden guesthouse has simple, village-style rooms and a nice restaurant where you can hang out in the evenings. To get here, follow the main road through the village and branch right by the police post.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Plenty of buses travel between Dhankuta and Dharan Bazaar (Rs 95, two hours). Morning buses from Dharan Bazaar continue uphill to Hile (Rs 25, 30 minutes) and on to Basantpur and Therathum.

Hile

☎ 026

The hill town of Hile (pronounced 'high-lay') is the starting point for treks to the Arun Valley (possible for individuals) and to Kanchenjunga and Makalu (only for groups). However, the security situation is not good. The hills around Hile are currently off limits to all but the most intrepid trekking parties, which is a real shame, as Hile is one of the most attractive villages in the eastern highlands.

If you do make it up here, the village is home to a sizeable population of Tibetans, who worship at the colourful **Urgay Namedo Chöling Gumpa** in the middle of the village. There's a second Buddhist monastery further along the ridge, near the Don Bosco school. Fans of a nice, hot cuppa can visit the **Guranset Tea Estate** (☎ 01-4478301 in Kathmandu; www.guranset.com.np) on the road to Dhankuta.

Several high points offer dramatic views over the Makalu section of the Himalaya. For the best views, walk uphill along the main road to the army encampment and climb the grassy ridge beyond.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are several charming Tibetan-run lodges along the main road through the village where you can find a clean bed and a plate of spicy buff chow mein. Most of the lodges also offer *tongba*, the traditional hot millet beer of the Himalaya.

Hotel Himali & Lodge (☎ 540140; d/q without bathroom Rs 120/400) A stone-finished place with bright blue windows, friendly Tibetan owners and a dark but cosy Tibetan-style bar at the back.

Gumba Hotel & Lodge (☎ 540173; s/d/q without bathroom Rs 60/100/200) Next to the Buddhist monastery, Gumba is very similar – dark but cosy, with oodles of character.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular buses run downhill to Dhankuta (Rs 25, 30 minutes) and Dharan Bazaar (Rs 118, 2½ hours) from the dirt bus stand

in the middle of the village. Assuming the road is safe, buses run north to Basantpur and Therathum, where you can start treks north into the Himalaya.

BIRTAMOD TO ILAM

The road to the tiny hill station of Ilam (pronounced 'ee-lam') starts just east of Birtamod on the Mahendra Hwy. As the centre of Nepal's small tea industry, Ilam has a lot in common with nearby Darjeeling, but the area is a hotbed of Maoist activity and road to Ilam is often blocked due to clashes between security forces and rebels.

If the security situation does improve, Ilam may resurface as a destination for tea tours, hill walks and treks in the foothills of Mt Kanchenjunga (8598m), the world's third highest peak. The main trailhead for mountain treks is Taplejung, accessible by plane from Biratnagar and bus from Birtamod.

Birtamod

☎ 023

The nondescript highway town of Birtamod is the starting point for buses and jeeps bound for Ilam. With the current security station in the hills, few tourists are heading to Ilam, which means that even fewer are stopping in Birtamod. Check the security situation locally before you head into the hills.

If you need to stop over, **Paradise Restaurant & Lodge** (☎ 542942; s/d without bathroom Rs 100/200, s/d with bathroom Rs 250/350) is a clean, reasonably priced lodge; it's 200m east of the main roundabout, opposite the departure point for Ilam jeeps.

Birtamod sits right on the Mahendra Hwy so any bus heading to Kakarbhitta can drop you off. Buses to Ilam (Rs 130, four hours) leave from the highway, just east of the main roundabout. Jeeps do the same journey in three hours (Rs 140).

Ilam

☎ 027

Ilam is the centre of Nepal's small tea industry and the quality of Ilam tea is recognised around the world. Sadly, this attractive hill town is frequently off limits due to the actions of Maoist rebels. Tea plantation tours and hill walks are the main attractions here but trips to Ilam are probably best avoided until the security situation improves.

If you are able to visit, the best place to stay is **Green View Guest House** (☎ 520103; r with/without bathroom from Rs 350/200). Rooms are large, clean and modern and most do indeed have a green view – of tea plantations.

The road to Ilam branches off the Mahendra Hwy at Charali but buses and jeeps to Ilam originate in Birtamod – see left. If the security situation allows, you can follow the same road north to Taplejung, the starting point for group treks to the base of Kanchenjunga.

KAKARBHITTA

☎ 023

Kakarbhitta (Kakarvitta) is the easternmost crossing between India and Nepal and it's just a few hours drive from Siliguri and Darjeeling in West Bengal and Gangtok in Sikkim. This is one of the easiest border crossings and the bazaar by the bus stand is packed with vendors selling Indian spices, Nepali *khukuris* (Gurkha knives), Chinese radios and other black market goods. The surrounding countryside is full of tea plantations, a taste of things to come on the Darjeeling side of the border, but there's isn't any great reason to linger here.

Information & Orientation

The Nepali border post at Kakarbhitta and the Indian border post at Panitanki are just a few hundred metres apart, so you can cross the border easily on foot. In Kakarbhitta, the bus stand is about 100m west of the border on the north side of the hwy. Most of the hotels are in the surrounding streets.

The Government of Nepal runs a small **tourist information centre** (☎ 562252; ☎ 7am-6pm) on the Nepal side of the border. You can check your email at **Net Point Cyber Zone** (☎ 562040; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 8am-8pm) opposite Hotel Mechi.

Sleeping & Eating

Kakarbhitta is tiny and most of the hotels are crammed together in the narrow alleys leading west from the back of the bus stand.

Hotel Deurali (☎ 562115; s without bathroom Rs 50, d with bathroom Rs 250) On an alley west of the bus park, this old-style cheapie is pretty basic but you can't argue with the price. Showers are cold and there's a simple *bhojanalaya* downstairs.

CROSSING THE BORDER**Border Hours**

Both sides of the border are staffed between 6pm and before 7pm. You may still be able to cross outside these times but you'll need to go searching for the immigration officials.

Foreign Exchange

Nepal Bank Ltd operates a foreign exchange desk (☎ 7am-5pm) close to the border. You can change cash and travellers cheques in US dollars, UK pounds and Euros, as well as Indian and Nepali rupees.

Onwards to India

It's about 100m from the Kakarbhitta bus stand to the border, and another 100m to the Indian border post at Panitanki. Rickshaws charge Rs 30 from Kakarbhitta all the way through to the bus stand at Panitanki, which has regular services to Siliguri (Rs 15, one hour), where you can pick up buses to Darjeeling (Rs 60, two hours). Jeeps to the same destinations, and Gangtok (Rs 140, 4½ hours) in Sikkim, line up just beyond the Indian visa post. Siliguri lies on the main train line from Kolkata to northeast India.

Hotel Sirijunga (☎ 562122; s/d with bathroom Rs 200/400, s/d with TV Rs 300/500) Full points for character at this unusual temple-topped hotel west of the bus stand. Rooms have a dash of colour and there's a restaurant and bar full of fairy lights.

Hotel Mechi (☎ 562040; s/d with bathroom Rs 500/700, s/d with air-con Rs 800/1400; 🍴) On the same road as the Kanchan, Hotel Mechi has hot showers and a recommended restaurant (the same food is available from room service). The usual border price-hike rules don't seem to apply here – the large, comfortable rooms here are excellent value.

Hotel Rajat (☎ 562033; rajeshm_s@yahoo.com; s/d with bathroom Rs 200/300, deluxe s/d with TV Rs 600/800, d with air-con Rs 1000; 🍴) The welcome is friendly here and there's a bistro-like restaurant with gingham tablecloths downstairs. Rooms are simple but inviting and the owner is a great source of advice for onward travel.

For meals, all the lodges have restaurants serving Indian, Nepali and Chinese fare.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

The nearest airport is at Bhadrapur, 10km south of Birtamod, which in turn is 13km west of Kakarbhitta. **Yeti Airlines** (☎ 522232) and other private carriers have daily flights to Kathmandu (US\$113, 50 minutes) – any

of the travel agents around the bus park can issue tickets. A taxi from Kakarbhitta bus stand to the airport costs Rs 600 or you can take a local bus to Birtamod, then a second bus to Bhadrapur, then a rickshaw to the airport.

BUS

Travel agents in Kathmandu and Pokhara offer 'through-tickets' to Darjeeling, but you must change buses at Kakarbhitta, then again at Siliguri – it's just as easy to do the trip in stages. The bus stand in Kakarbhitta is the usual, chaotic affair. Be extra wary of your luggage if travelling after dark.

There are several daily services to Kathmandu (day/night Rs 530/607, 17 hours) and Pokhara (day/night Rs 520/622, 17 hours), all travelling via Narayangarh (day/night Rs 405/475, 12 hours). Consider the poor safety record of night buses in Nepal before committing to 17 hours on unlit roads.

Within the eastern part of the Terai, there are four or more daily buses to Janakpur (day/night Rs 270/300, five hours), Biratnagar (Rs 120, 3½ hours) and Birganj (Rs 275, eight hours). If for some reason you wanted to cross Nepal in one go, a single bus leaves daily at 12.40pm for Mahendranagar (Rs 1128, 20 hours) and other towns in the western Terai.

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