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# CULTURAL TRIPS IN NEPAL

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# CULTURAL TRIPS IN NEPAL



Nepal is the cultural nerve center of the Himalayas. Its unhurried pace and the history of the medieval city squares in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur are the heart of this nation. The Kathmandu Valley is home to an unrivalled collection of world-class palaces, hidden backstreet shrines and sublime temple art.

## CULTURAL TYPES IN NEPAL

### THE HIMALAYAN ETHOS

Home to a stunning variety of handicrafts and a sophisticated cuisine, Nepal's diverse culture is packed into a compact geography. Nepal combines gorgeous views of the world's tallest mountains, golden temples, charming hill villages and wildlife to offer one of the world's great travel destinations. It has more than 60 ethnicities, a staggering architectural range in its ancient temples and pristine Buddhist stupas, a testament to its multi-religious heritage. You can observe its faith in its reverence of the Kumaris (living goddesses) across all major towns like Patan, Bhaktapur, and visit the stunning Kumari Bahal in Kathmandu.

### MULTICULTURAL NEPAL

The Malla period, particularly between the 15th-16th centuries, was the golden age of Newari craftsmanship in the Kathmandu Valley. Some of the famous palaces and temples in Patan, Bhaktapur and Kathmandu like the Kashtamandap, Kabindrapura and Maju Deval were built during this time. Apart from wood carving, Newari craftsmanship has also included stone sculpting, metal work and ceramics in places like Bhaktapur's Potters' Square. Newari food is a proud showcase of the rich cuisine of the community unlike the simplicity of a Tharu meal.

The Buddhist influence on the country has resulted in the creation of many thangka painting schools, and these are attended not only by local artisans whose work is sold at galleries and centres like the Dharmapala Thangka Centre, but also by travellers learning through long-term courses. The sleek khukuri (dagger) of the Gurkhas, the world-famous warrior community of Nepal, is a popular souvenir, and a large variety of these can be found at Khukuri House.



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32 Chariot festival

## **BOHO BEATS**

The 1970s brought flower power culture to Nepal, and while much of it has been erased over the decades, areas like Freak Street are a reminder of an era that once was. In many ways, Thamel, the backpacking heart of Kathmandu, balances that bygone time with modern-day travel.

Restaurants, jazz bars, bakeries, tattoo parlors and souvenir shops line its labyrinthine alleys and lanes, making it the Freak Street of today and a pulsating part of Kathmandu's culture.

Outside the valley, Nepali culture manifests itself most clearly in the local way of life. Teahouses on hiking trails become windows into the Sherpa community; wildlife explorations in the Chitwan National Park lend themselves to interactions with the friendly ways of the Tharu community who live on the fringes of the park; and travels in the Helambu region showcase the Nepali Buddhist way of life, which is quite different from the Tibetan one. As you make your way across these different villages and cultures, you slowly begin to figure out when to switch from namaste to tashi delek (greetings in the Tibetan language) and vice versa.

## **FESTIVALS & FAIRS**

Festivals are a great way to understand the culture of a country, and Nepal is no exception. Hindu festivals are celebrated with gusto, especially Dasain, the biggest of them all. The Kumari processions and rath jatras (chariot parades), including lesser-known ones such as those in Panauti, are also popular. Losar, the Tibetan New Year, is the most important festival for the Buddhist community after Buddha Jayanti, the day the Buddha was born. Devotees light thousands of butter lamps in celebration on these days.



© photo.ntb.gov.np

Rato Machindranath Jatra

## DIVERSE CULTURE

Nepal has an increasingly diverse culture today, thanks in part to a growing number of Nepalis who have studied and lived abroad but have chosen to return home. They have added their international influences to the melting pot of a new-age Nepal as have the foreigners who have adopted Nepal as their home and embraced its ancient culture, language and crazy traffic. While Nepali culture might bear a resemblance to India or other subcontinental countries, it is actually much like the popular slogan on T-shirts that are the rage in Thamel: 'Same Same but Different.'



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Kumari-The living goddess of Patan



## NEED TO KNOW

### When To Go

**October & November:** A favourite with trekkers, this is the season for the best mountain views. Clear blue skies and pleasant weather mark this period, and there is usually a steep rise in the prices of accommodation and other things.

**December–April:** The chill of winter sets in after a glorious autumn, and trekking routes are covered with snow and are bitterly cold. However, it's still a good time for cultural tours in the valleys. Spring (February and March) is warmer with a wonderful period of rhododendron blooms and is great for day trips into forests or low-altitude treks.

**June–September:** This is the monsoon period, and there are operators who conduct tours for travellers. Visits to rain shadow areas like Upper Dolpo and Upper Mustang are recommended during this season. In other areas, accommodation is cheap and discounts are common during these months.





## NEED TO KNOW

### What to Pack

- Depending on when you visit, pack layers of clothing as required; should the weather turn, you will need a light fleece even in the summers.
- Good walking shoes and sturdy hiking boots are a must if you plan to go to the higher mountains.
- Carry sunscreen, sunglasses, lip balm, a flashlight, insect repellent, water purification tablets, a reusable water bottle and all other paraphernalia for trekking or hiking. If you forget anything, you can buy it from any of the mini supermarkets in Kathmandu and Pokhara.
- A bathing suit is useful for hotel pools and rafting trips.





## **i Quick Facts**

### **LANGUAGE**

The people in Nepal speak a mix of Nepali and Hindi, and basic English is spoken and understood by most on the tourist circuits and even in teahouses on trekking trails.

### **CURRENCY**

The Nepali rupee (NPR) is the local currency. The US dollar is widely accepted just like the Indian rupee. Most money exchange shops display the exchange rates for the day, but you can check on [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com) too. The closer you are to a touristy area, the larger the number of ATMs you will find. Credit cards are widely accepted at mid-range and high-end hotels and other service providers, but carry enough cash on hiking trails.

### **CONNECTIVITY**

Local SIM cards are available at the airport, and there are many recharge shops in towns. If you are travelling with a partner or a group, try buying from the same service provider as inter-service telephony is expensive.

Wi-fi services are widely available in cities and towns and even in trekking teahouses now (additional charges apply). For more details, go to [www.welcomenepal.com](http://www.welcomenepal.com)







## Quick Facts

### KEY TO RATES

#### Accommodation

|        |             |
|--------|-------------|
| \$\$\$ | over \$90   |
| \$\$   | \$50-90     |
| \$     | below \$ 50 |

#### Meals

|        |            |
|--------|------------|
| \$\$\$ | over \$15  |
| \$\$   | \$8-15     |
| \$     | below \$ 8 |

## GETTING THERE

**By Air:** The Tribhuvan International Airport outside of Kathmandu is the country's only international airport.

You can take a prepaid cab from inside the terminal. You can also download the Sarathi app ([www.sarathi.cab](http://www.sarathi.cab)) and hire taxis or bicycles to get around Kathmandu. The domestic flight network in Nepal is excellent as it connects most remote trailheads to the capital and saves you arduous road journeys. These are small sector flights, so be prepared for delays and cancellations because of weather conditions, etc.

**By Road:** Buses are the main (and cheapest) form of public transport and connect most of the country. The tourist buses are more comfortable than local ones, and they are better at keeping time too. Car hires for multi-day trips can be arranged through tour operators. They can be a bit expensive but are worth the comfort and flexibility.





## TOURS & GUIDES

While tour operators and guides are a dime a dozen in Nepal, it is better to use reputed agencies and government-approved guides for both quality and safety reasons. Most heritage sites provide guides at the ticket counter, so pick one there or take along your agency-approved guide.

### Dos and Don'ts

#### Do

- Plan your itinerary ahead to get good deals on accommodation and travel.
- Start a fitness regimen if you plan to indulge in adventure sports.
- Acclimatize well before hitting high-altitude areas.
- Carry any specific medication if necessary. Kathmandu has good medical facilities, but the smaller towns will not be able to handle complicated medical issues.
- Be respectful in temples, monasteries and heritage sites as many of them are also operational religious sites.
- Dress modestly and take off your shoes and hat before entering the premises.

- Check if photography is allowed indoors.
- Move clockwise around chortens and stupas. You may leave a donation at gompas and temples if you wish.

#### Don't

- Waste natural resources in the mountains.
- Enter a private home with your shoes on or leave a meal until everyone else has finished eating.
- Take photos of people without seeking their permission first.
- Shop in Thamel without comparing prices.
- Drink tap water.

## Festivals of Nepal

Nepal is a multicultural society with people from various ethnic backgrounds. Festivals, whether they are Hindu or Buddhist, are celebrated with equal fervor and ceremony. Some of the most vibrant festivals in the year include:

- **Dasain** Sep-Oct
- **Tihar** Oct-Nov
- **Mha Puja** Oct-Nov
- **Fagu Purnima (Holi)** March
- **Gai Jatra** Aug-Sep
- **Ghode Jatra** Mar-Apr
- **Teej** Aug-Sep
- **Janai Purnima** Aug
- **Lhosar** Feb
- **Bisket Jatra** Mar-Apr
- **Buddha Jayanti** Apr-May
- **Indra Jatra** Sep
- **Chhath Parva** Oct-Nov
- **Maha Shivaratri** Mar
- **Rato Machhindranath Jatra** May

# 10 TOP CULTURAL EXPERIENCES 2023



## 1. SUNSET AT SWAYAMBHUNATH

The Swayambhunath Stupa, popularly called the 'Monkey Temple', is one of the most recognisable cultural symbols in Nepal. Built on the top of a hill 3km west of Kathmandu, you can watch the valley glow in the evening light of the setting sun from here. The white-washed UNESCO World Heritage stupa's colourful prayer flags flutter in the twilight breeze as pilgrims rotate mani (prayer) wheels chanting prayers, and twinkling lights pop across the stunning cityscape of the capital.



## 2. KATHMANDU BY NIGHT

The Pashupatinath Temple hosts an evening aarti with great fanfare. Get there early to secure a spot at a vantage point (the bank below the main shrine is a good spot). Exit before the fire dance ends to avoid getting caught in the exodus of worshippers. You can then head to Bodhnath Stupa and grab a bite at one of the small Tibetan eateries near the stupa. In the silence of the night, watch the flickering of the butter lamps long after the tourists are gone.





### 3. DAWN IN BHAKTAPUR

Wake up at dawn to the tolling of the bells in the temples of Bhaktapur (p30), and watch a heritage town slowly come to life. Stroll around as vendors set up their fresh wares, and vegetables are sold in the foreground of a 17th-century square. Later, the smells of fresh khaja (snacks) wafts out of small eateries tucked into crumbling buildings, and shops start displaying mani stones, paintings and other souvenirs. If you look around carefully, in the corners of the squares and alleys, you will find old-timers playing kassi pein, a local dice game.



### 4. DURBAR SQUARES

Almost every significant township in Nepal was once a small kingdom in itself, with its own ruler and durbar (royal square). Walk around these squares to travel back to the medieval era and let the richness of Nepali history sink in. The grandest squares include the durbar squares of Kathmandu, Patan (p28) and Bhaktapur. The smaller ones in Panauti and Nuwakot are interesting, especially to experience how medieval structures coexist with daily life to this day.



## 5. GALLI TOUR IN PATAN

Explore the small bylanes of Patan on the Secret Galli Tour led by Cosy Nepal, a unique accommodation initiative in the city. Led by Prakash Dhakwa, one of the hosts of Cosy Nepal, the tour takes guests to hidden courtyards and secret alleys, giving them an insight into Patan. The highlight of the tour is a private meeting with the Kumari, the living goddess of Patan.

## 6. FESTIVAL FUN

In a culturally rich country like Nepal, festivals are a window into its diversity and ethos. While there are plenty of jayantis (divine birth celebrations), it is the rath jattras that are a riot of celebration and colour. The biggest festival is Dasain, which usually takes place in October, and is marked by fairs and family feasts. A unique Nepali occasion is the Kukur Tihar, a festival that honours man's best friend and is celebrated across Nepal. Following the lunar calendar, Kukur Tihar occurs in October-November, on the second day of Tihar, a festival equivalent to Diwali in India.

## 7. BAR HOPPING

Thamel is the centre of most tourist activity and nightlife in Kathmandu, and it is most alive in the evenings when live music wafts out of the bars and restaurants. Hangouts like Electric Pagoda and Attic are popular with people who like funk and rock. Cafe New Orleans hosts jazz nights every Wednesday evening. The best jazz acts play every Saturday night at the evergreen Jazz Upstairs in Lazimpat. New hangouts like Moksha in Patan also host music and theatre performances.





## 8. JAZZMANDU

An internationally acclaimed jazz festival in Nepal, this event lives up to its tagline of being 'the biggest jazz party in the Himalayas! Mark your calendars for this annual autumn event while visiting Kathmandu to listen to some great music played by master musicians from across the world.

## 9. CULTURAL IMMERSION

One of the best ways to immerse yourself into a new culture is by trying your hand at a local skill. Take a cooking class to learn how to make momos at home, or take your painting abilities to the next level by learning thangka art in a class with a master artist. A unique class is one in khukuri making, the iconic dagger of the Gurkhas. Learn these skills and go on such trails.



## 10. EAT YOUR WAY THROUGH KATHMANDU

Traditionally, Nepalis have eaten two main meals, brunch and dinner, and this gave rise to an incredible khaja or snack culture. Stop at a local teashop to eat chatamari, a Newari rice crepe with meat toppings, also dubbed 'Nepali pizza: Cool off with Bhaktapur's famous juju dhau or king curd. Explore the breadth of Nepali cuisine (p46) that has retained the old, welcomed the new, and given birth to a fusion of flavours.

# BEST CULTURAL ITINERARIES



*Explore the different corners of Nepal for a vibrant cultural experience. Here are a few ideas for different travel durations.*

## CULTURAL TRIANGLE: KATHMANDU-BHAKTAPUR-LUMBINI (ONE WEEK)

### DAY 1

Walk around the Durbar Square in Kathmandu in the daytime, and drive to Pashupatinath to watch the evening aarti. Visit Boudha nearby to soak the experience of Kathmandu minus the day crowds.

### DAY 2

Walk around the old quarters of the city and have a leisurely lunch at the Garden of Dreams near Thamel after some afternoon shopping. Then, head to watch the splendid sunset at the Swayambhunath Stupa.

### DAY 3

Drive to Patan and explore the Durbar Square. Walk the alleyways of old Patan and finish with a delectable meal at one of its swanky cafes.

### DAY 4

Drive to Bhaktapur and walk around to explore the sights and crafts. Listen to the evening devotional music performance in the main square.

### DAY 5

Drive back to Kathmandu and fly to Bhairahawa in the morning. Drive 22km to Lumbini and spend the day there.

### DAY 6

Drive to Tansen and wander through the quaint little Newari town. Continue to Pokhara and have dinner on the lakeside.

### DAY 7

Fly back to Kathmandu



## **MOUNTAIN CULTURE & LEISURE: POKHARA-BANDIPUR-NUWAKOT (ONE WEEK)**

### **DAY 1**

Fly to Pokhara from Kathmandu. Unwind and go for a leisurely evening stroll around the Phewa lakeside.

### **DAY 2**

Take a boat across Lake Phewa. Stop at the Varahi Temple on the small island in between, continue to the other end and walk to the World Peace Pagoda. Drive back with a stop at the Gupteshwor caves.

### **DAY 3**

Drive to Bandipur. Wander through the cobbled pathways of the restored town and watch a beautiful sunset on the Annapurna range.

### **DAY 4**

Visit the Thani Mai Temple at sunrise. Visit the exceptional Siddha cave and continue to Ramlot, a traditional village, before returning to Bandipur for the night.

### **DAY 5**

Drive to Nuwakot after a leisurely morning.

### **DAY 6**

Walk around the little explored Nuwakot Durbar and experience the idyllic life of this mountain village.

### **DAY 7**

Drive back to Kathmandu.







## OFFBEAT TEMPLE TOWNS: BAJRAYOGINI-NAMOBOUDHA-PANAUTI (FOUR DAYS)

### DAY 1

From Kathmandu, drive to the famed Chang Narayan Temple near Bhaktapur. Continue to the little-known Bairayogini Temple, a 16th-century tantric shrine. Drive onwards to Nagarkot and spend the night here.

### DAY 2

Drive to Dhulikhel. Explore its old town and the Har Siddhi and Vishnu temples in the square. Visit the Newari-style Bhagwati Shiva Temple in the northwest and the Kali Temple in the southeast.

### DAY 3

Drive to Namoboudha near Dhulikhel. Sit in the prayer hall of the radiant Thrangu Tashi Yangtse Monastery. Drive down to the unexplored Panauti town and stay the night at a local home.

### DAY 4

Drive back to Kathmandu.





## EXPERT RECOMMENDATION: Suraj Vaidya

### Highlights of Visit Nepal 2023

Suraj Vaidya, coordinator of the Visit Nepal 2020 tourism campaign, lists some of the highlights for travelers to get up and close with Nepal culturally in 2023.

The year 2023–2033 is the national tourism decade in Nepal. We will host many exciting programs to make your stay in Nepal memorable.

#### **Unique cultural experience:**

The living goddess is the most unique cultural offering of the country. The Kumari, as she is known, is chosen after careful consideration and is the only living Hindu god in the country. Getting a glimpse of her, either seated at the window of her residence or during annual religious processions, is a blessing. Meeting her and feeling her divine presence on a rare occasion is an even greater privilege.

#### **Extraordinary landscapes:**

Go hiking and explore astonishing Himalayan regions, including 'forbidden kingdoms like Mustang, which once controlled the trade between the Himalayas and India.

#### **Bird watching The Koshi Tappu:**

Wild Life Reserve is the smallest of the Terai's national parks, and it packs a punch with its diverse avifauna.

#### **Rafting down the Karnali:**

Go on an exhilarating expedition down Nepal's longest river.

#### **Luxury in Chitwan:**

Have a sundowner by the Rapti as the sinking sun reflects its beautiful hues in the river's serene waters.

#### **Manaslu Circuit:**

Walk around Mount Manaslu and stay at the Serang Gompa to find a few moments of contemplative quietude as you feed the Himalayan deer there.