

# Shangri-La regained

Nepal has had its ups and downs in the last 50 years, but has enjoyed a return to stability of late. And, as **Gustasp and Jerroo Irani** discovered, a land dominated by the Himalayas can never lose its mystical charm

Right: a lady looks out of a bronzed window in one of the many temples that stud the city of Kathmandu



The Kohl lined eyes of the Living Goddess gazed at us in child like wonder from the wood carved window of her palace in Kathmandu, Nepal. The six-year-old girl is worshipped as a manifestation of the Hindu Goddess Durga and appears every evening at a certain time to bless locals, tourists and even visiting heads of state. Pink cheeked child monks head Buddhist monasteries and play badminton in their spare time. Slick private airlines with mystical names like Cosmic Air land at runways that double as pasture for local cattle in remote regions: a siren sounds and the cattle scurry away obediently to allow a propeller plane to land.

Above: a traffic jam in Thamel  
Right: a light aircraft comes in to land against the backdrop of the towering Himalayas

Below: flower and vegetable sellers lay out their wares beneath a pagoda in Durbar Square



In Nepal, the charming contrasts pile up with unending regularity: pictures of reggae icon Bob Marley and Lord Shiva are painted on the fenders of trucks; the sleek tiger and the armour plated rhinoceros in Chitwan National Park are closely monitored as national treasures, yet animal sacrifices are routine here. A mega one, the Gadhimai Festival, last held in November 2009 and believed to be the world's largest animal sacrifice, takes place every five years in the south.

There is something mystical about Nepal, probably because eight of the 14 highest mountains in the world (8,000m and above) are located here, giving it a palpable feel of otherworldliness. One encounters overt faith and tradition, underscored by the existence of 30,000 temples that co-exist happily with Buddhist monasteries, which resonate

with Tibetan chants. Not surprisingly, in the '60s and '70s the country was part of the Hippie Trail that started from London or Amsterdam and snaked overland to India and Nepal. That was the time the 'lost' Flower Children flocked to this last Shangri-La in a drug induced haze, seeking expanded self-awareness and to crack the code of life. Buses disgorged the unwashed, dreadlocked aspirants for nirvana at the end of New Road, from where a lane slips away to become Freak Street.

The street was renamed in the '60s and today it is wreathed in nostalgia, still studded with hole-in-the-wall cafés with names like Penny Lane and Friendly Momo, which the hirsute ones loved to frequent. The cafés and bars that studded Freak Street and neighbouring Thamel would resonate

All photographs: Gustasp & Jerroo Irani



with the hits of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. The iconic Kathmandu Guest House (billed as the best budget guest house in the world) in the centre of backpacker Thamel became the heart of hippie culture and the scene of swinging action. Later, its guest list began to feature famous climbers, researchers, the Beatles and even Hollywood personalities. (Today, we learnt, ageing hippies are returning and request to stay in the same rooms where they had holed up during their 'misspent' youth.)

The world's ongoing love affair with Nepal fizzled out for a while after the massacre of the royal

Above (left to right): a monk studies the scriptures in Boudhanath; the stupa with the all-seeing eyes; children playing together in Durbar Square

Below: a tourist takes a rickshaw ride through Thamel

family by Prince Dipendra in 2001 and the decade long Maoist insurgency that followed. Now that a tenuous peace and political stability have returned, and the 240-year-old monarchy is history, Nepal is back in business. Its tourism infrastructure may be a little frayed but visitors from all over the world are flocking to see a country that has an irrefutable trump card: the Himalayas and Mount Everest.

Unfortunately, the capital too shows the scars of rapid urbanisation, yet if one looks beyond the grit, there are pockets of sheer loveliness and great dollops of colour in Kathmandu. Even today, legendary Thamel explodes with Kodak



moments, for people from all over the world seem to converge there: grizzled hippies from another era, muscled trekkers, nubile young girls on their grand tour of Asia, Indian pilgrims, fruit vendors and first-timers dazed by the noise and colour... It is a street that is a world unto itself, studded as it is with shops, restaurants, cybercafés, sleazy bars, bookstores, hole-in-the-wall stores selling and renting trekking and climbing equipment, as well as travel companies that arrange everything from river rafting to sightseeing trips.

Wreathed as much in dust as in legend, Kathmandu fascinates with its dreamy setting of jagged, snow-capped peaks that rise saw-toothed over the distant horizon. We spent our first evening in Durbar Square, the historic seat of royalty and a World Heritage Site of interlinked courtyards, pagoda roofed temples and the royal palace (now a museum), where vegetable vendors and strawberry sellers with cheeks as red as the fruits they hawked made for a multi-hued tapestry. Tourists and locals sat on the steps of carved temples with wooden latticework dating from the 15th century, in a cosy equation with the past and the Almighty, while visitors clicked photographs with frenzied determination.

The following day, we found some respite from swirling colour at tranquil Boudhanath, the heart of the Buddhist community in Kathmandu. The stupa



Top: the flower and vegetable market in Durbar Square is a kaleidoscope of vibrant colour  
Above: boating on the blue-green expanse of Pheva Lake in Pokhara

with the all-seeing eyes dominates the skyline and while we circled it, the Buddhist chant of "Om Mani Padme Om" followed us from a myriad CD shops, as well as from hundreds of lips of monks, old and young, wizened devotees and lissom girls. Tourists sipped coffee at cafés that promised "heavenly views" of the stupa, or shopped at the numerous outlets for trinkets, handbags, carpets, curios...

The heady brew of divinity stirred with a pinch of commerce found expression once more at Swayambhunath, another 2,500-year-old stupa that overlooks Kathmandu valley, and then again at the riverfront Pashupatinath temple complex, where the aura was distinctly Hindu.



Top left: a cottage in the forest at the eco-friendly Machan Wildlife Resort in Chitwan National Park  
Left: a prized rhino in Chitwan  
Above: an elephant safari through the wilds of the National Park

the world. Our base was the eco-friendly property, Machan, where we stayed in 'back to nature' styled cottages in a glen, where amber leaves fell on the forest floor with a sigh. In pursuit of its 'green' mission, the nights at Machan glowed with kerosene lamps.

Here we ploughed through the moist, green heart of the forest on lumbering female elephants with dish rag ears. A baby followed its mother, who, it is whispered, was impregnated by a wild male elephant that had gate-crashed into the property one night! Grasslands, green and tawny, waved in welcome and trees as tall as totem poles reached for the sky, while thick vines clung to tree trunks like obsessive lovers. The forest vibrated with a feral spirit; we spotted a lumbering, one-horned rhino with its armour like hide crash into the distant undergrowth, and deer skipped away at our approach. So did a clumsy wild boar. A chorus of birds twittered and sang in the trees, making for a pleasing jungle sound track. Sadly, we did not hear the tiger's roar, nor did we spot the big cat, which perhaps lurked unseen in the rippling elephant grass.

Above the thick canopy of trees, ominous dark clouds had gathered. Our mahout turned his pachyderm around as thunder claps and forks of lightning lit the sky and threw it all into dramatic relief. We returned drenched to our forest hideaway in a lashing storm. Then, as suddenly as they had exploded, the heavens quietened; rain drops glistened on broad leaves and the forest started to whisper to itself once more.

Back at the resort we sat on the patio of our thatched cottage, nursing tall drinks and memories of green grass washed by the rain and Kathmandu's regal Durbar Square, where grand palaces, temples and monuments fielded the gentle rays of the mountain sun... Yes, Nepal had served up a platter of moments brimming with magic and promise.

## Nepal guide

A number of airlines fly to the landlocked country via their respective hubs. Within Nepal, local private airlines connect all the tourist spots. The best time to visit is between October and March. Accommodation ranges from five star to budget and there is a range of adventure activities to suit every age group. For more information visit Nepal Tourism Board at [www.welcomenepal.com](http://www.welcomenepal.com)

Pokhara, cupped in the wide, lush valley of the Seti river in central Nepal, was a pleasant change of pace from the urban rush of the capital. Girdled by the Himalayas and the Mahabharata range, the resort town was a vast canvas painted with divine flourishes. Located 900m above sea level, the quaint town commands compelling vistas—a 140km arc of robust Himalayan peaks, of which three are above 8,000m: Annapurna, Dhaulagiri and Manaslu. They seem close enough to touch and the perfectly proportioned Machapuchhre, or Fish Tail peak, looms over the town on clear days in lonely splendour.

Pokhara is the country's adventure capital and presents those looking for an adrenaline rush with opportunities to go trekking, hiking, boating, camping, river rafting... or take to the sky in microlite aircraft and swoop in the blue like airborne gods. We, however, embarked on a boat ride in Pheva Lake, a vast blue-green expanse that resembled shards of glass. Later we strolled in the colourful bazaar, milling with tourists and trekkers, where everything from local trinkets to body massages are available. While relaxing in a garden restaurant quaintly called Boomerang, we allowed the rhythms, sounds and fragrance of this former trading town to kick in. Around us, sun bronzed trekkers and mountaineers from all over the world swapped stories of their exploits about conquering seemingly inaccessible summits.

We got a glimpse of wild and untamed Nepal at Chitwan National Park, which is part of the dense forests in the foothills of the Himalayas that for centuries barricaded the country from the rest of