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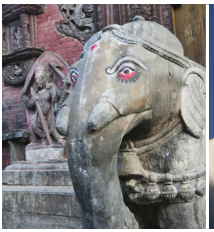
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**OPPOSITE** DIWALI LIGHTS **PREVIOUS PAGE** SWAYAMBHU, KATHMANDU





# Introduction to Nepal

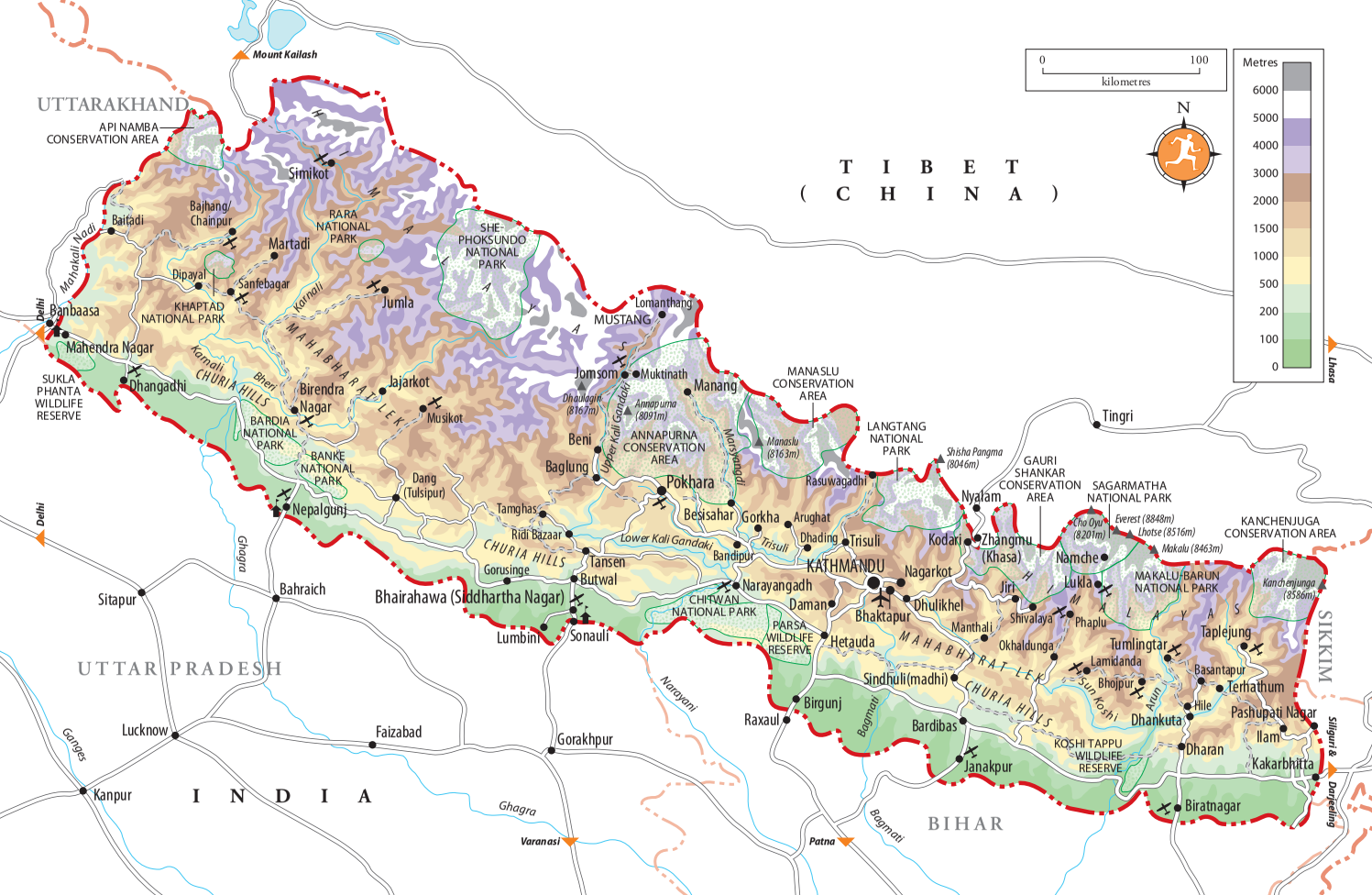
Hindus believe that the gods made their home in the mountains of Nepal; one look at the Himalayas, and you'll understand why. Squeezed between India and Tibet, Nepal's diverse scenery ranges from lowland dripping jungles, where tigers hide in the shadows, to Mount Everest's frozen summit, where no life can survive for long. For most visitors, coming to Nepal is a chance to experience the great mountains; but once here, most people are quick to realize that Nepal's artistic heritage, fascinating wildlife and welcoming people are all an equal draw to the mighty peaks.

Nepal's **cultural landscape** is every bit as diverse as its physical one. Its peoples belong to a range of distinctive ethnic groups, and speak a host of languages. Homes are made in everything from dense, ancient cities erupting with pagoda-roofed Hindu temples to villages perched on dizzying sweeps of rice-farming terraces and dusty highland settlements clustered around tiny monasteries. **Religious practices** range from Indian-style Hinduism to Tibetan Buddhism and from nature worship to shamanism – the indigenous Newars, meanwhile, blend all these traditions with their own, intense tantric practices.

The cultural richness owes something to the shaping force of the **landscape** itself, and something else to the fact that Nepal was never colonized. This is a country with profound national or ethnic pride, an astounding flair for festivals and pageantry and a powerful attachment to traditional ways. Its people famously display a charismatic blend of independent-mindedness and friendliness, toughness and courtesy. These qualities, through the reputations of Gurkha soldiers and Sherpa climbers in particular, have made Nepalis internationally renowned as a rare pleasure to work with or travel among.

But it would be misleading to portray Nepal as a fabled Shangri-la. Long politically and economically weak it has developed at uncomfortable speed in some areas while stagnating in others. Heavily reliant on its superpower neighbours, Nepal was, until

**ABOVE** CHANGU NARAYAN TEMPLE; THE HIMALAYAS; A TREKKING PORTER


Mount Kailash
UTTARAKHAND
API NAMBA CONSERVATION AREA
Simikot
Baitadi
Bajhang/ Chainpur
Martadi
RARA NATIONAL PARK
SHE-PHOKSUNDO NATIONAL PARK
Dipayal
Sanfebagar
Jumla
KHAPTAD NATIONAL PARK
Mahakali Nadi
Karnali
Delhi
Banbaasa
Mahendra Nagar
SUKLA PHANTA WILDLIFE RESERVE
Dhangadhi
Bheri
CHURIA HILLS
Birendra Nagar
Jajarkot
Musikot
BARDIA NATIONAL PARK
BANKE NATIONAL PARK
Dang (Tulsipur)
Nepalgunj
MAHABHARAT LEK
MUSTANG
Lomanthang
Jomsom
Muktinath
Manang
Dhaulagiri (8167m)
Annapurna (8091m)
Beni
ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION AREA
Upper Kali Gandaki
Baglung
Pokhara
Marsyangdi
Manaslu (8163m)
MANASLU CONSERVATION AREA
LANGTANG NATIONAL PARK
Shisha Pangma (8046m)
Rasuwagadhi
Tingri
Nyalam
GAURI SHANKAR CONSERVATION AREA
SAGARMATHA NATIONAL PARK
Cho Oyu (8201m)
Everest (8848m)
Lhotse (8516m)
Makalu (8463m)
KANCHENJUGA CONSERVATION AREA
Kanchenjunga (8586m)
Tamghas
Ridi Bazaar
Lower Kali Gandaki
Trisuli
Besisahar
Gorkha
Arughat
Dhading
Trisuli
Kodari
Zhangmu (Khasa)
Namche
Lukla
Jiri
Tansen
Butwal
Bandipur
KATHMANDU
Nagarkot
Gorusinge
Narayangadh
Daman
Dhulikhel
Bhaktapur
Shivalaya
Phaplu
Manthali
Taplejung
Tumlingtar
Lamidanda
Okhaldunga
Hetauda
PARSA WILDLIFE RESERVE
CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK
Sitapur
Bahraich
Bhairahawa (Siddhartha Nagar)
Lumbini
Sonauli
Ghagra
Sindhuli(madhi)
CHURIA HILLS
Sun Koshi
Arun
Bhojpur
Basantapur
Terhathum
Hile
Pashupati Nagar
Ilam
Dhankuta
Dharan
Kakarbhitta
Birgunj
Raxaul
Bardibas
Janakpur
KOSHI TAPPU WILDLIFE RESERVE
Biratnagar
Narayani
Bagmati
Lucknow
Faizabad
Gorakhpur
Ganges
Kanpur
INDIA
Varanasi
Patna
BIHAR
Lhasa
Siliguri
Darjeeling
SIKKIM
TIBET (CHINA)
0
100
kilometres
N
Metres
6000
5000
4000
3000
2000
1500
1000
500
200
100
0



1990, the world's last remaining absolute Hindu monarchy, run by a regime that combined China's repressiveness and India's bureaucracy. Following a soul-scouring Maoist insurgency, which ended in 2006, it has ended up as a federal republic. Nepal seems always to be racing to catch up with history, and the sense of **political excitement** here is thrillingly palpable.

## Where to go

Nepal's capital, **Kathmandu**, is electrifyingly exotic, with its medieval warren of alleys, Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas, and its uniquely relaxed nightlife. The city is increasingly hectic, however, so many visitors make day-trips out to the semi-rural **Kathmandu Valley**, and the well-preserved medieval cities of **Patan** and **Bhaktapur**, while others escape to stay overnight at one of the mountain viewpoints on the valley rim, such as **Nagarkot**, in the **Central Hills**. Few take the time to explore the valley's wealth of temples, towns and forested hilltops in more depth, but those who do are richly rewarded.

Most people move on from Kathmandu to **Pokhara**, six hours west of the capital via tourist bus. An engaging, easy-going resort town in the **Western Hills**, Pokhara is set beside a lake and under a towering wall of white peaks. While many visitors are happy just to gaze at the town's impressive views, or hang out in its numerous bars, it also makes a great base for day hikes and mountain-bike rides, yoga and meditation courses,

### THE 2015 EARTHQUAKE

On April 25, 2015 Nepal was devastated by a massive **7.8-magnitude earthquake** – the country's worst in over eighty years – and several powerful aftershocks, killing thousands and creating a humanitarian disaster (see p.381).

Much of the earthquake damage has now been repaired, and there are few visible signs that it had happened at all. However, the UNESCO-protected buildings and temples of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur's Durbar squares are still awaiting restoration, and it's likely to be many more years before these architectural treasures are restored. Throughout this guide, we have mentioned sites where earthquake damage remains significant.

**ABOVE** PUPPETS, BHAKTAPUR

and even paragliding and microlight flights. Other towns in the Western Hills – notably **Gorkha** with its impressive fortress, **Manakamana** with its wish-fulfilling temple, and **Bandipur** with its old-world bazaar – offer history and culture as well as scenery.

Not many travellers head into the flat **Terai**, along the border with India, unless it's to enter the deservedly popular **Chitwan National Park**, with its endangered Asian one-horned rhinos. The Terai is also home to **Bardia National Park** and two other rarely visited wildlife reserves – all worth considering for those looking to escape the Chitwan crowds. In the west, **Lumbini**, Buddha's birthplace, is a pilgrimage site of worldwide importance, as is **Janakpur**, a Hindu holy city in the east.

Yet above and beyond all else, Nepal is most renowned for **trekking** – hiking from village to village, through massive hills and lush rhododendron forests and up to the peaks and glaciers of the high Himalayas. The thrillingly beautiful and culturally rich **Annapurna** and **Everest** regions are the most oriented to trekkers, but other, once-remote areas are opening up, notably **Mustang** and **Manaslu**. Meanwhile, **mountain biking** through Nepal's scenic back roads and **rafting** down its rivers offer not only adventure but also a different perspective on the countryside and wildlife.

## When to go

Nepal is broadly temperate, with four main **seasons** centred around the summer monsoon. The majority of visitors, prioritizing mountain visibility, come in the **autumn** peak season (late Sept to late Nov), when the weather is clear and dry, and neither too cold in the high country nor too hot in the Terai. With the pollution and dust (and many bugs) washed away by the monsoon rains, the mountains are at their most visible, making this an excellent time for trekking. Two major festivals, Dasain and

### FACT FILE

• With a land **area** of 147,000 square kilometres, Nepal is about the size of England and Wales combined. Useable land, however, is in short supply due to the precipitous terrain and a growing population of 28 million or more, over a third of whom are less than 15 years old.

• Eight of the world's ten highest **mountains** are found in Nepal, including Everest, the highest of them all.

• Prior to 1951, only a handful of Westerners had ever been allowed into Nepal. Today, the country receives as many as 600,000 **tourists** annually; increasingly, visitors are coming from neighbouring India and China.

• Despite the fame of its Tibetan and Sherpa Buddhist communities, Nepal was long the world's only Hindu kingdom, and **Hindus** still officially make up some eighty percent of the population. In practice, many Nepalis combine worship of Hindu gods with shamanic and animist rituals.

• Thanks to solid conservation policies, Nepal's population of **Royal Bengal tigers** is growing at an impressive rate. The country had aimed to double the tiger population to two hundred and fifty animals between 2010 and 2022, but at current rates it's expected that the population will reach this target as soon as 2018.

• Nepal has an average per capita annual **income** of US$2400, and around 25 percent of the population is thought to live below the poverty line.

Tihaar, also fall during this period. The downside is that the tourist quarters and trekking trails are heaving, prices are higher and it may be hard to find a decent room.

**Winter** (Dec & Jan) is mostly clear and stable. It never snows in Kathmandu, but mornings can be dank and chilly there – and in trekking areas, the fierce cold can make lodge owners shut up shop altogether. This is an excellent time to visit the Terai, and if you can face the cold, a rare time to be in the mountains too.

**Spring** (Feb to mid-April) is the second tourist season, with its warmer weather and longer days. Rhododendrons are in bloom in the hills towards the end of this period, and as the Terai's long grasses have been cut, spring is the best time for viewing wildlife – despite the increasing heat. The downsides are that haze can obscure the mountains from lower elevations (though it's usually possible to trek above it).

The **pre-monsoon** (mid-April to early June) brings ever more stifling heat, afternoon clouds and rain showers. Trek high, where the temperatures are more tolerable.

Nepalis welcome the **monsoon**, the timing of which may vary by a few weeks every year, but typically begins in mid-June and peters out in the last weeks of September. The fields come alive with rushing water and green shoots, and this can be a fascinating time to visit, when Nepal is at its most Nepali: the air is clean, flowers are in bloom, butterflies are everywhere and fresh fruit and vegetables are particularly abundant. But there are also drawbacks: mountain views are rare, leeches come out in force along the mid-elevation trekking routes, roads and paths may be blocked by landslides, and flights may be cancelled.

## AVERAGE TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

| | Feb | Apr | Jun | Aug | Oct | Dec |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **JANAKPUR (70M), TERAI PLAINS** | | | | | | |
| Max/min (ºC) | 26/11 | 35/16 | 35/20 | 33/26 | 31/22 | 25/11 |
| Max/min (ºF) | 79/52 | 95/15 | 96/68 | 91/79 | 88/72 | 77/52 |
| Rain (mm) | 20 | 40 | 40 | 310 | 70 | 10 |
| **JOMSOM (2713M), HIMALAYAN RAIN SHADOW** | | | | | | |
| Max/min (ºC) | 10/-2 | 19/4 | 23/12 | 23/13 | 18/6 | 12/-2 |
| Max/min (ºF) | 50/28 | 66/39 | 73/53 | 73/55 | 64/43 | 54/28 |
| Rain (mm) | 10 | 20 | 20 | 30 | 30 | 10 |
| **KATHMANDU (1300M), CENTRAL HILLS** | | | | | | |
| Max/min (ºC) | 20/4 | 27/11 | 29/19 | 28/20 | 26/13 | 20/3 |
| Max/min (ºF) | 68/39 | 81/52 | 84/66 | 82/68 | 79/55 | 68/37 |
| Rain (mm) | 20 | 60 | 260 | 320 | 60 | 150 |
| **NAMCHE (3450M), HIGH HIMALAYAS** | | | | | | |
| Max/min (ºC) | 6/-6 | 12/1 | 15/6 | 16/8 | 12/2 | 7/-6 |
| Max/min (ºF) | 43/21 | 54/34 | 59/43 | 61/46 | 54/36 | 45/21 |
| Rain (mm) | 20 | 30 | 140 | 240 | 80 | 40 |
| **POKHARA (800M), WESTERN HILLS** | | | | | | |
| Max/min (ºC) | 22/9 | 30/15 | 30/21 | 30/22 | 27/17 | 20/8 |
| Max/min (ºF) | 71/48 | 86/59 | 86/70 | 86/72 | 81/62 | 68/46 |
| Rain (mm) | 30 | 120 | 700 | 850 | 170 | 20 |

# Author picks

Our authors have bussed, walked, rafted, paddled and biked the length and breadth of Nepal to research this book. Here are some of their favourite travel experiences and places.

**Nepali people** The Nepali people themselves are a major factor in making this country so special. Learning some Nepali (see p.50), volunteering (see p.49) or simply accepting an invitation for tea are all great ways to get to know them.

**Festivals** Catch one of Nepal's many religious festivals (see p.35). It'll be an experience you'll never forget, and will show you an important part of Nepali culture.

**Bardia National Park** Skip the crowds of Chitwan and head east to explore the less-visited Bardia (see p.268). It's the best place in Nepal to spot tigers, too.

**Treks** The Everest Base Camp (see p.335) and Annapurna (see p.316) treks justify their fame, but going off-piste brings rich rewards. Manaslu (see p.326) has stunning scenery and far few visitors than the main routes. Not far north of Kathmandu, the Langtang valley (see p.330) is crying out for trekkers to return, now that the extensive 2015 earthquake damage has been repaired.

**Newari cities** Bhaktapur (see p.153) and Patan (see p.87) are arguably some of the best-preserved medieval cities in all of Asia.

**Food** Astounding pickles enliven the national dish of *daal bhaat* (see p.32), while spicy Newari food is an adventure in meat-eating: try it in restaurants such as Kathmandu's *Thamel House* (see p.104), Tansen's *Nanglo West* (see p.232) and, most authentically, Kirtipur's superb *Newa Lahana* (see p.142).

**Janakpur** Little visited by Western travellers, the fascinating Terai city of Janakpur (see p.282) is an important stop on the Hindu pilgrimage circuit, with an ornate temple and a bustling old town.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.





**FROM TOP** NEPALI WOMEN COOKING; TIGER, BARDIA NATIONAL PARK