Practical Guide to Nepal
Namaste friends!

We are SO excited to welcome you to Nepal soon!

To help prepare for your trip, we have compiled information on practicalities such as visa procedures, how to get a local sim card, things to pack ... along with some suggestions on places to eat and what not to miss while in Nepal.

You may have gathered from the press that the political situation in Nepal is not at its smoothest at the moment. An ‘unofficial blockade’ has affected supply of petrol, cooking gas and other essentials for the past 3 weeks. We will not lie - things are not easy here at the moment, local transport is curtailed (taxes, buses, private vehicles), hotels, restaurants and cafes are struggling to provide power backup (mostly run on generators) and serve full menus. Through all this, we are muscleing forward to put on the best festival we can.

We are ready to welcome you and we will make our best effort to look after you. Do check out the “Bring” section on page 8; there are some essential suggestions! And definitely don’t forget to pack your sense of humor and appetite for adventure :)!

Please feel free to be in touch for anything at all.

Safe travels and see you soon!

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati & Bhushan Shilpakar
Festival Co-Directors

Contact

During the festival, you can always find the Photo Kathmandu team either at Swotha Square and/or at Yala Maya Kendra, where most of the Talks and Workshops take place. These are the contact details for the Festival Team, in case you need anything.

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Disclaimer

This information has been gathered based on personal experiences from the Photo Kathmandu Team, their friends and partners, from wikivoyage.com/wiki/kathmandu, from wikivoyage.com/wiki/nepal, from www.nepalimmigration.gov.np and from nepalembassy.in/visa.htm. The information has been verified and was considered correct at the time of writing. Photo Kathmandu shall not be held responsible for inaccuracies nor for situations resulting from possible inaccuracies. - October 2015
Understand Nepal

**Geographically**, Nepal is a complex place. Roughly, from South to North, you can distinguish the level plains of the Outer Terai, the very low (600m) Siwalik Range, the large valleys between the latter (Inner Terai - that’s where Chitwan National Park is situated) and the Mahabharat Range that goes from East to West (up to 3000m high), the Middle Hills are a little lower (up to 2000m) and include the Kathmandu and Pokhara Valleys. The serious mountains start with the Lekhs (up to 5500m) and the snowy Himalayas (over 6-7000m). Before tumbling back down into China/Tibet, there are the remote but gentler Trans-Himalaya peaks (around 6000m) and valleys.

**Historically**, Nepal has been mentioned in the old classical Indian literature. In the 3rd century BC Buddhism was introduced from India. Nepal was also in contact with China. Around 200 AD the Lichavis took power in Nepal. The country flourished and great temples both Hindu and Buddhist were built. After their decline, the Thakuri kings took over in 879 AD. From the 12th century on, the Mallas reigned. In the 14th century, Jayasthiti Malla introduced the caste system into Nepal. The Malla dynasty peaked in the 15th century under Yaksha Malla. After his death in 1482 the kingdom was divided between his 3 sons, to be reunited only 300 years later by Privthi Nayan Shah. He was suspicious of the growing power of the British in India and isolated the nation. After the 1814-1816 Gorkha War, Nepal was forced to come to terms with Britain and the present boundaries of Nepal were drawn. In 1860 Nepali soldiers began serving in the British army. Meanwhile in 1846, Jung Bahadur seized power and declared himself Rana, holding the real power while the kings were only figureheads. Find out what happened next under Contemporary History!

Regarding **religion**, Nepal is as complex as its geography. Hindu groups (81%) intermingle peacefully with Buddhists (9%), Sikh, Muslim, Christians, Kiranti, Jain and others.

Nepal’s **climate** varies with the time of year and altitude. Ranging from the tropical to the arctic, “when” you visit matters as much as “where” you visit. Generally though, the lower you are, the hotter it gets, and the higher you climb, the fresher. Hiking in the mountains during winter will leave you frozen, as much as a midday stroll in the Terai in July will have you suffocate. Play around with these variables and you’ll realize the best time of the year to visit Kathmandu (1,400m) is autumn. The monsoon clouds clear up and leave the skies open for gorgeous views of the mountains and the temperature drops to a perfectly nice average of 20°C (70°F) during the day.

Contemporary History

- **1951** - The year marks the end of the 104-year-old, autocratic Rana oligarchy.
- **1959** - Parliamentary elections are held under a Constitution granted by King Mahendra Shah.
- **1962** - The monarch promotes a Constitution with a party-less framework and centralizes power in the Palace (Panchayat system).
- **1990** - A People’s Movement, the Janandolan, leads to the restoration of multi-party democracy. A new Constitution limits the monarchy’s role, paves the way for a parliamentary system, and grants fundamental rights. Radical Left forces reject the Constitution.
- **1991** - Elections are held. The National Congress wins.
- **1996** - The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launches a ‘People’s War’.
- **1996 - 1999**: Nepal’s run with instability continues, with three different prime ministers in as many years.
- **April, 2006**: A nineteen-day People’s Movement, the second Janandolan, succeeds. King Gyanendra admits that sovereignty rests with the people. The Parliament, dissolved in 2002, is reinstated. A ceasefire is declared.
- **May, 2006**: The Parliament clips royal privileges, declares Nepal a secular state and abolishes untouchability.
- **November, 2006**: The Comprehensive Peace Agreement declares the end of the civil war and creates a road map for elections and a Constituent Assembly.
- **May, 2012**: The term of Nepal’s first elected Constituent Assembly runs out, no Constitution has been written.
- **November, 2013**: Nepal holds elections for a second CA. The NC emerges as the single-largest party and the Maoists and the Madhesi parties face a severe electoral rout.
- **January, 2015**: The term of Nepal’s second elected Constituent Assembly runs out, without a Constitution having been written.
- **August 2015**: Nepal’s first democratic Constitution is promulgated.

(Adapted from “Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal” by Prashant Jha)

**Recommended reading**

Among the many sources of information/books on Nepal, we find these particularly well written and insightful.

- Thomas Bell - "Kathmandu" (non-fiction)
- Prashant Jha - "Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal" (non-fiction)
- Prawin Adhikari - "The Vanishing Act: Stories" (fiction)
- Manjushree Thapa - "Tutor of History" (fiction)
- LaLit Magazine
- The Record Nepal
Arrival in Nepal

Nepal’s immigration department offers about 15 different types of visas, but the only one you need to look at is the regular tourist visa.

Indian nationals do not require a visa to enter Nepal. A passport or an Indian identity card is sufficient to enter the country.

Visitors from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, except Afghanistan, receive a once-a-year free 30-day visa upon arrival (Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).

Nationals of Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Cameroon, Somalia, Liberia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan are required to obtain visas before arrival.

Tourist visas are available on arrival for citizens of all other countries at Kathmandu airport and currently cost US$25 for 15 days, US$40 for 30 days and US$100 for 90 days. Tourist visas can be granted for a maximum of 150 days in a calendar year. You can also pay this in convertible currencies such as Euros, Pounds, RMBs and Australian dollars, although US dollars are always preferred. The visa fee collection desk has a credit card terminal, but it has been known to be faulty. All tourist visa are currently of the "multiple entry" type.

After your passport has been processed and stamped, exit the hall and go down to the luggage belts. Expect to wait for some time until your luggage is delivered, especially if you arrive with an evening flight. Be sure to keep your luggage tag (the one that was pasted on your boarding pass at check-in) handy as security/customs officers will check if it matches the one on your bag.

If Photo Kathmandu is arranging your hotel, look out for our placard outside the main arrival area. Our airport pickup service by Four Season Travel & Tours will take you to your hotel.

If possible, arrange your first night's accommodation before you arrive and ask the hotel to send someone to meet you. Many hotel and guest houses offer complimentary airport transportation. If you have made such arrangements, someone from your hotel or trekking agency will be displaying a sign so they can be identified.

Fixed price pre-paid taxis can be arranged before you exit the building, but you may get a cheaper fare outside if you are willing to negotiate directly with a taxi driver.

At the airport

Step-by-step for everybody except the nationals of above-mentioned countries:

- Fill in the tourist visa form online (www.online.nepalimmigration.gov.np/tourist-visa)
- Bring a print out of that form with you
- In the plane, ask the cabin crew for a disembarkation form or get one in the arrival hall
- Pay the visa fee at the booth on the far end of the hall, and get your receipt
- Armed with receipt, visa form, disembarkation form and your passport, find the appropriate immigration desk to get your visa sticker and entry stamp. The desks are differentiated according to the amount of time you want to spend in Nepal: 15 days - 30 days - 90 days.
Getting around in Kathmandu

Except for the main arteries, very few streets have a name/sign in Kathmandu. To get to your destination, you need to know the closest landmark, or at least the name of the neighborhood.

**Taxis** are probably the most efficient mean of getting around in Kathmandu. They’re the small white Maruti Suzuki cars, usually with a luggage rack on the roof. Most taxi drivers know most hotels and landmarks around town, and if you tell them the neighborhood, they’ll ask around themselves to get you safely to your destination.

Before sitting down, either make sure they put on the meter or agree on a price. Be prepared to negotiate (on average, settle on 30% less than the first offer). Best results are obtained when you smile and take the negotiation process lightly. It’s no use to get angry, and in any case there are usually other taxis around to choose from.

Some examples: Patan Durbar Square to Thamel should be around 300 Rs (a bit more for the other way around, because of circulation constraints). Count 400 Rs from Jhamsikhel to Lazimpat. Thamel to Bouddha would be 300 Rs. Prices increase 50% after dark.

Other options include the (often crowded) “tempo” three-wheelers and “micro” buses. They run on fixed routes and cost between 15 and 20 Rs. The route they serve is written in Nepali, so ask around for help.

**Money matters**

Nepali rupees (NPR) is the local currency. Removing the last 2 digits of a price gives you a fair approximation of the USD equivalent (1 USD = +/- 105 NPR).

Indian currency is also accepted in Nepal (at an official exchange rate of 1.60 Nepali rupees to 1 Indian rupee), nevertheless, the INR500 and INR1,000 notes are not widely accepted.

There are banks in the major cities that will allow you to retrieve cash from ATM’s or credit cards. You may be charged a service fee, depending on your bank. There are quite a number of ATM’s now in those cities that are open round the clock. The maximum withdrawal amount is 35,000 Rs (Nabil Bank, Himalayan Bank, …) for a 400 Rs processing fee. Standard Chartered’s limit is 10,000 Rs but they don’t charge extra.

Currency exchange offices are available throughout the main cities.

Be sure to keep all currency exchange and ATM receipts as they are required at the airport bank to convert back to your original currency. If you don’t have them, they will refuse to convert your currency.
Eat & Drink

The Nepali national meal is *daal-bhaat-tarkaari*. It is spiced lentils poured over boiled rice, and served with vegetables cooked with spices. This is served in most Nepali homes and teahouses. The meal may be accompanied by *dahi* (yogurt) and a small helping of ultra-spicy fresh *achaar* (pickle). Traditionally this meal is eaten with the right hand. Curried meat, goat or chicken, is an occasional luxury, and freshwater fish is often available near lakes and rivers. Because Hindus hold cattle to be sacred, beef is forbidden but still can be obtained for a high price in some expensive restaurants.

Outside the main morning and evening meals, a variety of *snacks* (*khaja*, literally “eat and run”) may be available. Tea, made with milk and sugar is certainly a pick-me-up. Corn may be heated and partially popped. Rice may be heated and crushed into *chiura* resembling uncooked oatmeal that can be eaten with yogurt, hot milk and sugar, or other flavorings. Fritters called *pakora* and turnovers called *samosa* can be found, as can sweets made from sugar, milk, fried batter, sugar cane juice, etc.

Newars, an ethnic group originally living in the Kathmandu Valley, are connoisseurs of great foods who lament that feasting is their downfall. In the fertile Kathmandu and Pokhara valleys this cuisine often includes a greater variety (particularly vegetables) than what are available in most of the hills. As such, Newari cuisine is quite distinct and diverse compared to the other indigenous regional cuisines, so watch out for Newari restaurants.

**Tea** - Although not as internationally famous as Indian brands, Nepal does in fact have a large organic tea industry. Most plantations are located in the east of the country and the type of tea grown is very similar to that produced in neighboring Darjeeling. Unfortunately over 70% of Nepal’s tea is exported and the tea you see for sale in Thamel, while they serve as token mementos, are merely the scrapings from the bottom of the barrel.

**Coffee** - Nepal has emerged as a coffee producing country in the last two decades. For the most part, it is grown organically and provides extra income for small holder farmers. Don’t settle for dehydrated powders when you can enjoy a local arabica!
Alcohol - *Raksi* is a clear liquid, similar to tequila in alcohol content. It is usually brewed “in house”, resulting in a variation in taste and strength. It is often served in small, baked, beveled clay cups that hold less than a shot. It works great as a mixer in juice or soda. *Chyaang* is a cloudy, moderately alcoholic drink sometimes called “Nepali beer”. Mostly it is made from rice, specially in Newari culture. While weaker than *roksi*, it will still have quite an effect. You’ll probably have a taste of it during the festival’s opening night!

Stay safe

Kathmandu is generally a safe city, even pickpockets are rare. Nevertheless, take the usual precautions and don’t flaunt your cash or make ostentatious displays of wealth.

Sometimes, there are strikes (*bandhos*) and demonstrations to contend with. Some businesses close, but many allowances are usually made for tourists, who are widely respected. Ask about strikes at your hotel or read the English language Nepali newspapers.

Stay healthy

Water - Always assume that tap water is unsafe. In restaurants and bars, when you ask for regular water, you’ll get water from treated and purified 20l bottles. Otherwise stick to mineral water.

Food - Peel your fruit, avoid street food unless you’re positive about the vendor’s hygiene (if it’s fried, it’s usually OK), most restaurants wash the vegetables and salads with iodized water to kill germs but don’t hesitate to ask you waiter about it. In any case, traveler’s diarrhea is a common thing and shouldn’t leave you too worried. Stay hydrated, carry tissues and hand sanitizer around, take basic precautions and it should be over before you know it. If not, see the next section...

Emergencies

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<th>Service</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire Brigade</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulance</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic Police</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patan Hospital</td>
<td>+977 1 552 2295 or 552 2566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIWEC Clinic</td>
<td>+977 1 442 4111 or 443 5232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grande Hospital</td>
<td>+977 1 515 9266 or 515 9267</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norvic Hospital</td>
<td>+977 1 425 2922 or 425 8554</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue Cross Hospital</td>
<td>+977 1 426 2027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Bank</td>
<td>+977 1 422 5344</td>
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Newspapers

These are the main Nepali newspapers in English language:

- Nepali Times
- My Republica
- The Himalayan Times
- Kathmandu Post
- Himal South Asia
Respect

Greet people with a warm namaste (or a more formal namaskar) with palms together, fingers up. It is used in place of hello or goodbye. The least watered down definition of the word is ‘The divine in me salutes the divine in you.’

Show respect to elders.

Feet are considered dirty. Don’t point the bottoms of your feet at people or religious icons. Do not step over a person who may be seated or lying on the ground. Be sensitive to when it is proper to remove your hat or shoes. It is proper to take off your shoes before entering a residential house.

The left hand is considered unclean because it is used to wash after defecating. Many Nepali hotel & guest House toilets have bidet attachments, like a kitchen sink sprayer, for this purpose in lieu of toilet paper. It is considered insulting to touch anyone with the left hand. It is proper to poke someone, take and give something with the right hand.

Circumambulate Buddhist and Hindu shrines and temples, chortens, stupas, mani walls, monasteries etc in a clockwise direction.

When haggling over prices, smile, laugh and be friendly. Be prepared to allow a reasonable profit. Don’t be a miser or insult fine craftsmanship, it’s much better to lament that you are too poor to afford such princely quality.

Many Hindu temples do not allow non-Hindus inside certain parts of the temple complex. Be aware and respectful of this fact, as these are places of worship, not tourist attractions.

Being a non-Hindu makes you moderately impure to some strict Hindus. Avoid touching containers of water; let someone pour it into your drinking container. Likewise avoid touching food that others will be eating. Make sure you are invited before entering someone’s house. You may only be welcome on the outer porch, or in the yard. Shoes are routinely left on the front porch or in a specific area near the front door.

Wash hands before and after eating. Touch food only with the right hand if you’re not left-handed.

Bring

In November, forget your rain gear and expect sunny skies with daytime temperatures around 20°C! After sunset, the air freshens to 10°C on average.

• pack a bag with clothes and essentials for 2 days and bring this as hand luggage (carry-on) - many flights are having luggage delay issues
• bring warm clothes to sleep in at night (no central heating)
• comfortable walking shoes to walk around
• a sweater/light jacket/scarf for the evenings (key to Kathmandu nights is definitely ‘layering’)
• a torch in case of power cuts, inside and outside
• toilet paper is not standard in every bathroom, so carry your own if you need it
• passport sized photos (e.g. for sim card application form, permits, …)
• medication/prescriptions – ask your doctor about your specific needs
• prescription glasses and contact lens solution if required
• camera, memory cards, extra batteries
• power banks, solar chargers are very handy
Connect

WiFi is widely available in the Kathmandu Valley. WiFi speed and reliability are not among the world’s best, but they are certainly enough to check emails and browse social media.

There are two main mobile operators in Nepal: Government run NTC (Nepal Telecom Company) and private Ncell. Both offer 3G data in populated areas.

Both operators allow tourists to buy SIM cards for about NPR200 in Kathmandu and most major towns. You will need to bring a passport photo, fill in a form and have your passport and visa page photocopied. Try to buy the SIM card at a shop owned by the phone company as if you buy it from a corner shop it can take some time for the card to be activated, despite promises that it will be done in “a couple of hours”.

Ncell SIMs - can be bought from many stores (type Ncell in Google Maps), but are best bought from official outlets. Micro SIMs can be cut for free if needed. Ncell offers both call/data and data only SIMs.

NTC SIMs - NTC SIMs can usually only be bought from their official offices (on Durbar Marg). They sometimes have a shortage of SIM cards. They also do not publish their coverage maps. However they do have superior coverage in more remote areas compared to Ncell.

Visit

The festival’s travel partner Four Season offers a wide array of tours, trekking itineraries, both long and short. Take advantage of their knowledge and let them take care of the logistics of your trip!

Contact Mr. Pankaj Pradhananga (pankaj@nbe.com.np or +977-9801033864, +977-1-5526894 / 5528842) for a personalised tour or check out the packages on their website (http://www.gonepal.com/destination/nepal.html).

Spend an afternoon at Baber Mahal Revisited (Thapathali) where you can find eateries and stores, all in a wondrous Rana Palace setting. Don’t miss one of Siddhartha Art Gallery’s special exhibitions!

Palaces and temples. Besides the mountains, these are the other reason people visit Nepal. Basantapur (Kathmandu), Patan and Bhaktapur are the most famous Durbar Squares (durbar means palace) and are cramped with temples, bells, statues, patis and hitis. Yes, even after the disastrous quakes of 2015. The most interesting way to visit is with a guide, who can take you around the square and, importantly, the neighborhoods in the area so as to get a glimpse of how traditional urban life is organized.

Equally beautiful, but lesser known, are the old centers of Dhulikhel and Panauti, a mere 2-3 hours drive from the capital, just outside of the valley.

Of course, do not miss the Boudhanath and Swayambhunath Stupas. Both are major pilgrimage sites for Buddhists and impressive architectural feats.

Pashupatinath: this extensive Hindu temple precinct is a sprawling collection of temples, ashrams, images and inscriptions raised over the centuries along the banks of the sacred Bagmati river. Simply gorgeous.

When the hustle of traffic, horns, and pollution gets too much, take a nap on the cushions in the Garden of Dreams (Thamel) amidst the exquisite sub-tropical flora. Or play around with the squirrels.
Relax

**Kundalini Sound and Herbal therapy** (Thamel) is the place to wind down and get yourself back together after exploring the nooks and crannies of Kathmandu. Just sit back, relax and let the singing bowls do all the work.

**Sotai & Kai Japanese Physiotherapy** (Jhamsikhel). The Japanese owner and his son trained deaf/mute Nepalis to perform excellent massages that will do wonders to aching muscles and joints.

Go Out

Check out the festival’s website to see the day’s designated drinking hole.

For more information on the following selection, check out their facebook pages.

In Thamel, **Sam’s Bar** and **OR2K** are lively and fun. **Jazz Upstairs** on Lazimpat Road offers nice views in a pub kind of style (with a live band on Wednesdays and Saturdays). The **Reggae Bar and Cafe** in Thamel has live bands almost every night as does **Purple Haze Rock Bar** right around the corner. **The Irish Pub** shows the major sports event on a big screen (Lazimpat). **Club 25 Hours** (Naxal) has a cozy restaurant, a garden bar and a club in it’s basement. **The Victory Lounge** (Durbar Marg) is the new fancy place in town. Check their facebook page to get on the guest list. Those in the know gather at **House of Music**, an old-school beer house and music venue on Friday and Wednesday evenings for decent rock, reggae and RnB (Amrit Marg). Unpretentious **Base Camp** gathers the artistic minded crowds on Arun Thapa Chowk. **Piano B** (Ekantakuna) for real Italian pizza and a selection of imported beers in a cozy setting.

Do not miss out on the **Kathmandu International Jazz Festival** (aka Jazzmandu, various locations, from 4 to 10 November), a major highlight in the capital’s cultural scene. Extremely well selected jazz performers come up to the valley from around the world to perform and delight the Nepali crowd - jazzmandu.org

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Help us get the word out

As a new initiative, we can use all the help we can get the word out about Photo Kathmandu. A couple of small clicks on your part would go a long way! Here’s an overview of our social media and handlers

- [www.photoktm.com](http://www.photoktm.com)
- [facebook.com/photoktm](http://facebook.com/photoktm)
- [instagram.com/photoktm](http://instagram.com/photoktm)
- [#photoktm](http://www.photoktm.com)
- [@photoktm](http://www.photoktm.com)

Tweet about your exhibition/slideshow/talk/workshop, share links, post photos of your preparations!

All photos in this guide are part of Photo Kathmandu’s [Special Print Sale](http://www.photoktm.com) to fundraise and support the rebuilding of heritage sites in the historic city of Patan that have sustained damage in Nepal’s recent earthquakes.

Prints are available in a limited edition of 100 per photograph. They are made with high quality archival paper and bear the official stamp of Nepal Picture Library. Sizes are unique to each photograph so kindly check the gallery for specifications for each print. Prints will be shipped to you, with love, from Kathmandu.

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