



Buddhist monasteries, such as Neydo Tashi Choeling, are welcoming places to experience the diversity of Nepali culture. Opposite: A Tharu woman wears a traditional dress from southern Nepal. The country itself is a colorful tapestry of 124 ethnicities.



HIMALAYAN HEART

Mighty peaks—including Everest—draw most visitors to Nepal, but a rich culture thrives in the shadow of these mountains

BY CARRIE MILLER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISON WRIGHT



On Yagbir Singh Marg street in Kathmandu, vendors sell vegetables, fruits, and spices on the road. In this buzzing capital of one million, daily life unfolds in the open.

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THIS IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE PLACES ON THE PLANET. Kathmandu, Nepal. Specifically Kathmandu's Boudhanath stupa, one of the biggest in the world. Its whitewashed dome, tinged with saffron and crowned with a golden spire, is painted with the all-seeing eyes of Buddha. This is the sacred eye in a maelstrom of the profane. Just outside Boudhanath's gates swirls the dizzying street scene of Kathmandu, as crazy and cacophonous as I remember from my first visit nearly two decades ago: a pressing sea of one million people, with vendors who pursue you for blocks down broken brick sidewalks to sell you a \$5 lapis bracelet, past light poles wrapped with beehive-size bundles of gray wiring, the work of electrical wizards or madmen.

But the stupa's gates keep the city at bay. Prayer flags ripple in the breeze as hundreds of pilgrims circle the base of the fifth-century shrine, always clockwise. Sitting on the top platform of the three that encircle the stupa, I toy with the \$5 lapis bracelet I'm wearing around my wrist, my throat dry from the raspy street air that tastes of dust and two-stroke exhaust fumes, and survey the city's rooftop scene from my perch. Up here life plays out above the pandemonium: Tourists relax with beer and pizza at rooftop bars, while Kathmandu's locals, drawn together from Nepal's 124 ethnic groups, hang laundry and carefully tend potted trees and plants, their personal oases of green.

Lifting my eyes even higher, I see the snowy Himalaya, pink in the dust and haze, climbing halfway up the sky. Nepal is home to eight of the world's 10 tallest mountains, including Mount Everest, and these peaks are what draw most visitors here.

On my first visit I was a peak pilgrim too, a restless, driven 26-year-old eager to test myself on those high trails. Now I've returned, with National Geographic Journeys, to experience a more hidden side of Nepal, a side often overshadowed by these mountains—the diversity of the people and landscape and the rhythm and respite of places like Boudhanath. This time I don't want to go high. I want to turn my back on the mountains (and my ego) and go inside, hoping Nepal's ancient culture will reveal itself to me, if only for a moment.

To begin, we make our way to the Neydo Tashi Choeling Monastery Guest House, 14 miles southwest of Kathmandu, close to Pharping.

The golden-roofed monastery sits on a dusty hill studded with prayer flag–draped pine trees. Home to 150 Buddhist monks, ages five to 27, the monastery also runs an austere 23-room guest-house for travelers. Some come here to unwind, some to study Buddhism, others to experience a taste of monastic life. Visitors are encouraged to attend the monks’ morning and evening pujas, Buddhist prayer ceremonies.

I ask Tsering Hyolmo, the 25-year-old manager of the guest-house, if it’s strange, welcoming visitors to watch your daily devotional practice.

“We enjoy sharing our practice,” Tsering says. “Maybe we have a beautiful place, and visitors want to know about Buddhism. Maybe they just want to get away from the city. Either way we can help.”

At 5,577 feet the air temperature is much colder here than in Kathmandu, and I notice Tsering is wearing a down jacket over his burgundy robes. He unlocks the door to my room, which is sparse, simple, and everything I need: a sturdy bed, small wooden desk, and en suite bathroom.

The next morning I hunch my shoulders against the predawn chill and hike up the hill to the monastery. Kicking off my shoes, I take my place among a row of visitors sitting cross-legged on cushions against the back wall, facing a one-story-tall golden Buddha and rows of monks in their saffron and red robes, which they’ve pulled tightly around themselves in the cold.

The noise is deafening. The monks keep up a continuous chant, punctuated with the beating of deep bass drums, the blasts of horns and conch shells, and the metallic clashing of cymbals.

I start to sense a rhythm underneath the chaos, although I don’t understand it. As Tsering promised, I do feel welcome, but apart. It’s as though the monks are opening a door and it is up to me to step through.

Whenever I lose my focus (which happens frequently) during the puja, my eyes go to the young monks in the back rows, who are behaving like boys at school, stifling yawns with the long sleeves of their red robes, wriggling in their seats until a senior monk walks slowly and watchfully down the line.

Until recently Nepal was one of the poorest countries in the world, relying heavily on aid money. Many children end up in monasteries like this one, or the Arya Tara School and nunnery down the hill, because of the free board and opportunity for education. Some children are sent by their parents; others choose to come.

Dhekyid Dolma chose to come to Arya Tara at age 12. The 22-year-old nun wants to become a teacher of *thangka*, a type of Buddhist painting on cotton or silk known for its intensely bright colors and elaborate designs. “I just wanted to be a nun. I want to be a simple person with high thinking,” she tells me.

In the rural area of Kurintar, 70 miles northwest of Pharping

YASUSHI TANIKAWA/GETTY IMAGES; PREVIOUS PAGES: SIMONE/ESTOCK PHOTO (STREET)



Pokhara, like other cities in Nepal, reflects and bears witness to the majesty of mountains. The city serves as the end point of the famed Annapurna hiking circuit, with views of fishtail-shaped Mount Machapuchare (far left).



A gallery of faces reveals Nepalis' irrepressible spirit. A Newar woman wears red and saffron for a Hindu wedding; a villager in Kurintar returns home with fodder for animals. For a young Buddhist monk and a uniformed schoolgirl, life revolves around their studies.



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and my next destination, it's clear that life is not easy, especially for young women who want to be high thinkers. Red dirt trails thread precipitous hillsides from one cluster of corrugated-iron-roofed houses to the next, with a narrow suspension bridge over a frothing river connecting the hillside to the main road. In these villages one man in every household works in Kathmandu or abroad to supplement the family's subsistence farming, and education—particularly for girls—isn't a priority.

I'm spending the night at Summit River Lodge, a sprawling accommodation accessed only by foot, over the bridge.

Before the sun has sent exploratory beams through the morning mist, I'm up and climbing the dusty paths behind the lodge. I pass a group of villagers crowded around an older woman carrying a large basket of cherry tomatoes. She has walked from a village an hour away to sell or trade her homegrown harvest. If she doesn't sell them all, she'll walk to the next village.

I happen upon a woman grinding corn by hand. She stands up to greet me with a shy, warm smile, pressing her palms together in the traditional greeting, bowing slightly. I return the greeting, *Namaste*—I bow to you.

Her daughter emerges from the house briefly, a baby on her hip, before ducking back inside. When she reemerges, she is carrying a cup of tea for me, and the three of us stand in the cool morning air, the cup of tea warming my fingers, smiling and talking with exaggerated gestures as chickens peck around the satellite dish that's been placed carefully next to the house.

I thank them for their hospitality and say *namaste* again, winding my way back down the red dirt trail, the sun starting to beat on my neck.

Nepal compels you to confront the variety of human existence. There's no escaping the poverty that throws my own life into stark relief. There is time, however, to consider the balance between poverty and simplicity and to marvel at friendly, gentle people who are willing to open their homes, to put their hardworking lives on pause, in order to share in a conversation. There is time to consider my own perception of what makes for a wealthy life.

Nepal is one of those propitious places where you have time simply to be, where precisely constructed itineraries are shredded and you are forced to go with the flow. My Western mind tends to resist that—strongly at first, but I'm starting to let go.

I'm in that halfway state when I reach Chitwan National Park, 45 miles south of Kurintar. Chitwan is a rare success story of government support, tourism, and local involvement working together to benefit everyone. Yet another one of Nepal's UNESCO World Heritage sites (the country has four in all), the 579-square-mile former hunting ground for the royal family is the oldest national park in Nepal and home to greater one-horned rhinos, Bengal tigers, leopards, wild deer, crocodiles, and 550 species of birds. Determined to protect this wild resource, the Nepali government decades ago called in the army to police the park; only one incident of poaching has occurred in the past three years.



Nepal Navigation

Nepal's infrastructure is up and running after the devastating earthquake of 2015, but the usual crowds of travelers have yet to return, which means the timing has never been better to visit.

WHERE TO STAY

Kathmandu

The Traditional Comfort boutique hotel is a small, centrally located spot with a basic restaurant on-site. From \$138. traditionalcomfort.com

Pharping

The Neydo Tashi Choeling Monastery Guest House is a simple guesthouse adjacent to a monastery, which guests are welcome to visit. The guesthouse also features a restaurant. From \$87. neydohotel.com

Chitwan National Park

The Barahi Jungle Lodge features 35 guest rooms overlooking the park, a restaurant, a swimming pool, and a wealth of safari activities. From \$250. barahijunglelodge.com

DINING AND SHOPPING

Kathmandu

Fire and Ice pizzeria has been an expat favorite since 2005.

Krishnarpan, the restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, serves traditional Nepali cuisine. Meals are six- to 22-course extravaganzas. There are plenty of souvenirs to be found in Nepal's capital city, but for unique, quality pieces try NPI Collection (pashminas) and Buddha Thangka Treasure (paintings). Patan Museum in Lalitpur sells bronze Buddhas.

INSIDER TIPS

Visas

Tourist visas are available for purchase in advance or on arrival. They are cheaper to purchase on arrival, but it can take over an hour to get through the queue. Bring extra passport photos.

What to Pack

Closed-toe, sturdy shoes are a must in both cities and rural areas. It's a good idea to bring a basic first-aid kit. Always drink bottled water, including when brushing teeth.

GO WITH NAT GEO

Carrie Miller and Alison Wright traveled on National Geographic Journeys with G Adventures' "Nepal: Himalaya Highlights" tour. The itinerary includes Kathmandu, Pharping, Kurintar, Chitwan, and Pokhara. natgeojourneys.com/explore; 800-281-2354

“The quality of life has improved with tourism,” Saket (Saki) Shrouti, my 27-year-old guide from the Barahi Jungle Lodge, tells me. “The communities here were totally dependent on the forest for food and shelter. They were using the wildlife. When the park was created, it put a lot of restrictions on the people. But when tourists started coming, there are roads and electricity here now. Doctors can now get here. Ultimately communities got to know that if we save the rhino, we show the rhino, tourists will come. Many tourists can see one rhino for 40 years. One poacher sees one rhino and it’s gone. And so the locals can see how wildlife conservation benefits everyone.”

Chitwan is a Nepal I never could have imagined: lush and languorous, with hazy, fireball sunsets and the swish of the wind catching the 20-foot-high elephant grasses.

The next morning I’m literally going with the flow, sliding down the wide, unruffled Rapti River on a boat. Mist skirts along the still surface, and the only sound comes from two poles dipping into the water, slowly propelling us forward. Aitaram Bote, 45, stands in the front of the boat; Som Kumal, 33, is in the back. Both belong to the local Boteh tribe, which Saki describes as “expert watermen who know every corner of this park.”

Saki himself is full of knowledge about everything we’re seeing, from the egrets, to the pair of hog deer grazing on the bank, to the mugger (an Asian crocodile) floating as innocently as a log.

Suddenly Saki taps me on the shoulder and nods at the opposite bank. A hulking gray figure blends in with the morning mist, but I can make out its fringed ears. The one-horned rhino pauses from its foraging, raising its large head, pinning us with a stare. More than 600 of these behemoths live in Chitwan, thanks to the antipoaching measures, and I count myself very lucky to be seeing one in its natural habitat.

“The rhinos often come down to drink from the river,” Saki whispers to me. “One guest asked me what time they come. I tell her they come anytime they want. It’s their kingdom.”

It is their kingdom, and by tearing my eyes from the mountains, I am fortunate enough to be granted this uncustomary audience with rhino royalty. I feel the same sensation—a rare peacefulness—that I felt on the sun-warmed steps of Boudhanath, with the women at Kurintar, and during the puja ceremony at Neydo Tashi Choeling.

Som and Aitaram pole us over to the riverbank at the confluence where the Rapti meets the Narayani River. As I disembark for a waiting jeep, Aitaram shakes one of my hands with both of his and says a few words. Aitaram and I both look to Saki, hoping he’ll translate for us. “He says, ‘If you come back, remember us.’”

I want to tell him that I will remember him, as I do the other moments when I glimpsed the hidden heart of Nepal.

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One of two peace pagodas in Nepal, Shanti Stupa is a site for meditation atop a hill in Pokhara.

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