

South Asia

# Nepal is back: ancient temples, mountains — and Bengal tigers too

Tourists stayed away after the earthquake two years ago, but now adventurous holidaymakers are returning to this breathtaking country, says **Tom Chesshyre**

**R**uby-red rhododendron trees with trunks adorned with delicate white orchids line the path to the remote village of Panchase Bhanjyang. Below, the mountainside plunges to crop terraces and clearings with water buffaloes. Smoke rises from far-off dwellings. Luminous clouds scuttle across the valley, cooling us as we pause after our five-hour hike.

We are on the edge of the Annapurna region of mountains in central Nepal. Somewhere to the north is Fishtail mountain (Nepalese name: Machapuchhare, 6,993m, or 22,942ft), which resembles a half-submerged fish descended from the heavens. Somewhere to the southeast is Everest (8,848m), the granddaddy of the Himalayas. All around, snow-capped peaks lurk behind clouds.

This is a mystical, soul-lifting place. We continue upwards, tackling a steep rocky section. My guide, Su, pauses to examine leopard droppings. “About a month old,” he says, striding onwards. “Very shy,” he says, striding onwards.

All is quiet. Since the morning we have passed a mere handful of hikers — French walkers with porters heading to Pokhara. And when we arrive at Panchase Bhanjyang, having covered eight miles, we are the only guests. Maya, one of the three sisters who own the Happy Heart Hotel, ushers us to a plank-like perch in front of the wood fire in her smoky kitchen so we can warm up with tin cups of lemon ginger tea.

As she tends the rudimentary stove she tells us about April 25, 2015, when an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale struck Nepal, bringing the loss of almost 9,000 lives, destroying tens of thousands of homes, turning centuries-old temples to rubble — and in a few terrifying minutes ruining the tourism on which so many parts of the nation depend. “It was big shaking,” she says. “Big, big shaking. Our main house collapse.”

The costly rebuilding of this property took a dozen workers three months, but the hotel itself escaped serious damage. Yet since then guest numbers have halved



at its ten well-appointed, but simple rooms — £4 a night, with electricity, clean toilets in sheds and pictures of the Hindu elephant god Ganesha on the bedroom walls (he is said to bring luck). “People are too scared to come because of the earthquake,” says Maya, who has a remarkably laid-back take on the disaster. Nepal has been through a lot in the past two years, not least a pair of powerful aftershocks soon after the initial quake, which brought down many more buildings. Now, however, with reconstruction of some (but far from all) temples and the immediacy of the trauma fading, tourists like me are beginning to trickle back. I have signed up to a ten-day tour, beginning in Kathmandu, with visits to sights in the Kathmandu Valley, Chitwan National Park (to the west), and culminating in our magnificent Annapurna hike.

The country is still a long way from normal — and the effects of April 2015 are obvious on the drive from the airport to the centre of Kathmandu. Buildings with precarious-looking support beams, great piles of rubble and roads with teams digging up cracked pipes (authorities are modernising the water system) create an impression of barely suppressed chaos.

This is heightened by the awful traffic jams. The earthquake came as the capital was struggling with a population influx from the countryside. In recent years many youngsters from rural areas have sought more glamorous lifestyles glimpsed on the internet, turning their backs on the hard grind of working the paddy fields. The result is that Kathmandu is very busy, and the pollution from vehicles and building sites is dreadful. So much

so that my city guide, Archana, regularly loses her voice after leading tours. She hands me a face mask to keep out dust. Despite this, my lungs ache at night after a day’s sightseeing.

See the sights we do — what’s left of them. In Durbar Square, in Kathmandu’s medieval centre, the white walls of the old royal palace are cracked and crumbling, with crude support beams and a seclusion zone in case the crippled edifice decides to call it a day. Beyond, many of the temples are little more than construction sites behind corrugated metal walls.

“This is the temple of Vishnu,” says Archana. “At least, it used to be.”

Near here I get talking to an Australian couple from Sydney. “We sat up there where the pillars were last time we came,” says Jill, a retired teacher. She’s looking at a picture on a display board. “Now everything looks like it was hit by a bomb.”

Yet there is still a huge amount to see in Kathmandu. The Sydneysiders and I chat for a while, and they tell me how they were asked for donations by “very polite” Maoist insurgents when they went trekking in the mountains in the 1990s (Nepalese politics has had a rollercoaster ride in recent years). Then we go to see the beautiful temple of Kumari. This is home to the eponymous “living goddess”, who is now aged ten and who was selected for her unusual role when aged three. When she menstruates for the first time, Archana says, a new goddess will be selected. No photos of her may be taken in the temple.

On our visit Kumari happens to come to the window of her balcony, dressed in a red and gold robe and wearing Cleopatra-style eyeliner. She regards her audience (us) somewhat disdainfully, pouts and returns to an inner room. The 20 or so tourists in the courtyard are delighted.

Afterwards, we visit “Freak Street”. This is close by and is where hippies hung out in the 1960s, enjoying the Himalayan nation’s plentiful marijuana — now illegal, although the waft of weed is not an unfamiliar smell in Thamel, Kathmandu’s tourist district and very much backpacker central.

Then we drive to see the remarkable cremation temple of Lord Shiva, known as Pashupatinath Temple, on the Bagmati River. Here a series of funeral pyres, *ghats*, are ablaze by the murky water’s edge. Wood crackles. Thick white smoke swirls up. Many Indian tourists are taking pictures — this is a key Hindu pilgrimage site. Cows graze by the river and monkeys skip about on rocks. Palm readers, who are Hindu priests in saffron robes, sit cross-legged by a path, patiently waiting for customers. On an impulse I have my palm read by one. He clasps my right hand with his tumeric-stained hands and says that I “could be very rich”, “will travel a lot” and



Main picture: temples in the centre of Bhaktapur

may have “two or three children, but not with family planning”. With this, the priest winks and asks for 500 rupees (£3.85).

We go to see the great white stupa of Boudhanath in the city’s north, which has had part of its golden tower repaired since the 2015 quake. Shops all round the stupa sell knock-off branded shoes and climbing wear — North Face jackets are available for £15; “North Fakes”, as they are known locally. Monks in maroon robes jostle past. Local couples circle the stupa for good luck. About 12 per cent of the Nepalese are Buddhist, while 80 per cent are Hindu.

So concludes our final afternoon in Kathmandu, but before heading north-west for the Annapurna trek, we have three stop-offs planned — each revealing the state of Nepal’s post-quake recovery.

The first is the medieval city of Bhaktapur, about eight miles south of the capital. The labyrinthine red-brick centre of this much smaller city, which was the centre of power in the country until the late 15th century, has been preserved over the years, yet its frailty meant it took a bad hit two years ago. Now just about every building is propped up by wooden beams, some of which look terribly makeshift.

“Orange and peach light rises forming a fiery blaze above the icy peaks

Many of the central temples are still being painstakingly rebuilt. And parts of the recently reopened National Art Museum are off-limits because of cracks in the walls.

This museum is home to fantastic medieval paintings of Hindu gods, as well as portraits of Nepalese kings, beginning with the founder of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1768, the much-loved Prithvi Narayan Shah, and ending with the last king in 2008, when the monarchy was brought to an end. This decision came after the world headline-grabbing royal massacre of 2001, when Crown Prince Dipendra went on a shooting spree, murdering his father, King Birendra, and killing himself. The final portraits have a spine-chilling quality.

Tin “earthquake victim shelters” are still in Bhaktapur, as are faded blue tents supplied by China. Some families are living in buildings that are not considered safe. “They are taking a risk,” says Su, who is accompanying me from here to Annapurna.

Onwards we go, driving up a mountain overlooking Bhaktapur that rises to 1,950m, and the to the hill town of Nagarkot. Along the way we pass army bases where Gurkhas who later join the British Army are trained — they can be seen running

along the steep single-track road carrying rifles and heavy packs (no wonder their fitness levels are renowned). We check in at dusk to the Sunshine Hotel, get an early night after a power cut (Nepal’s electricity supply is still in a parlous state), then wake at the crack of dawn to do what everyone does at Nagarkot — watch the sun rise.

At 5.45am we are on the hotel roof with binoculars gazing across a hillside that is still being rebuilt after the earthquake to see the sun slowly appear beyond the jagged ridge of the Himalayas. Orange and peach light rises in heavenly shafts, soon forming a fiery blaze above the icy peaks. The tip of Everest can be seen in the distance by a band of cloud. We look on in awe before having breakfast, where Subbha, the waiter, tells us how his grandfather died in a collapsed building on this hillside in 2015.

Almost everyone has an earthquake story. Su is no exception. When the ground began to move he was in a street in Kathmandu, and he imagined he was simply experiencing a dizzy spell. Then, when moped riders began to topple in the street, he realised something significant was afoot. Phones were not working, telecommunications towers had come down, so he

Top right: Machapuchhare (Fishtail mountain); middle, a Bengal tiger in Nepal; bottom, Boudhanath stupa in Kathmandu

Need to know

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Explore (01252 884723, explore.co.uk), which offers a 15-day Discover Nepal trip from £1,945pp, including flights, hotels with breakfast, some other meals, transport and the services of a tour leader, guides and a driver.



rushed as quickly as he could to his village to check that his wife and son were OK.

This took nine hours, including a 15-mile hike. His wife and son were — thankfully — fine, but their house was badly damaged. He bought a tarpaulin to act as a tent in their garden. A month later he was allocated a tin emergency shelter, in which they still live. “I need \$25,000 to buy a house,” he says. “Everyone in my village is in the same boat. We are all in it together.”

It is a seven-hour drive from Nagarkot to Chitwan National Park. Here, we check in to the Jungle Villa Resort overlooking the Rapti River. As we do, staff at the hotel wave us over to a deck. A single-horned rhino — of which there are about 500 in the park — is wallowing in the shallows.

So begins a marvellous two days, witnessing rare sloth bears, more rhinos, gharial and mugger crocodiles, and finally — best of all — a Bengal tiger. The creature is pacing through shrubland and, when it sees us, turns and disappears almost immediately. Yet for a few seconds we have witnessed the elusive beast, of which there are about 120 in the park. Apparently there is a one in 20 chance of such a sighting (even the guides are thrilled).

It’s worth adding here that when I arrive there is just one other hotel guest. Sahodar, the hotel manager, tells me that business is down about 70 per cent since 2015. In 2014 127,000 foreigners visited Chitwan National Park. Last year this figure was 56,000. It’s an excellent time to go to Nepal if you want to avoid tourist crowds.

This is true on the trekking trails too. At the Happy Heart Hotel, after our eight-mile hike, I get to know the handful of Spanish, American and German guests — trekking is very sociable — and in the morning we all head off our own ways after a dawn visit to Hindu and Buddhist temples on a peak. Su and I tramp for 18 miles through beautiful rhododendron forests and villages growing garlic, cabbages and spinach, all the way down to Pokhara, with its backpacker hostels and bars.

We are exhausted and, to celebrate, we go for Everest beers and chicken curries at a bar in the middle of the strip — which was, luckily, unaffected by the quake. Hardly anyone is around. Rolling Stones and Beatles songs play out across empty bar stools as we raise our beers to our adventures. Nepal is back... even though the mountains never went away.