

TRAVEL

ESCAPE ROUTES

SOLO TRAVEL FOR THE SOUL



SEEKING SOLITUDE IN KATHMANDU



Stylist contributor Georgie Bradley explores Kathmandu's busy streets in her bid to discover inner peace

As far as gutsy solo travellers go, I'm a bit of a fraud. In my head solo travellers lead by instinct, abandon plans, forage for food with eagle-eye prowess, live in beat-up boots and have an open mind to allow whatever is to happen, happen. I like to do all of the intrepid things above, but with a safety net of a luxury boutique hotel and guides for the places where I know I might die if I were left to my own devices. But as someone who gets fidgety after 30 minutes on a sun-lounger, the allure of a trip packed with treks,

tribal villages and sensory overloads had me heading to solo-friendly Nepal.

Kathmandu makes up one of the three infamous K's. Kabul, Kuta and Kathmandu are cited as *the* hippy hangouts in Asia for their laid-back vibe, easy living and openness to navel-gazing individuals seeking answers to the bigger questions in life. Most places to stay in Kathmandu are crammed between the choking streets of dustbowl Thamel (wear a mask; I didn't and by nightfall I sneezed out black



matter) which is great for souvenir shopping, mountain equipment musing or for liberal quantities of momos (incredibly moreish Nepalese dumplings), but relentlessly busy for someone seeking a moment of zen.

Instead, I stayed right near Kathmandu's airport. Not an obvious choice for anybody looking for a retreat, but rest assured, the Dwarika's Hotel Kathmandu is something out of a Rudyard Kipling novel. Just a seven-minute drive from the airport, the hotel is on a busy but wide street and sticks out like a sore thumb. You don't get any glimpses of the interiors, only the densely overgrown shrubberies that engulf the building whole.

Of all the hotels in the world that offer complete tranquility from external noise, Dwarika's really lives up to its promise. You walk through the grounds and feel like you're standing in a UNESCO world heritage site, with the building taking inspiration from the architectural grandeur of the Newari royal palaces and impressive craftsmanship reminiscent of the famous Durbar Square - the 2015 earthquake had no mercy, leaving the site in a haphazard pile of debris; but restoration efforts are slowly piecing back centuries of history together.

My junior suite is both rustic and refined. After a mandatory happy dance (space, all the space!) on the plump bed equipped with traditionally woven decorative pillows, I scope out the room (large

studio) and soak up the heritage and history that surrounds me. The hotel's emphasis on sustainability is found in the earthiness of the terracotta-tiled flooring, the rugged but regal organic linen, and the handmade furniture. All expose a Nepali lifestyle that is incredibly warm and personal. It's the kind of destination hotel you could spend every part of the day in, exploring it like a museum. The atmosphere mixes Himalayan harmony with staff armed with oodles of sincerity.

While Dwarika's isn't exactly a shoestring option next to some seriously budget-friendly alternatives (here, you can live like a queen on a waitress wage), it's worth the extra dosh for the refuge it offers, as venturing out on the streets of Kathmandu is a death-dodging exercise. Cars ruthlessly push through people and you're left to fight for your footing on the dirt roads. Somehow I thought it would be a good idea to do a Lonely Planet walking tour, taking me from Thahiti Tole to Durbar Square, or rather, taking me from Thahiti Tole through a intricate web of streets where children scurry around tourists bellowing, "Hello! Give me ice-cream!" with an innate



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ballsiness that I really envied.

Despite being monsoon season (June-August) I landed a few lucky days where the skies were completely bathed in sunshine. One of those days was when I did a full day 20-kilometre trek from Changunarayan Hillock to Nagarkot. I'd be lying if I didn't pretend to be super hard-core about the climb, which involved dizzying inclines, punishing

steps, stops at temples where you're always guaranteed a curtain of fluttering prayer flags, and teeny self-sufficient villages where the locals lead gloriously simple lives, complete with an all-in rain-summoning ceremony.

At the end of the trek, my guide and I visited the home of a man with an almost-indulgent way of speaking in Chinese proverbs and prophecies. He exchanged the city life for his peaceful farm dwelling 15 years ago, and now feels more nourished surviving off the fruit and vegetables he grows. Listening to his chatter while I work my way through the lunch he prepared: lentils with rice, he shares the philosophy that launched his move to the simpler life: "If you want to be happy for a week, take a wife. If you want to be happy for a month, kill your goat. But to be happy all your life, plant a garden." While I'm not quite ready to uproot all in pursuit of happiness, my visit to Kathmandu had at least planted a small seed.

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BEYOND KATHMANDU

Being a nation of mountains, Nepal has its share of outdoorsy experiences

1 EVEREST FLIGHT EXPERIENCE
Seeing the world's highest mountain up close is the stuff of dreams. On a clear day you get just a smattering of clouds concealing the peak. The neighbouring mountains are also a sight to behold. Go with Buddha Air; they have a good track record and you can sit with the pilot for Insta-snaps.

2 DAY TRIP TO DAMAN
This little village is as rural as they come. Take a four-hour drive up the mountains east of the capital and mingle with the local Nepali and Tibetan tribes at almost 2,500 metres above sea-level.

3 BHAKTAPUR AND PATAN
These medieval cities lie east and west of Kathmandu and are steeped in cultural and historical significance. Temples and stupas abound as well as impressive wood-carvings.

4 SHIVAPURI NAGARJUN NATIONAL PARK
A 30-minute drive from the centre of Kathmandu, this is an ideal spot for hiking. You're surrounded by lush forest and waterfalls, with the fairly gentle route suitable for all fitness levels.