

Further on, a golden spire crowning a conical wooded hill greeted us. This was the Swayambhunath Stupa, the most ancient and enigmatic of all the holy shrines in Kathmandu valley. Its lofty white dome and glittering golden spire are visible for many miles and from all sides of the valley. Historical records found on a stone inscription give evidence that the stupa was already an important Buddhist pilgrimage destination by the 5th century AD. The lotus mysteriously radiated a brilliant light, and the name of the place came to be Swayambhu, meaning 'Self-Created' or 'Self-Existent'. Saints, sages and divinities travelled to the lake to venerate this miraculous light for its power in granting enlightenment. Swayambhunath's worshippers include Hindus, Vajrayana Buddhists of northern Nepal and Tibet, and the Newari Buddhists of central and southern Nepal. Each morning before dawn, hundreds of pilgrims still ascend the 365 steps that lead up the hill as part of their pilgrimage. On each of the four sides of the main stupa there is a pair of big eyes, symbolic of God's all-seeing perspective. There is no nose between the eyes but rather a representation of the number one in the Nepali alphabet, signifying that the single way to enlightenment is through the Buddhist path. Above each pair of eyes is another eye, the third eye, signifying the wisdom of looking within. No ears are shown because it is said the Buddha was not interested in hearing prayers in praise of him.

We hired a private car from the hotel for better fare and safety for the whole day, and the car started honking from 3:00 am to make sure we did not miss the Sunrise. There we were, three cold shivering ladies with our eyes half opened started for our aim to witness 'another new day!' Nagarkot is famous for its Himalayan views- the Himalayan peaks at sunrise are a magnificent sight to behold. We wished upon arrival that we had planned for more than one day to stay. It was majestic to see the moon beaming at us and the same time a red dot on other side of the sky gleaming its rays on the mountains giving us a vivid view of their edge.

Then we got back on the car to go to the 2nd valley of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur. Bhaktapur Durbar Square is the plaza in front of the royal palace of the old Bhaktapur Kingdom. It is one of three Durbar Squares in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, all of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. We were shocked though that the entry fee has become so high even for SAARC country citizens. Bhaktapur, also known as Bhadgaon, is a museum of medieval art and architecture with many fine examples of sculptures, woodcarving and colossal pagoda temples consecrated to different gods and goddesses. The city is shaped like a conch shell-one of the emblems of the god Vishnu and was founded by King Ananda Deva in 889 A.D. It was evident that modern ideas certainly had not replaced the ancient traditions, which was refreshing. Sipping on the popular masala tea, we got a tour guide who we hired for Rs300 (NR) per hour. Among all the history of the temples and kings that he mentioned, the most interesting one was of Lu Dhowka (The Golden Gate) erected by King Ranjit Malla. It is said to be the most beautiful and richly moulded specimen of its kind in the entire world. The door is surmounted by a figure of the goddess Kali and Garuda (mythical griffin) and attended by two heavenly nymphs. It is embellished with monsters and other mythical creatures of marvelous intricacy.

Our next stop was Patan and we got their area map and unanimously agreed that we needed at least a whole day if not two to see everything. The ancient name of Patan is Lalitpur which means a city of beauty. It is indeed a city of beauty and grace and is planned in a circular format with Buddhist stupas at each of the four points of the compass. The city is full of Buddhist monuments and Hindu temples with fine bronze gateways, guardian deities and wonderful carvings. Noted for its craftsmanship and metal workers, it is also known as the city of artists. It is believed that the city was built during the reign of Vira Dev in 299 A.D. From too many temples we could only select a few due to time constraints, so we each picked two to visit. All three of us wanted to see the Golden Temple, so there we were. The Golden Temple (Hiranya Varna Mahavihar), built in the 12th Century by King Bhaskar Verma, is located just north of Durbar square. This three-roofed Buddhist monastery is adorned with a golden facade, four large gateways, a clock tower, and two lion sculptures. Inside are golden images of Buddha, wall carvings, and a prayer wheel. Another must see is The Kumbheshwor Temple which is one of only two five-tiered temples in Nepal. Dating back to 1391, when it was built by Jayast Hiti Malla, it had two tiers. It hosts an annual pilgrimage of Hindus during the Janai Purnima day in July/August.

Whether to have some alone time, read a book, explore art and history or to unwind, Nepal should be on one's travel list. Be it for adventure, camping or outdoor activities or even for a peaceful way to rejuvenate and inspire spiritual endurance, Nepal is the best place.

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