

NEPAL ... copyright Geof Prigge
geofprigge@yahoo.com.au

Nepal, the top of the world, is still a magnificent destination even after years of turmoil which has seen thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators and innocent civilians killed. It is mid 2006 and the king has finally seen the light and relinquished control of the political situation. The road ahead to democracy will undoubtedly be a rocky one, however with the seven party alliance and Maoists joining forces to formulate a new constitution, all is looking far more positive. Hopefully this new course will mean a long and lasting change for the better.

Because of the recent political strife and the painfully slow decision by the monarchy to wake up, people are really suffering. The tourist numbers are drastically down. Walk around the streets of anywhere but Kathmandu and you feel it at every step. Shop-owners are desperate for your business. They'll do almost anything to lure you into their shop in the hope that just maybe you'll make a purchase and this in turn will enable them to stay open, to put food on the table and to feed their families. In all my travels throughout all continents over three decades, I have never come across a situation where I have been at pains to spend my money fairly as I had to consider in recent trips to Nepal. In one shop I'd buy my water, another I'd get my fruit, another I'd purchase my chocolate, simply to spread my money around a bit.

It's summer now (June) and the number of visitors is very low. Locals are hoping that by October with the improved political situation visitors will come in droves, but that's unlikely unless positive stories continue to come out of this magnificent country.

For those who do venture here, you will be welcomed by some of the most genuinely friendly people on earth. Trekking will again be on the agenda and bargains will exist in every direction. You'll still find free accommodation in some parts, providing you eat and pay for your meals. Even when you don't, the overnight fee can be less than one euro in the hills and as little as two euros in towns...and for this you'll often get a private bathroom and for a fraction more, a tv. Meals vary from less than a euro for a breakfast consisting of eggs, bread, butter and honey, tea or coffee and fruit. Lunch and dinner can be found for between three and five euros including drinks. Handicrafts are as colourful as ever and even more prolific.

Travel between major centres in tourist buses and you'll find fares are astonishingly reasonable. An example is the journey from Kathmandu to Pokhara. The fare is just 8 euros. And if you choose the local bus, it's even cheaper at around 3 euros. You can fly quite cheaply too. One-way fares vary according to your bargaining ability, but start at about 35 euros. My advice though is not to bargain too hard. They need every morsel of money they can get their hands on.

I've been asked many times about places to stay and things to do at my various destinations around the world. So here's a bit of a list...

KATHMANDU...Swoniga Hotel tel: 977-1-4253253. Their email address is: swoniga@wlink.com.np and their website: www.view-nepal.com/swoniga and The Pilgrims Hotel in Thamel are the pick for friendly service and good prices. Both have rooms starting at 280 rupees, which is about 3 euros. Mum's B&B and Via Via hostel are the bargain places. Slightly more upmarket are the Hotel Kathmandu and Florid Guest House, both of which have superb gardens which the budget places lack. Whilst in Kathmandu, visit Thamel if you're not staying there. It's a must for the ambience and shopping. Also Durbar Square and enter the King's Museum. Wander past the Royal Palace. Pakshin Kali, a Hindu temple where sacrifices are the norm, is well worth a visit. Chubar, another temple, although a bit dilapidated alongside the river, is also worth a visit, as it's off the tourist trail. The famous Monkey Temple is not to be missed. The climb tests many.

If you want to purchase pashmina scarfs, the best quality ones can be found by logging on to www.phelgenepal.com.np or email the proprietor, Megha Shakya at info@phelgenepal.com.np

For internet and associated services, the Kathmandu Business Centre in Thamel is the friendliest and best priced office around.

POKHARA... Sunrise Guest House where Sabitri and Surya Timilsina and their children Sunita, Saroj and Saru look after their guests well. Their email is: sunrisequesthouse@fewanet.com.np. Phone 00977-61-534827. Their lake views are superb! Rooms start at 200 rupees and that includes a private bathroom and 24 hour hot water. Their rooftop restaurant is private and affords not only a view of the sunrise, but spectacular sunsets across the lake as well.

Go out on the Fewa Lake in a canoe, visit the Peace Stupor on the other side of the lake and walk back via the jungle (1 ½ hours). You'll have to hire a paddler if you plan to walk back. Visit the Gupteswor Mahadev Cave and the nearby Patale Chhango (Devi's Falls) and Seti Gandaki River, which if you're lucky enough to visit at spring time, you'll experience it's tremendous flow. Mahindrapul Markets is also well worth a visit. It's not at all touristy. Recently because of the death of a man at the markets, the area has been re-named in his honour. Now it's called the Bhimsen Chowk.

The International Mountaineering Museum is worth a visit, but it's not cheap. Entry for overseas visitors is 300 rupees. Plan to spend several hours there. It's very impressive. There are three other museums in Pokhara but the pick of them is the Museum of Natural History. Their butterfly collection has been

painstakingly collected and preserved by British entomologist Colin Smith over a thirty year period. Entry is by donation.

For the most colourful cushions, rugs, blankets, pashmina, shawls, hand-embroidered garments and so on, drop in on Woodpecker Handicrafts near the Royal Palace, beside the lake. Ganesh Sapkota and his brother Raj will beat any price. Tel: 061-523330. Email: woodpecker2002@yahoo.com

Quality restaurants are as commonplace as in Thamel in Kathmandu. The variety of food on offer is wonderful. From local Nepali Thali and Dhal Bhat to Mexican, Indian and European cuisine, it's all there. Once Upon a Time, Lemon Tree, Enlightened Yak, Laughing Buddha, My Beautiful Restaurant... the list goes on and on, and the names are very interesting.

Internet café's are everywhere, but E-mail One was my choice when staying in Lakeside. If however you walk a kilometre away from the lake and the tourist zone, you'll find prices drop dramatically.

Visit the villages of Poharepani and Sarangkot for spectacular views of the Himalayas. These villages are only an hour or two (depending on the vehicle you choose) from Pokhara. You'll be glad you made the effort. Be prepared though. The mountain road is rough. Ask any local which hill to climb for the most impressive views. It is near here that the paragliding teams take off. The landing point is about two kilometres west of Pokhara on the side of the lake.

CHITWAN...Riverview Cottages in the village of Sauraha seems the best all round, with obliging staff and situated right beside the river. Tel: 00977- (0) 56 580096. The advantage of this one over the other riverside places is that it has two large elevated viewing platforms, to help you spot the wildlife. It's a bit pricey on local standards, but 5 euros for B&B isn't too bad. A hundred metres behind though is the friendly Sauraha Resort. It costs about half that. Both have private bathrooms and hot water.

The friendliest place in town is an internet café run by Dev Chaudhary, called Easy Link Cyber Cafe, providing phone, fax, CD burning and photocopy services too. All the cyber cafes charge the same amount but Dev gives free hot drinks and big smiles. His café is located right in the heart of Sauraha at the major intersection. Email Dev at [easy link@ntc.net.np](mailto:easy_link@ntc.net.np)

The best times I had in and around Chitwan were when I hopped on a bicycle. Go an hour in any and all directions and you'll start to experience the real Nepal...villages along the roads, people working the fields, others training young elephants. Don't miss the jungle, The Royal Chitwan National Park. Go on an elephant ride, do the dawn river paddle, go exploring in a 4WD visiting the Twenty Thousand Lakes. Visit the elephant breeding centre. There's lots more to do than the two or three day tours they'll try to sell you in Kathmandu. Be

prepared to stay longer. A good piece of advice is to go under your own steam and organise things once you're there. A helpful company for advice is Jungle Safari Park Tel: 056 580128 and email: info@junglesafaripark.com who can help with tours too.

TREKKING...My favourite has to be the Jomsom Trail but there are plenty from which to choose. Annapurna Base Camp trek is one of the most popular. A very helpful team is The Trekking Team in Kathmandu. Email Rakam Lama rakam_lama@yahoo.com This team is efficient and professional.

ADJACENT AREAS...Consider a trip to Tibet while you're in the area. Mustang and Bhutan are also worth considering, but allow time. Many people think a week in these places is sufficient. For some, a year is not enough. It's costly though to travel in these areas.

One thing for sure, if you're lucky enough to make a trip to Nepal, you'll come home with great memories, and you'll most likely have a strong desire to return.

TIBETAN MEMORIES

Sometimes the most enduring memories of a country are the smells one remembers after departure. In Tibet, for me, it was the lasting recollections of the yak butter candles burning in the monasteries now sprinkled about the countryside...I say sprinkled because the Chinese have seen to it that the vast majority have been eliminated. Fifty years of occupation has just about brought to an end the way of life so important to this land of Buddhist worship. Even as recently as October 2006, the international press filmed Chinese soldiers shooting and killing Tibetan refugees.