

Cultural Wonders of Khatmandu Valley

Skipped over by many trekkers in Nepal are the cultural gems of the Khatmandu valley. The cultures and religions of Nepal have molded the philosophical outlook of numerous civilizations for over a thousand years. While many travelers arrive in Khatmandu staying just a single overnight before leaving on their trek, anyone who loves culture and history will want to spend several days exploring these surrounds.

An ancient city, Khatmandu was first settled in the eighth century. The valley of Kathmandu is actually composed of three royal cities, Kathmandu (the capital), Patan & Bhaktapur. Each of them have their own unique qualities.

The ancient city of Patan is just three miles southeast of Khatmandu and lies on the banks of the Bagmati river. The religions of Buddhism and Hinduism have coexisted in Patan for centuries and Buddhist monuments and Hindu temples are everywhere. Known for its artists, both wood workers and metal craftsman, the bronze gateways, guardian deities and magnificent carvings are extremely detailed and well done.

The best example of stone architecture in Nepal is on Durbar Square in Patan. Here you'll find Krishna Mandir built in homage to an incarnation of Vishnu. The scenes on the temple walls are from the Mahabharat, Asia's greatest mythological war. In addition to Krishna Mandir there are temples dedicated to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, Shiva, Narsingha, Taleju, and others in Patan Durbar Square.

Bhaktapur, which translates to the city of devotees in Sanskrit was first founded in 889 AD. Kings in Bhaktapur ruled over the other two cities Kathmandu and Patan from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. A massive earthquake shook the city in 1934, and while many temples, monasteries and residences were destroyed the numerous remaining temples and ancient buildings are a testament to the skills of the Bhaktapur craftsman.

Bhaktapur even includes a king among its greatest craftsman. King Bhupatindra Malla who reigned from 1696 to 1722 built the gate to the palace complex in the center of the city. The gate may not seem massive by today's standards, but it was one of the largest in the Khatmandu valley.

If you're going to visit Bhaktapur you'll want to put the aptly named Palace of Fifty-five Windows on your list of things to see. Not that you could miss it if you're there as it stands in the square. This Palace was home to many of the kings who ruled the city and it was here that King Bhupatindra Malla mentioned above lived. Among the many other attractions that you'll want to see are the big bell, the Golden Gate, the five-tiered temple of Nyatapola, the Bhairab Temple, and the Dattatreya Square where you visit woodcarving and metalwork museums.

The capitol of Nepal is Khatmandu and it sits at an elevation of 4521 feet in a valley that is surrounded by green terraced hills, which are capped in the distance, by some of the world's tallest mountains. Khatmandu itself is home to a UNESCO heritage site and hundreds of Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples. Sites worth a visit include Durbar Square, the Temple of Kumari, Swayambhunath, Bouddhanath Stupa and Pashupatinath Temple.

Dubar Square is where the kings of Nepal are crowned and where their coronations happen. The square is where Taleju Temple, the Gaddi Baithak, the statue of King Pratap Malla and the Jagannath Temple are located. In addition, the Tribhuvan Museum is inside the Hanumandhoka Palace.

Near the Hanumandhoka Palace is the Temple of Kumari. Kumari is said to be a living goddess. Her temple has extraordinary wooden balconies and carved screens. Kumari appears on the balconies from time to time, but tourists are warned that no photographs are allowed.

Swayambhu meaning "the self existent" is the place to experience the harmony of Nepal's religious practices. Monasteries with huge prayer wheels are common and Nepal's largest image of the Sakyamuni is in a monastery that is beside the stupa.

If you wish to observe Tibetan culture in Nepal then you will want to visit the area around the Bouddhanath Stupa. This 118 foot high stupa is one of the largest in all of South Asia. It lies on an ancient Tibetan trade route and many Tibetan refugees have settled around it.

Nepal's most sacred Hindu complex is the temple of Pashupatinath. Only Hindus are allowed inside. However from a vantage point across the holly river of Bagmati one can get good views of this complex of temples and ashrams. The site goes back at least to the 4th century AD and some date it back even another thousand years.

If you're going to Nepal for a trek you'll want to leave time for a [cultural tour of the Khatmandu valley](#). An excellent way to break this up would be to visit Bhaktapur and Patan before you head out for your trek. Then when you arrive back in Khatmandu after the trek you can visit this city's many sights. Anything less than three days and you are shorting yourself on some of Nepal's best sights.