

Finding Calm in Kathmandu

Kathmandu is a chaotic jumble of people, colours and sights. But amongst the alley temples and beaming grins, there's an oasis of calm at Dwarika's Hotel, an architectural gem intent on preserving Nepal's architectural heritage. Giselle Whiteaker explores.





Kathmandu is not like any other city. The capital of Nepal stretches along the Kathmandu Valley meeting satellite towns and villages as it spreads its fingers towards the encircling mountains. Eight rivers flow through the city and the metropolis alone houses more than 2.5 million souls – all of whom seem to be out on the streets when we make our first foray into the heart of Kathmandu: the historic UNESCO-listed Durbar Square.

Many of the winding streets here are unpaved, their muddy potholes filled with monsoon showers. Bicycles, motorbikes and pedal-powered rickshaws weave around these obstacles while white Suzuki taxis hurtle through alleyways barely wide enough to accommodate their narrow axels. Dogs seek respite from the heat of the day in whatever small patch of shade they can find, panting in doorways and under mobile vendors' carts selling all manner of wares, from mangoes to beaded bracelets.

Weathered faces stumble past, their aging frames hauling loads larger than their bodies in baskets strapped around their foreheads, and young children bounce coins on the pavement in a game with made-up rules. Brightly-coloured clothing flutters around the doorframes of small shops, next to stacks of hand-beaten copper pots and buffalo tails sold as talismans. A man sits at a foot-powered sewing machine ready to repair worn clothes and blood-red chilli peppers bake innocuously in the sun on the steps of a temple.

A misshapen lump of wood pierced with nails clamping coins to its bulk juts from the corner of a building. Passers-by reach out to tenderly touch the sacred object to ward off toothache. Along the next block their turmeric-stained fingers caress the face of a statue of Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god, before



being pressed to their own foreheads in self-blessing. Temple bells tinkle to alert the spirits, the ringing joining a cacophony of voices and car horns.

Amidst this jumble of life sits the Royal Palace, a traditional Newari building with intricate wood-framed windows pressed joist to joist to the neighbouring gleaming white 1908-built palace, Gaddi Durbar. Built using European architectural designs, its Greek columns mark it as an intruder in this historical square. Past the house of the *kumari*, the child revered as a living goddess, a collection of unrelated temples accumulated over centuries huddle in patches. Tiered

pagodas reach for the sky, their columns carved with detailed myths and multi-pillared pilgrim platforms on every corner provide resting places for travelling ascetics, and any other weary bodies.

It is easy to while away a day in central Kathmandu, roaming its streets and temples as locals call out "Namaste" in a warm greeting accompanied by a face-splitting grin. A little further afield, Swayambhunath, an ancient religious complex, sits on a small hill overseeing the city's bustle. The steep stairs – one for each day of the year

– lead to a stupa, its white dome ringed by brass prayer wheels. The cubical structure on top is painted with the eyes of Buddha, looking in all four cardinal directions. Far from solemn, everywhere monkeys scamper and play, plucking organic matter from the sacred offerings for their afternoon tea. Religion here can be a raucous affair.

As dusk cloaks the city, travellers seek respite. In the courtyard of Dwarika's Hotel, a dancer twirls, her hands telling a story in refined movements. There's no finer place to soak up the heritage of Kathmandu in sweet luxury.



Mr. Dwarika was an astute man. Many years ago as Kathmandu expanded he saw architectural and cultural artefacts being laid to waste. He embarked on a mission to save these items, which now call Dwarika's Hotel home. The hotel exhibits an extensive collection of artefacts from the 13th century onwards, and the buildings and courtyards house some of Nepal's best craftsmanship. The windows are framed with detailed wooden carvings and stone elephant spouts gush water into the swimming pool. The spacious rooms combine traditional design with a contemporary outlook, ensuring comfort, a haven in the swirling city.

Dwarika's cuisine is top notch, no matter which restaurant you choose. For those eager to explore local flavours Krishnarpan offers opportunities for a feast; a journey through Nepal's culinary cultures. Set menus of up to 22 courses are peppered with Nepali produce, much of it sourced from The Dwarika's Eco Organic Farms. Sampling a six course menu is a delight. From minced meat *momo* dumplings served with mouth-watering chutney, to roasted mushrooms, flash-fried herbed lentils, stir-fried aubergine and chicken curry, every morsel is delectable, igniting the palate and telling tales of kingdoms past.

A satiating meal, a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast are the ideal way to usher in another day in Kathmandu. The air outside is heaving in the flux of the busy city. A short stroll through the humidity leads to the entrance of Pashupatinath temple. Ascetics known as sadhus, their faces painted pale and ochre, join the

thongs as henna painters wait to decorate the hands of pilgrims. A few youngsters splash in the ash-grey waters of the Bagmati River, opposite the funeral ghats, burning in readiness. A small herd of cows mills on the bridge and everywhere people gather to mourn, to celebrate and to pray in company.

Up and over the hill away from the crowds, a small pine thicket houses a collection of stone Shiva shrines lined up crookedly. On the other side of the hill the city begins again, but here there is almost silence. In the distance, the eyes of Buddha on the enormous Bodhnath stupa watch over the urban sprawl. The stupa is one of the largest in the world, dominating the skyline. A circle of cafes and trinket stalls encircle the edifice, enticing visitors to linger on their clockwise stroll. Three women sell bowls of corn to feed the multitude of pigeons that patiently wait, fluttering, in their designated area. Despite the cooing, the hushed murmurs of visiting groups, and the traffic rushing nearby, there is a feeling of reverence here.

Energy gone, it's time for rejuvenation. A dip in Dwarika's pool invigorates, a water-side glass of wine providing the antidote to the rush of life. The chaos of Kathmandu is never far away, but in this oasis it feels like miles. Here you can see the future of this city, surrounded by its past. ■

For more information on Dwarika's Hotels, see www.dwarikas.com. In addition to the lovely Dwarika's Hotel in Kathmandu, Dwarika's Resort in Dhulikel offers peace with views of the high Himalayas.