

# **Streets of Silver, Streets of Gold**

**Ten easy walks among the gods, legends and bazaars of the Kathmandu Valley**

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## Introduction

A little time spent with a globe reinforces one's sense that Kathmandu is far away: 12,000 kilometres (7,500 miles) from New York, 7,500 km (4,500 miles) from London, and 9,750 km (6,000 miles) from Sydney.

Kathmandu is actually farther away than that. It is separated from the Western world by a vast gulf of time. Kathmandu is as old as the great cities of Europe and far older than those of the New World, but the gap isn't the city's age. Time runs slower here, or at least it doesn't pass in the frenetic, linear way that most visitors consider normal. Past and present are close in Kathmandu; history, legends, and the present are all equally real. Time is a circle, a cycle of seasons, lives, and eras.

All visitors experience some culture shock at first in Kathmandu. The 'distance' of a different climate, Eastern religions, lack of development, a new language, different food, and the sights and sounds and smells of a new country affect even savvy travellers.

The remarkable Kathmandu Valley is overwhelming but also immediately enchanting. The temples, palaces, and homes of the old cities are aesthetically pleasing and balanced: they were designed for both God and Man. Two great traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism co-exist in harmony here and intermingle like nowhere else on the planet. There are eight world heritage sites in this small valley and an equal number of great 'power places'. The air itself seems saturated with piety and history and the eternal present.

From the beginning of time, the Himalaya have been the seats of divine authority and homes to the gods and goddesses. There were 'people' living in sight of these great mountains before we were human; in 1960 scientists found a tooth of a Ramepithicus who lived in southern Nepal more than a million years ago.

Until recently, in geologic terms, the Kathmandu Valley was a large lake in the middle foothills of the Himalaya. Polished stone tools, perhaps 35,000 years old, turn up occasionally high on the Valley's hills, near the ancient shoreline. When the natural dam at the lake's southern outflow was breached and the water drained off, whether by geologic event or, as you will read, by a divine sword, the fertile flatlands of the Kathmandu Valley were ready for settlement.

It apparently took humans some time to arrive. There is no evidence, physical or legendary, of people settling permanently here before 1000 BCE. The first arrivals probably came from the west, one of the waves of peoples we now call Aryans. At the same time or very soon after that, a Tibeto-Burman people arrived from the east. Over the centuries many more came, from all directions. Today there are close to 100 caste and ethnic groups in Nepal.

The arrivals found a beautiful valley with fertile soil, good water, and a climate allowing year-round agriculture. With peoples' material needs easily met, the stage was set for a cultural flowering. Tantalising hints in legends and scripture suggest that that flowering occurred shortly after their arrival, but our vision of it gets dimmer the farther back in time we look. The oldest known objects in the valley date to a few hundred years BCE. The earliest known inscription is dated 185 CE. The oldest firmly dated building in the earthquake-prone valley is about 1,000 years old.

Our vision of the past sharpens from the 5th century CE, when written records become plentiful. Those records indicate that architecture and arts, governance, legal codes, taxes and public services had reached sophisticated heights. Records of that era describe scenes that would be familiar to a modern visitor: a Chinese ambassador wrote in 607 CE about temples and palace buildings made of brick and carved wood, with many storeys and many roofs. When ancient records speak of gods and festivals, they are referring to deities and traditions that are far older: Many of the traditions continue to this day. A 7th century king's inscription on his palace's foundation says he was building on the site of 'the ancient palace'.

Much of the story of Kathmandu lies buried under the ground. There has been very little archaeological excavation in the Valley, but construction sites commonly yield spectacular finds. In 1992 workers digging a house foundation discovered a statue with the earliest date found inscribed so far in Nepal. The population of the Kathmandu Valley grew more than five-fold from 1978 to 2001, and much archaeological

opportunity now lies under new homes. Other likely sites are on sacred ground or are commercially too valuable to excavate.

Even half the story of Kathmandu is rich enough to require many lifetimes to tell. These walks are just a dip of the toe into a great river, ever changing and timeless. Namaste, and happy walking.

## Walk 1

### Kathmandu Durbar Square

This walk takes the reader to the temples and monuments in and around Kathmandu's old royal palace, home to the kings of the city and then of Nepal until 1896. The word *darbar* means 'palace' and comes to Nepali from Persian, the court language of the Mughals during their five-century-long rule of India. This old palace sits astride an ancient trade artery that lay at the focal point of small settlements which merged over time to form the mediaeval city of Kathmandu.

During this walk you will visit a building that is at least a thousand years old and from which Kathmandu derives its name. Most of the other structures noted date from the 15th to 18th centuries and were built at the sites of palaces and temples old enough to be described in 7th and 14th century inscriptions. The oldest sculptures in the square are more than 1,500 years old.

This is a short walk in terms of distance, but it is one crowded full of fascinating things to see. Allow one hour at the very least.

### Places of Interest

Basantapur - A conqueror's offering and curio vendors

Kasthamandap - The inspiration for the city's name, an open-air building made from a divine tree

Windows on the Square - A curious god and an unhappy queen

Hanuman at the Gate - Ram's faithful monkey companion stands guard at a golden door

Kumari Ghar - The house of Kathmandu's child goddess

### To begin

*Take a taxi or car to the end of New Road and stop by the statue in the traffic roundabout. The figure is of Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher Rana, who pressed this wide commercial street through a city ruined by the massive earthquake of 1934. Pay your entry fee, currently Rs 200, at the booth just inside the traffic barrier at the end of New Road. Walk about 50 metres along the stone-paved plaza until you reach a pair of large stone lions.*

### Basantapur Square

You will meet guardian lions like these throughout the walks, at the entrances to courtyards, squares and temples. These particular lions were placed here in 1998. Though this is now the busiest entrance to the palace area, it has only been so since New Road was built in 1934.

Stretching out ahead of you to the right is the old palace, built over the course of five hundred years. The first two storeys of the brick and wood building closest to you may date to the 16th century; the low, white-plastered building farther ahead is from the 17th century; the ornate towers above you were built in the 18th century; and the massively columned white building far ahead only in 1908.

Basantapur Square, the open area ahead and to your left, is one of the three loosely connected squares that make up the Kathmandu Durbar Square area. It is named after the tallest of the four towers standing above the brick and wood building to your right. The lower building and the towers are beautiful examples of Newar architecture. This style dominated the architecture of the Valley throughout the mediaeval period and is consistent with two millennia of tradition.

Plain exposed red brick and elaborately carved wood are the hallmarks of the Newar style. Seventh-century Chinese accounts of Kathmandu describe multi-roofed buildings of brick with beautifully carved woodwork. Not much ancient architecture remains in this earthquake-prone city, but written records that

survived the buildings that stood here over a millennium ago indicate that those structures must have borne a strong resemblance to the ones we see here today.

*Look at the fine woodwork up close, then step back into the square far enough to see the whole building and the towers closest to you.*

### **Prithvi Narayan Shah and the four towers**

Kathmandu Valley and considerable tracts of the surrounding territory were ruled by the Lichchhavi dynasty for most of the first millennium CE. The Lichchhavi centuries were followed after 1200 CE by the period of Malla rule. The Mallas were a contentious lot, and in 1484 CE, central rule gave way to three separate and warring kingdoms – Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur.

For the next three centuries the Malla kings fought amongst themselves. Fortunately for us, their pride and competitiveness drove them not only to war but also to great heights of artistic patronage with each king trying to outdo the others in terms of the splendours his kingdom could produce. Unfortunately for the Mallas, the squabbling diverted their attention from the rise of once-tributary kingdoms outside the Valley. By the 18th century, one of those states, Gorkha, 75 kilometres west of Kathmandu, had come knocking in a less-than-friendly way.

Prithvi Narayan Shah, king of Gorkha, desperately wanted to add Kathmandu to his growing kingdom. It has been said that he wanted it not only for the rich prize it was in itself but also in order to establish peace and stability between the warring territories and to unite the kingdoms of the central Himalayan region in the face of British ascendancy in India. His task took decades of blockades, raids and bloody battles for surrounding hill towns. He mixed military actions with diplomacy aimed at fuelling the inter-kingdom rivalries to which the Mallas were already well disposed. In 1768 Prithvi Narayan's army entered Kathmandu, and in less than a year Patan and Bhaktapur, too, had fallen. The three Malla kings were variously killed, exiled and imprisoned. Nepal's present monarch, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, is Prithvi Narayan's direct descendant.

The tall brick and wood structure near you – to your right as you enter Basantapur Square – was built by Prithvi Narayan after his conquest of the Nepal Valley, as the Valley was then known. The four towers that rise from it are sometimes associated with the Valley's three cities along with the town of Kirtipur, which lies south of Kathmandu and Patan on the northern slope of the Champadevi hill. After the brutality of his conquest, Prithvi Narayan Shah was keen to legitimise his position as the ruler of his newly created kingdom. Legend has it that, in the spirit of consolidation and conciliation, he called the greatest artisans of the valley together and that, after rebuilding and adding two storeys to an older structure, the craftsmen of each town separately designed and executed these four unique towers.

Some writers describe these towers as 'pleasure palaces', but contemporary accounts suggest that they were used as watchtowers for fire. One lovely but apocryphal story tells of how at mealtimes the king would send attendants to the towers to look for houses from which no smoke from a cooking fire could be seen. The residents of such a house were presumed to be either too ill or too poor to make food, and help was dispatched.

The two towers visible from here are the Basantapur tower, associated with Kathmandu, and the tower often associated with Lalitpur, or Patan. The Basantapur tower, the tallest of the four, stands at the southwest corner of the building and rises to the left. The Lalitpur tower is square and sports a single, tiled roof.

The other two towers are visible from inside the palace's Nasal Chowk, or dance square, where we will take you in a minute. The tower associated with Bhaktapur lies to the rear and to the right with relation to where you now stand. It is octagonal in shape and truly unique in the valley. The tower associated with Kirtipur, to the rear and to the left, is square in shape and sports an umbrella-like gilt copper roof clearly inspired by Mughal architecture.

If there is any truth to the story of the towers' creation, the inclusion of Kirtipur – a minor town compared to the three cities – is noteworthy given the nature of its capture. The town of Kirtipur lies at the northern base of the hill of Champadevi, southwest of Patan and Kathmandu. In the 18th century it was fortified, and

possession of it was essential to the capture of the main cities. Prithvi Narayan tried to take Kirtipur in 1757 and 1764, both times unsuccessfully. He finally captured the town in 1767, and in brutal revenge for the town's stubborn resistance, he ordered that the noses and lips of all the defenders be cut off. Only those who could play the flute were spared. The horrifying appearance of the mutilated survivors as they fled to the rest of the valley must have weakened the city dwellers' will to resist. Kathmandu fell 18 months later.

The curio sellers who usually fill Basantapur Square have many interesting but rarely old or valuable items on offer. Remember that if you choose to buy something, it is a good idea to bargain. Since this walk returns here at its end, you may wish to defer shopping until then.

*Walk the full length of the palace buildings and Basantapur Square and then stop under the large, white neoclassical building with heavy columns and two balconies, one facing you and the other around the corner.*

### **The Gaddi Baithak**

This large edifice is built in a noticeably European style. Most buildings of this style you will see in Nepal date to a particular period in the country's history. In 1846, a general named Jung Bahadur Kunwar seized control of the government and literally imprisoned the king in the royal palace. (We will come to this story in Walk 3.) He took the title and family name Rana, and his family ruled the country as hereditary prime ministers for more than a century. It was the Ranas who built most of the valley's neoclassical structures. The style was first inspired by Jung Bahadur's trip to London and Paris in 1850.

The portion of the old palace you are standing under is the Gaddi Baithak built in 1908 by Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana to serve as his living quarters and as a reception hall for foreign visitors. The word *gaddi* means 'throne' and *baithak* translates as 'meeting room'. Today, the building is used only for special royal ceremonies, when army officers and ministers line the balconies as the king and queen greet the public. The building is overwhelmingly neoclassical European in appearance, but the details reveal the handiwork of the Nepali artistic tradition.

*Continue walking in the same direction. You will find a beautiful wood and brick building with painted lion guardians to your left, an open square to your right, and a red temple on a high pyramid base directly in front of you. Walk twenty paces to the left of the temple down a short, narrow lane separating a row of small shops from the temple.*

### **Kasthamandap**

*As the short lane opens up, walk a few more paces into the open area.* Directly ahead is a large, three-storeyed wooden building with an open-air ground level. The building is partially whitewashed, and sometimes red cloth streamers are hung under the roof's eaves. This is Kasthamandap, the wooden pavilion.

Kasthamandap's age is uncertain, but there is a plaque inside that dates to 1048, and this alone is enough to make the building one of the oldest known structures in Nepal. It is almost certain that Kathmandu was named for Kasthamandap, given that the pavilion was located between the two ancient hamlets that merged to form the old city. Perhaps this structure or one much like it stood here that long ago. We know the current building was here in 1048, but we don't know how old it was then.

Where historians must be cautious, mythology offers a ready account for the origins of this pavilion. Once upon a time, it is said, the god of wood came to Kathmandu in the form of a handsome young man in order to watch one of the city's colourful festivals. He was recognised by a tantric priest, who bound him to the spot by means of a spell. (For more about tantric practices and rituals, see Walk 4.) A negotiation ensued between the trapped god and the priest. 'Ask for a boon', said the god, 'and I will grant it in return for my release'.

The priest asked for wood to build a temple, and his wish was granted with one condition – that the temple would not be consecrated until the prices of rice and salt became equal. The deal was struck, the god vanished, and the next morning at the spot on which the god had been bound there stood a gigantic celestial tree. The tree was so large that both the Kasthamandap and the Silyan Sattal – the building to the far left with the gilded lions at its corners – were said to have been constructed from its wood. The name Silyan

Sattal translates from Newar as 'excess wood rest house'. The more recent Nepali-language name for it, Singha Sattal, is only a corruption of the old one and must have been inspired by the gilded lions that Jung Bahadur Rana installed here. *Singha* is Nepali for 'lion'.

Enter Kasthamandap and look at the four corner porches and the massive central wooden posts, which might, in fact, be the originals. The prices of rice and salt have never become equal and so Kasthamandap was never consecrated as intended. It served instead as a rest house and, in 1379, was converted into a shrine for the saint Gorakhnath (the orange coloured figure in the center of the building) and lodgings for his devotees. Squatters lived here until 1966, when they were evicted so that the building could be restored. It is fitting that this historic and elegant building, positioned perfectly on the old trade artery through Kathmandu and fittingly donated by the god of wood, has been returned to public use.

*Before you leave the building the same way you entered, pause at the top of the steps to look around at the vegetable sellers, the vendors of flower garlands and leaf plates for offerings and festivals, and the constant bustle of people.* In the fenced pit in front of you is a boulder, a remnant of animist traditions that held that a local spirit or protector inhabited the rock. It is still sacred, although most worshipers now identify it as Ganesh, the elephant-headed god whom we will soon meet.

*Still standing at the top of the steps of Kasthamandap, look ahead and to the right to a long building with a wooden lattice that covers most of the ground floor façade.* This is Kabindrapur Sattal, a dance hall built by King Pratap Malla in 1673. Pratap Malla was one of the greatest figures in Kathmandu's history, an intellectual and a patron of the arts, especially of dance. He considered himself the greatest dancer that ever lived, and he inaugurated this pavilion by dancing in it himself. It is another matter that his arrogance and dancing also got him into trouble, as we shall soon see.