

Earthbound Expeditions

Kathmandu Valley Cultural Tour

5 days, from US$447 per person

Duration
5 days

Grade
Easy

Max altitude
2,175 m

Start and end
Kathmandu

On foot
3 to 4 hours a day

Best season
Oct to Apr

Accommodation
Hotels

Meals
Breakfast daily

Group size
Private, from 1

Getting around
Private vehicle

Kathmandu Valley Cultural Tour Overview

A guided tour of the three medieval cities of the Kathmandu Valley at a relaxed pace and in a planned order, with a guide who explains the carvings and a night on the valley rim at Nagarkot.

Tour overview

Four guided days in the Kathmandu Valley, which contains seven UNESCO monument zones within an area about twenty miles across. Three of them are the royal squares of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. These were rival kingdoms until 1769 and spent three centuries competing to build the finest monuments. That rivalry explains much of what you see in the valley today.

The order of the visits

Many itineraries cover all three squares in two days, which makes them hard to tell apart. We visit Swayambhunath and Pashupatinath first, so that you understand the Hindu and Buddhist background. We then visit one square each day and finish with a night on the valley rim, where you can see the whole valley. By day 4 you will be able to understand the buildings, not only photograph them.

Your guide

The guide is central to this trip. A carved roof strut in Patan can look like simple joinery, but it may also record a three-hundred-year-old dispute about kingship, and a guide can explain this. We work with licensed cultural guides who have many years of experience in the valley, and we pay them fairly so that they stay with us.

Who this trip is for

Anyone who wants to see Nepal without trekking: first-time visitors, families, people with a few days at the start or end of a longer trip, and trekkers returning from the Everest region who want to see the cultural side of the country. It runs for one traveller or more.

Key highlights of the Kathmandu Valley Cultural Tour

- All seven of the valley's UNESCO monument zones, with a guide who explains their history
- Bhaktapur in the late afternoon, after the day visitors have left
- Patan's metalworkers and woodcarvers working in their own courtyards, not in a showroom
- Sunrise from the Nagarkot ridge, with views from Ganesh Himal to Everest on a clear morning
- The walk down from Nagarkot to Changu Narayan, the oldest temple in the valley

Itinerary

Day	Route	Hours	Distance	Altitude
1	Arrive Kathmandu	-	-	1,400 m
2	Swayambhunath, Durbar Square, Pashupatinath	3 to 4	-	1,400 m
3	Patan, then Bhaktapur	4	-	1,400 m
4	Bhaktapur at dawn, then Nagarkot	3	-	2,175 m
5	Nagarkot to Changu Narayan, and out	2 to 3	8 km	1,540 m

Day 1

Arrive in Kathmandu

We meet you at the airport and take you to your hotel. The afternoon is free for you to rest after your flight. In the evening we take you on a one-hour walk around Thamel so that you can find your way back to the hotel on your own, and we go through the plan for the tour over dinner.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, arrival day Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Dinner

Day 2

Swayambhunath, Kathmandu Durbar Square and Pashupatinath

You climb the east stairway to Swayambhunath early in the morning, while pilgrims are walking around the stupa and mist still lies over the valley. In the late morning you visit Kathmandu Durbar Square, where the guide explains what the 2015 earthquake damaged and what has since been rebuilt. In the afternoon you visit Pashupatinath, where cremations take place in public on the ghats. We explain what to expect before you arrive.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: 3 to 4 hours on foot Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast

Day 3

Patan and its workshops, then drive to Bhaktapur

You spend the morning in Patan Durbar Square, the finest and least crowded of the three squares. You then walk through the back lanes, where lost-wax metal casters and woodcarvers still work in family courtyards. After lunch we drive east to Bhaktapur and check in to your accommodation inside the old city. The square outside empties of visitors at five in the evening.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: 4 hours on foot Night: Guesthouse inside the old city, Bhaktapur Meals: Breakfast

Day 4

Bhaktapur in the early morning and drive to Nagarkot

You set out at six, when the square is still empty. This is the main reason for staying overnight in Bhaktapur. You visit Taumadhi Square, the Nyatapola temple, the pottery square and the Golden Gate, then the vegetable market as it opens. After lunch we drive for an hour up to the Nagarkot ridge at 2,175 m, where you spend the evening watching the sunset over the mountains.

Altitude: 2,175 m On foot: 3 hours on foot Night: Hotel, Nagarkot Meals: Breakfast

Day 5

Nagarkot sunrise, walk to Changu Narayan and return to Kathmandu

You rise before six for the sunrise. On a clear winter morning the view extends from Ganesh Himal to the summit of Everest. After breakfast you walk down the ridge for two and a half hours to Changu Narayan, a fifth-century temple on a spur that most visitors do not reach. From there we drive you back to the airport or your hotel.

Altitude: 1,540 m On foot: 2 to 3 hours downhill Night: No overnight Meals: Breakfast

What's included

- Airport transfers and all transport in a private vehicle with a driver
- Four nights of accommodation: two in Kathmandu, one inside old Bhaktapur and one at Nagarkot
- A licensed cultural guide for the whole of days 2, 3, 4 and 5
- Breakfast every morning, and dinner on the first evening
- All monument entry fees for the seven sites, which total about $55
- The walk from Nagarkot to Changu Narayan, with the guide, and a vehicle waiting at the end
- A map of the valley and a short written guide to the sites

Not included

- International flights and the Nepal visa
- Lunch and dinner from day 2 onwards, which are inexpensive in Kathmandu and allow you to choose your own restaurants
- Drinks, tips and personal expenses
- Travel insurance
- Optional extras: the Everest scenic flight, a cooking class, a rickshaw evening

Permits and other costs

Permit	Fee	Issued by
Nepal tourist visa. Paid in cash at the bank counter, in clean notes. Indian nationals do not need a visa. Fifteen days is sufficient for this trip unless you are adding a trek.	$30 for 15 days	On arrival at Kathmandu airport
Monument entry fees, seven sites. Kathmandu Durbar Square NPR 1,000, Patan NPR 1,500, Bhaktapur NPR 1,800, Pashupatinath NPR 1,000, Boudhanath NPR 400, Swayambhunath NPR 200, Changu Narayan NPR 350. Children under ten enter free. All fees are included in your price.	About $55 in total	At each gate
Licensed guide. A cultural guide is not a legal requirement in the valley, unlike a trekking guide on the trails, but the sites are difficult to understand without one.	Inside the tour price	Nepal Tourism Board

Other cost	Amount	Note
Nepal visa on arrival, 15 days	$30	Cash at the airport bank counter
Kathmandu hotel	$35–70 a night	Three-star, two nights. Included in your price
Guesthouse inside old Bhaktapur	$30–60 a night	One night. The itinerary is planned around this stay

Nagarkot hotel	$25–65 a night	Wide price range. The more expensive rooms face north towards the mountains
Monument entry fees	$55	All seven sites, paid at each gate. Included in your price
Licensed cultural guide	$30–40 a day	For four days. The sites are difficult to understand without one
Private vehicle and driver	$60–90 a day	Including the Bhaktapur and Nagarkot legs
Lunch and dinner	$12–25 a day	Paid by you, and inexpensive. Kathmandu has many good restaurants
Travel insurance	$40–80	Standard travel cover. Trekking cover is not needed
Tips, guide and driver	$40–70	Per traveller, paid at the end of the tour

Packing list

Headwear

- A sun hat. The valley is at 1,400 m and the sun is stronger than the temperature suggests
- Sunglasses
- A warm hat for the evening at Nagarkot from November to February

Clothing

- Clothes that cover your shoulders and knees, which are expected at every temple and appreciated elsewhere
- One warm layer for Nagarkot, which is seven degrees colder than Kathmandu
- A light waterproof jacket in any month, as the valley has afternoon storms outside winter
- Smarter clothes for the final dinner, if you wish

Footwear

- Shoes with good grip that you can take off quickly, as you remove them at every temple
- Clean socks for standing on temple floors
- Shoes that are already worn in, as four days on cobbles can cause blisters

Health

- A dust mask or buff for the Kathmandu traffic, which is the most common complaint from visitors
- Hand sanitiser, and your usual remedy for an upset stomach
- Sunscreen, factor 30 or above
- Your prescription medicines in their original packaging

Bags

- A daypack, which is the only bag you carry
- A refillable water bottle, to avoid buying plastic bottles
- Your camera, and a spare battery for the Nagarkot sunrise

Documents

- Passport valid for at least six months, and two passport photographs for the visa
- US dollars in clean notes for the visa counter
- Travel insurance details, on paper as well as on your phone

Getting there and back

The flights and long drives on this itinerary, and what happens if one is delayed or cancelled.

Getting to Kathmandu

Most travellers arrive at Tribhuvan International Airport. Connecting flights run through Delhi, Doha, Dubai, Istanbul, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. There are no direct flights from Europe or North America.

Visa on arrival

Complete the form at the kiosk before joining the queue, pay $30 in cash for a 15-day visa at the bank counter, then go through immigration. Bring clean US dollar notes. Indian nationals do not need a visa. The process takes about forty minutes when the airport is quiet and up to two hours when several large aircraft land at the same time.

Late arrivals and early departures

There are no activities on day 1 apart from your arrival, so a late flight is not a problem. On day 5 we can take you directly to the airport from Changu Narayan, arriving at about one in the afternoon. If your flight leaves in the evening, we recommend booking a day room.

Adding a mountain flight

The Everest scenic flight leaves at first light from the domestic terminal and returns by eight, so it can be added before either of the two full days. It depends on the weather and is refunded in full if it does not operate.

Accommodation

You spend two nights in Kathmandu, one inside old Bhaktapur and one on the Nagarkot ridge at 2,175 m. The night in Bhaktapur is central to the design of the tour.

Where	Nights	Type	Room	Bathroom
Kathmandu	2	Three-star hotel in or near Thamel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Bhaktapur	1	Guesthouse inside the old city walls	Twin or double, some with a square view	Private, hot water
Nagarkot	1	North-facing hotel on the ridge	Twin or double with a mountain view	Private, hot water

Hot shower
Available every night in your own bathroom. Some hot water at Nagarkot is solar heated, so shower in the evening rather than early in the morning.

Wifi
Available in all three hotels and generally reliable. The connection at Nagarkot is the weakest.

Charging
Mains power is available everywhere, with Indian and European round-pin sockets. Bring an adaptor.

Heating
The Nagarkot hotel has heaters in winter. Most hotels in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur do not, and indoor temperatures on January nights are colder than many visitors expect.

Drinking water
Filtered water is available at all three hotels. Do not drink tap water, and bring a refillable bottle to avoid buying plastic bottles.

Luggage
There is no luggage limit. The vehicle carries your bags, and you only carry your daypack.

Laundry
Same-day service in Kathmandu, charged by the kilo and inexpensive.

Cash
There are many cash machines in Kathmandu and Patan, one in Bhaktapur and none at Nagarkot. Cards are accepted in hotels but rarely elsewhere.

Meals

Meal	Time	What it is like
Breakfast	7:00–9:00	Hotel buffet in Kathmandu, and eggs, toast and fruit at Bhaktapur and Nagarkot
Lunch	12:30–14:00	Near wherever you are visiting that day. The guide can recommend good places for dal bhat
Dinner	19:00	With us on the first night, then at a restaurant of your choice. Kathmandu has an excellent choice of restaurants, so we recommend eating out rather than at the hotel
Tea	16:00	Milk tea and a samosa, usually from a street stall

Diet	How we manage it
Vegetarian	Very easy. Much Nepali food is vegetarian, and Newari cuisine offers a wide range of dishes.

Vegan	Straightforward in Kathmandu and Patan, with fewer options at Nagarkot. Tell the guide on day 1 and they will choose restaurants accordingly.
Gluten free	Manageable. Rice, dal, curry and grilled meat are safe. State your requirement clearly, as soy sauce and wheat flour are used in unexpected dishes.
Nut allergy	Tell us when you book. Kathmandu kitchens use peanuts and cashews widely, so each restaurant needs to be told. The guide will do this for you.
Halal	Available in Kathmandu. Tell us when you book and we will choose lunch venues accordingly.

A typical day

Days start early, include a long lunch and finish before dark. The pace is relaxed throughout.

Time	What happens
7:30	Breakfast at the hotel, at a relaxed time on every day except the last two
8:30	Drive to the first site before the tour coaches arrive
12:30	A long, sit-down lunch, usually in a courtyard
14:00	Afternoon site visit, at a slower pace
17:00	Return to the hotel, or in Bhaktapur, time in the square as it quietens
19:00	Dinner, at a place of your choice from day 2

Difficulty and preparation

Difficulty 1 of 5

This is one of the two easiest trips we offer. You spend three to four hours on foot each day, all at 1,400 m or slightly higher, and the vehicle is never more than ten minutes away. The main source of fatigue is walking on cobbles and climbing temple steps.

- Three to four hours a day on foot, on uneven stone surfaces rather than paths
- Several hundred steps at Swayambhunath, taken at your own pace
- One optional downhill walk of two and a half hours on the last morning
- No significant altitude. Nagarkot, at 2,175 m, is the highest overnight stop
- A vehicle and driver with you all day, every day

Getting ready

Before you book: Understand the trip

This is a walking tour of medieval cities, not a trek. Each day includes three to four hours on foot and a long sit-down lunch. If you want more height and distance, consider the Chisapani ridge walk instead, or add it at the end.

A month before: Prepare your feet

Cobbles are the main challenge. Four days on uneven stone in unfamiliar shoes can cause problems. Wear the shoes you plan to bring as often as possible before you travel.

A week before: Background reading
Read something about the Malla kings and why three rival cities stand six miles apart. Half an hour of reading will help you understand the squares, and it will help the guide too.

Weather by month

The tour runs in every month. This section shows which months usually give Himalayan views from Nagarkot and which do not.

Month	Day in Kathmandu	Night in Kathmandu	Day at Nagarkot	Conditions	Note
January	18°C	2°C	9°C	Best	Cold mornings, bright days and the clearest mountain views of the year from Nagarkot. Bring a warm layer for indoors.
February	20°C	4°C	11°C	Best	Similar clear weather with slightly milder mornings. Losar falls this month or the next, and Boudhanath is worth visiting during the festival.
March	25°C	8°C	16°C	Best	Warm, with rhododendrons in flower on the Nagarkot ridge and the festival season under way. Haze begins to build late in the month.
April	28°C	12°C	19°C	Good	Hot in the middle of the day and hazy, so mountain views from Nagarkot are uncertain. Bisket Jatra in Bhaktapur is the largest festival in the valley.
May	30°C	16°C	21°C	Good	Hot and dusty, with pre-monsoon storms in the late afternoon that briefly clear the air.
June	30°C	19°C	22°C	Hard	The monsoon arrives. The valley is green, humid and quiet, and the mountains are hidden by cloud until autumn.
July	29°C	20°C	22°C	Hard	The wettest month. Rain usually falls heavily for an hour or two rather than all day, and the squares are attractive in the rain.
August	29°C	20°C	22°C	Hard	Wet and quiet, with lower prices. Indra Jatra, the main Kathmandu festival, falls in August or September.
September	28°C	18°C	21°C	Good	The monsoon clears during the month, and the last week often has the clearest air of the year.

October	26°C	13°C	18°C	Best	The best month overall, with clear air, warm days, the Dashain and Tihar festivals, and mountain views from Nagarkot on most mornings.
November	23°C	7°C	14°C	Best	Clear, cool and calm. This is one of the best and busiest months for this tour, so book the Bhaktapur guesthouse early.
December	19°C	3°C	10°C	Best	Cold and very clear. Morning fog on the valley floor usually lifts by ten, and Everest is visible from the ridge.

Averages for the valley floor at 1,400 m, with the Nagarkot ridge figure alongside because the difference decides what you pack.

Guides and porters

Your guide and driver

You have one licensed cultural guide for the four touring days and one driver with a private vehicle throughout. On the day 5 walk the guide walks with you and the driver meets you at Changu Narayan. For groups of eight or more we add a second guide, as one guide cannot be heard easily in a crowded square.

The guide's role

The guide explains the buildings, handles tickets at the gates, sets a comfortable pace and recommends places for lunch. They do not take you to shops that pay commission, because we do not work with those shops. If you would like to buy a thangka or a singing bowl, tell the guide and they will take you to a workshop where you can see it being made.

Tipping

Tipping is not required but is appreciated. Most travellers give forty to seventy dollars each, shared between the guide and the driver at the end of the tour. Nobody will ask you for a tip.

Responsible travel

Entry fees

The Bhaktapur fee of NPR 1,800 may seem high, but it funds the restoration of the buildings you have come to see. Pay it at the gate and keep your ticket. The fees help the valley protect its heritage.

Buying from workshops

In Patan, families still cast bronze using the lost-wax method in their own courtyards and carve windows by hand. The shops on the main tourist streets mostly sell imported goods. The guide will take you to the workshops, where the money goes directly to the maker and prices are usually lower.

Photography at Pashupatinath

Please be respectful when photographing cremations. The accepted practice is to take wide shots from across the river without showing faces, and the guide will explain what is appropriate. At the monasteries, ask before photographing a monk. Most people are happy to be asked.

Drinking water

Kathmandu has a serious problem with plastic bottle waste and with its water supply. Every hotel on this trip provides filtered water for refilling. If you bring your own bottle, you will avoid about twenty plastic bottles during the week.

Booking and payment

How to book

Email us or send a WhatsApp message with your arrival date and the number of travellers. We confirm within one day, and usually on the same day.

Deposit

A deposit of twenty per cent secures the hotels. The balance is paid on arrival in Kathmandu or by bank transfer one week before. In October and November the Bhaktapur guesthouse needs to be confirmed earlier than the other hotels.

Cancellation

If you cancel more than twenty-one days before the start date, the deposit can be transferred to another date within one year. Within twenty-one days the hotels have already been paid and we retain the deposit. As this is a short trip, the amount at risk is small.

Changes during the trip

Changes are easy to make. If you would like a second day in Bhaktapur, the guide can rearrange the plan over breakfast. This is a private trip, and the itinerary can be adjusted to suit you.

Adding a trek

Tell us when you book rather than later. Permits, guides and domestic flights need a few days of notice, and a single combined itinerary costs less than two booked separately.

Optional extras

Everest scenic flight

$220, 1 morning

A one-hour flight along the Himalaya with a guaranteed window seat, returning to Kathmandu before breakfast. It can be added to day 2 or day 5 without changing the rest of the itinerary. It operates only at first light, and if it is cancelled you receive a full refund.

Newari cooking class

$45, half a day

Held in a family kitchen in Patan rather than a hotel demonstration room. You shop at the market first, cook six dishes and eat them with the family. We consider it the best value option on this list.

Boudhanath at dusk, with a monastery visit

$55, one evening

You join the kora (circuit) around the stupa at lamp-lighting time, when several thousand people walk around it together, and attend evening prayers at one of the Tibetan monasteries nearby. Added to the evening of day 2.

Two extra days: Panauti and Namobuddha

$240, 2 extra days

An extension east of the valley. It includes Panauti, a rarely visited Newari town, a hilltop stupa at Namobuddha with a very good monastery guesthouse, and a walk between the two. This is the extension we recommend most often.

Chisapani to Nagarkot ridge walk

$349, adds 3 days

Our five-day ridge trek, combined with the end of this tour rather than booked separately. It includes Shivapuri forest, two nights in lodges and views of the Himalaya on your left throughout.

Airport day room on departure

$35, same day

A hotel room kept until the evening if your flight home is late. Recommended after four days of sightseeing on foot.

Frequently asked questions

Answers to the 12 questions travellers ask us most often. If your question is not here, contact us and we will answer it.

How fit do I need to be?

You need to be able to walk for three to four hours a day on flat ground and cobbles, and climb a few hundred temple steps. The only sustained walk is two and a half hours downhill on day 5. If you prefer not to walk it, the vehicle takes you round by road instead.

Are four days enough for the Kathmandu Valley?

Four days are enough for the seven monument zones if the time is well planned. They do not leave time for the less visited parts of the valley, such as the bahals (courtyards) behind Patan, the Newari festivals and the hill temples. If you would like to include these, you can add two days and we will arrange them.

Why stay overnight in Bhaktapur rather than visit on a day trip?

Bhaktapur charges an entry fee at the gate, and most visitors who pay it leave by five in the evening. From five in the evening until nine the next morning, the old city is used mainly by the people who live there, and it feels very different. We consider this the most important part of the itinerary.

Will I see the mountains from Nagarkot?

From October to March you usually will, and in December and January it is very likely. During the monsoon it is rare. If the morning is cloudy, we still walk down to Changu Narayan, which is worth visiting in its own right.

What should I expect at Pashupatinath?

Cremations take place in the open on the ghats, and you will see one. Once the guide has explained the customs, most visitors find the experience dignified rather than distressing. Non-Hindus cannot enter the main temple courtyard, and photographing the pyres is not permitted. If you prefer not to visit, we can spend the afternoon at Boudhanath instead.

What is still damaged from the 2015 earthquake?

Less than most people expect. Most of Kathmandu Durbar Square has been rebuilt, Patan is largely restored and Bhaktapur was less damaged than either. Some buildings are still supported by props and a few temples were lost. The guide will point out where the restoration work has been done.

How much are the entry fees?

The fees come to about $55 per person for the seven sites and are included in your price. Kathmandu Durbar Square is NPR 1,000, Patan NPR 1,500, Bhaktapur NPR 1,800, Pashupatinath NPR 1,000, Boudhanath NPR 400, Swayambhunath NPR 200 and Changu Narayan NPR 350. We pay them at each gate on your behalf.

Can I do this as a private trip?

Yes. The trip is private by default. There is no group departure, the vehicle is for your use only and the guide works at your pace. Most bookings are for two people, and we have run it for one traveller and for groups of up to eleven.

Can I add a trek at the end?

Yes, and many travellers do. The Chisapani to Nagarkot ridge walk starts an hour from your Kathmandu hotel. Alternatively, you can fly to Pokhara and walk the Ghorepani circuit. Tell us when you book and we will combine both into a single itinerary.

What is the best month?

October and November offer clear air and warm weather. December to February gives the clearest mountain views and cold mornings. March brings rhododendrons and festivals. April is hazy. The monsoon is green, quiet, cloudy and lower in price, and it is a good time to visit if your main interest is the architecture rather than the mountains.

Is it suitable for children?

Yes. Children usually enjoy the pottery square in Bhaktapur and the monkeys at Swayambhunath. Children under ten enter every monument free of charge. Tell us their ages and the guide will adapt the day for them.

What should I wear?

Cover your shoulders and knees at the temples, wear shoes you can take off easily, and bring a warm layer for the evening at Nagarkot, which is seven or eight degrees colder than the valley floor. Leather belts and bags are not allowed in the inner precinct of Pashupatinath.

Photos, videos and reviews of this trip:
earthbound.rajansimkhada.com/kathmandu-valley-tour-with-himalayan-view-at-nagarkot