

Katmandu Valley Temples I

Thamel

Katmandu Durbar Square



Katmandu has become prominent in the world and national media because of the catastrophe it's enduring; the city has been prominent in my life since I first visited in 1968 as an adult hippie.

Since then I've been to Nepal three more times, in 1998, 2004, and 2013. Each time I stayed in a hotel in the Thamel area of Katmandu - the area spread through with statues, temples, and other cultural and religious icons.

From there I would walk - each day I stayed in Katmandu - through the many narrow streets often but not always in the direction of the old royal city area, Durbar Square, visiting shops, courtyards, temples, and chatty residents along the way.

I carry my camera with me wherever I go - in a harness this last time, for easier access - and no one seems to mind when I point it at them (actually, I don't know if they mind, but their activity, whatever it may be, doesn't seem to be altered by my presence).



After the April 2015 earthquake I delved into my archives and extracted photographs of many of my favorite temples while I watched them on news sites damaged or destroyed.

I'm neither a native nor a scholar, which means the relevance - cultural, historical, religious - of the temples will be foreign to me, despite what I've read about them, and despite my experience of them close up.

Nevertheless, I'm entranced by the Katmandu architecture, alignment, and ambiance; hopefully that will show in the photos. I've associated names with some of the temples but I don't claim to be always correct. Many I'm not able to identify.

This review is meant to be idiosyncratic. It introduces a single area of interest within the complex cultural and physical structure of Kathmandu. Even the tourist (even I, as tourist) enjoys many more components of Katmanduan life than I've described here. Take this commentary as one snapshot in a fascinating travelogue and, if you wish, find more for yourself.



Starting from whichever three star hotel I'm likely to be staying in, breakfast sometimes included and sometimes not (here's the outdoor dining area of one - breakfast worth the extra \$5 because of the pleasant surroundings, not always the food), it's a 15 or 20 minute walk south to the Durbar Square north edge and its multiple entrances.

No walk to Durbar is that quick, of course. The eyes are constantly drawn to objects that evoke curiosity and fascination, the legs will wander at will, and the camera makes its own demands. In addition, although the walk seems short, the noise and air pollution and the exhaustion that comes from dodging rushing vehicles or other pedestrians, fending off touts offering anything you do or don't want and - especially for the first few days - jet lag and the deficits of age, make a rest stop a frequent requirement.

Let's take a casual stroll to Durbar Square, stopping often along the way for (rest and) photo opportunities.

Not too far from my hotel is a plaza with boys playing soccer, insistent "guides" walking and talking with me, and a temple with bronze doors



Somewhere in Katmandu is a temple in a courtyard, surrounded by apartments and drying saris. The photograph is from 2004 and I looked for it without success in 2013.



Intersections in Katmandu come complete with temples and markets - no corner is without one or many of both.



An intersection is called a chowk, which is more correctly a marketplace, and often the intersection is filled to the point where it actually is more a marketplace than an intersection. The only obstacle these ladies are facing, however, is a tourist with a camera.



The largest intersection in Katmandu is Indra Chowk which is at the crossroads of six streets. It stands on the ancient India-Nepal trade route and boasts the striking Akash Bhairav Temple with its magnificent bronze statues.



Although I've crossed through Indra Chowk many times - one can't help not - it wasn't until I came around the corner one afternoon (middle left, where the man in yellow is standing) and looked up at the frieze of the temple, that I realized how awesome these statues are.



Akash Bhairav is a form of Bhairava, the manifestation of Lord Shiva expressed in his role as destroyer of manifest creation or - what amounts to the same thing - the destroyer of ignorance.

Akash Bhairav means God of the Sky. How appropriate that the bronze creature, as seen from the ground, is surrounded by sky - on this day, happily, blue sky.



It's wise to always carry an umbrella in Katmandu and I've been here in all kinds of weather. Rain changes everything and not at all for the worse. Every photographer has found himself holding an umbrella with one shoulder and a chin while he manipulates the camera with his other two hands. There are multi-limbed Hindu gods who are not so adept.



This is a display of variously shaped and adorned stupas in a Katmandu courtyard in the rain. Stupas are Buddhist symbols and building one is supposed to have considerable karmic benefits both in terms of relative existence and for the chances of enlightenment.

In the same courtyard is a much larger stupa under repair and an elaborately decorated temple. The motif over the front door, of a pair of long necked ruminants on either side of a dharma wheel, is common in Tibetan Buddhist temples.



Perhaps this is the same temple,
seen from a different direction,
with different weather
(in a later decade):



I remember Katmandu in 1968 where the then-unpaved streets were lined with old wood buildings. The entablature of many of the buildings was highly carved and brightly painted. When I returned in 1998 I looked everywhere and found little of what had stood out so evocatively 30 years before.



This old wood building on Ason Tole (street), being used for mundane affairs, is a Krishna Temple. Ason Tole is the oldest and busiest shopping area in Katmandu.



A thanka merchant is displaying his wares. Thangka is a Buddhist painting on cotton or silk typically showing a scene with multiple deities arranged in the shape of a mandala. I remember the young man well although it was many years ago. His shop was on the street I frequently walked down, at a corner where it was difficult to avoid traffic. I would stand on a ledge next to his shop, stop, look all ways, and suddenly he was there again offering me tea and thankas.



As we approach Durbar Square and its ancient royal temples and statues along one of the several main streets, we can see the pagoda tops of some of the larger temples from blocks away. They get closer and closer until we arrive in the Durbar crowd.





If I hadn't been so concerned about being hit by a car I would have spent more time studying the visible features of Newari architecture. As it was, the street wasn't congested and I only had to be wary of the odd vibes I was getting from passersby.



The prominence of the pagoda-style roof is a familiar characteristic of this architecture. There's a beautiful temple just up from the Ganges in Varanasi and you don't need to be told it's the Nepali Temple.



Another characteristic is the detailed and painstaking brickwork. We should also note the wood struts holding up the roof which serve as structural as well as decorative elements.



The struts can be un-carved or modestly carved. Sometimes, however, they serve as an art form all their own and one that is on a par with the great ones. Here is a strut from the temple at Changu Narayan about 20 miles outside of Katmandu.



Durbar Square is so large and has so many micro areas that it's rarely crowded. The entryways are another story, as they are narrowed by parked and moving vehicles, fellow pedestrians, and the tables of local produce, fabrics, kitchen appliances, underwear, and tourist paraphernalia.



You
can enter
many of the temples and
go upstairs.
From their windows
you can see more temples.
The big one is Basantapur Temple
built, according to the royal archives,
in 1770.



The Basantapur Temple is located in the corner of the courtyard known as Nasal Chowk (nasal means *the dancing one* and refers to dancing Shiva).



Basantapur Temple is adjacent to the white Hanuman Dhoka Palace, one of the three palaces of the Katmandu kings. Nasal Chowk, a large rectangle, is either just warming up or just closing down its operations. Typically this square is filled with merchants and their low-lying tourist displays - it's a challenge to walk and look without tripping on a corner.



At this point you're already in Durbar Square although the area popularly identified as such lies through the opening just past the towers to the left. There are ticket sellers at many points along the perimeter of the royal sector of the city. It's now required to purchase a ticket to enter the area although if you're going to be around for multiple days you can, as of my visit in October 2013, get the ticket stamped at the main office (located in the palace) so you don't have to buy a new one each day. The price was about 1000 Nepalese rupees, about \$10.

The temples in the main Durbar Square area were built mostly in the last four centuries but maintenance over the years has been casual and reconstruction is common. The photo of a winged stone Garuda statue at the top of this commentary, surrounded by temples, is taken in the Square.

Katmandu Durbar Square is a prime tourist destination but, more than that, it's a great place to hang out, chat with natives and other travelers, wander around, shop, and take photos.



The large temple in the center is the Trailokya Mohan Narayan Temple with the much smaller domed Bimalleshwor Temple just to its left. If you look closely you can see the Garuda statue right in front of Bimalleshwor with your line of sight going just past the entry to the white stupa.

The domed
Bimalleshwor
Temple



Maju Deval Shiva Temple was built in 1690. It's the iconic traveler temple and its steps are often crowded.



Behind Maju Deval is the early 20th century classical-European-style Gaddi Durbar Palace, the most recent of the three royal palaces in Durbar Square.



Winged Garuda faces the Trailokya Mohan Narayan Temple with the Bimaleshwor Temple immediately to his right and the Maju Deval Shiva Temple to his left.



Other temples in the Square include the late 18th Century Shiva and Parvati Temple (you can see them in the upper window looking out on their devotees).



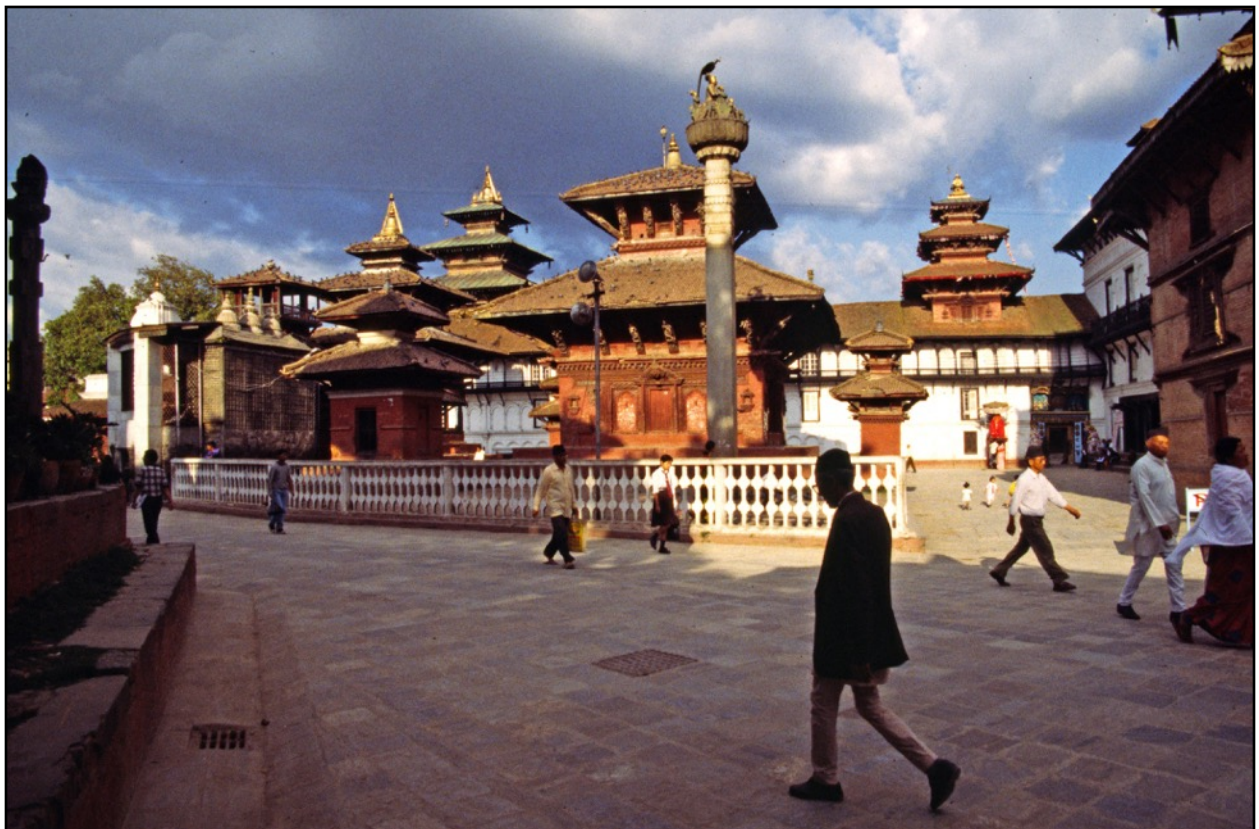
If you're tired and want to have the royal ride back to your hotel (or to your favorite sweet shop or cozy cafe) there's always a line-up of pedicab drivers at your command. The white stupa is in the background.

We haven't spent nearly enough time here but there is tomorrow, hopefully. Since we entered via one of the main entrances let's back out by another.

The cobbled road with man bearing basket is just outside the square (there's the white stupa again).



King Pratapa Malla's column stands in front of the 16th Century Jagannath temple.



A cluster of temples near the entrance, with an intriguing shrine showing Shiva in his virile glory. You can see the back of the shrine in front of the domed temple and immediately to the right of the two red motorbikes.





Just inside the gate where sadhus (or pseudo-sadhus) gather, in their full saffron regalia, waiting for you to point your camera at them - or even your eyes - before rushing over to request a "donation".



Before exiting, if you look up and to the side, you can see, behind the Kakeshwar Temple with its bulbous white tower, the Teleju Temple, the oldest in Durbar Square, thought to have been built around 1500, backed by clouds and the lovely blue sky.



Just outside the gate is a long line of arts and crafts shops, on one side of the street, selling thankas, paper products, wood carvings, statues of gods in stone, wood, or bronze, and anything else you may want to carry home with you or have shipped.



Many of the proprietors also do major import-export business.



On the other side of the street is a grand mansion with some intricately carved wood windows.



As we return to our hotel by a wandering route let's look at a few of the whimsical artifacts that attracted the attention of the camera in my recent visits to Katmandu.

I entered a temple, the name of which I can't recall, circumambulated the shrine in the inner court, then was directed out the back way and cracked my head going through the doorway. I rubbed it and, slightly dazed, walked into the yard and saw another temple and a Buddha statue - as well as a pottery storage depot.



Off the main route but near my hotel is the lovely little Ikha Narayan Temple in Bangemudha Marg, dedicated to Lord Vishnu.



The temple, in a residential neighborhood, is well protected from intruders but still exposed to the camera's eye.



On Ason Tole is the quaint and busy Annapurna Temple, dedicated to Annapurna, the goddess of success and abundance. People buy her trinkets and ring the bell for her auspicious blessing.



A seemingly forlorn Ganesh shrine with a broken roof sits on a muddy corner next to a garbage dump with announcements papered across its lintel and its rat vahana missing, possibly pilfered by smugglers - at least they left the guardian dogs (even if one has its head flattened) and the bell.



It is, however, regardless of its condition, here. In Katmandu, every corner has its sacred space. In between corners, as well. Katmandu is a blend of sacred and mundane. Or, perhaps it's the place where the sacred is so confident in itself that it allows the mundane to flourish unhindered, and the mundane just goes about its life. The passing man, perhaps making a delivery, shows how this is done - over one shoulder is the shrine, over the other are his work-a-day tools: a pair of baskets, nicely balanced, and the umbrella.

