

Nepal Now

Rebecca Slater of Rebecca Recommends visited Nepal earlier this year before the devastating earthquake in April. She recently returned there to assess one of her favorite destinations. Here's her report on "Nepal, now."

In March this year, I was fortunate enough to host an educational trip with our highly respected client, Ventours International Travel, to a country I had longed to travel to since I was a child: the tiny mountain kingdom of Nepal. I was in awe at being "on top of the world" in the Himalayas, sighting a Bengal Tiger in

the Chitwan National Park, witnessing the Hindu festivals, and visiting Kathmandu that conjured exotic and mystical images. Doing all of this in a country the size of Wisconsin captivated me.

Then, on April 25, devastating news broke when the 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck just east of the district of Lamjung in Nepal. Having fallen in love with this country and its people, the euphoric high I was riding post trip turned into feelings of heartbreak and helplessness. I made a conscious decision that moving forward, my intention would be to channel my energy into making some difference, if only on a small scale, to help those in Nepal. I knew that the tourism industry, which accounts for about eight percent of the economy and employs more than a million people, would be significantly affected. If I

was to assist with tourism recovery and speak informatively, I needed to assess for myself how things were on the ground. I had a Ventours FAM trip to Bhutan planned for August, which offered the perfect opportunity to combine the two countries, as many visitors do.

On arrival, my first impression was how good the city looked. If you had never been to Kathmandu before, you would not necessarily know it had suffered the effects of a major earthquake. Of course, this is not to say there are still thousands of people within the country, many in more remote parts, who face the challenge of having to rebuild their homes and their lives. Recently, the Nepal Tourism Board launched nepalnow.org to communicate that Nepal is safe to visit and has so much to offer. Almost 80 percent of the country was not touched by the earthquake.

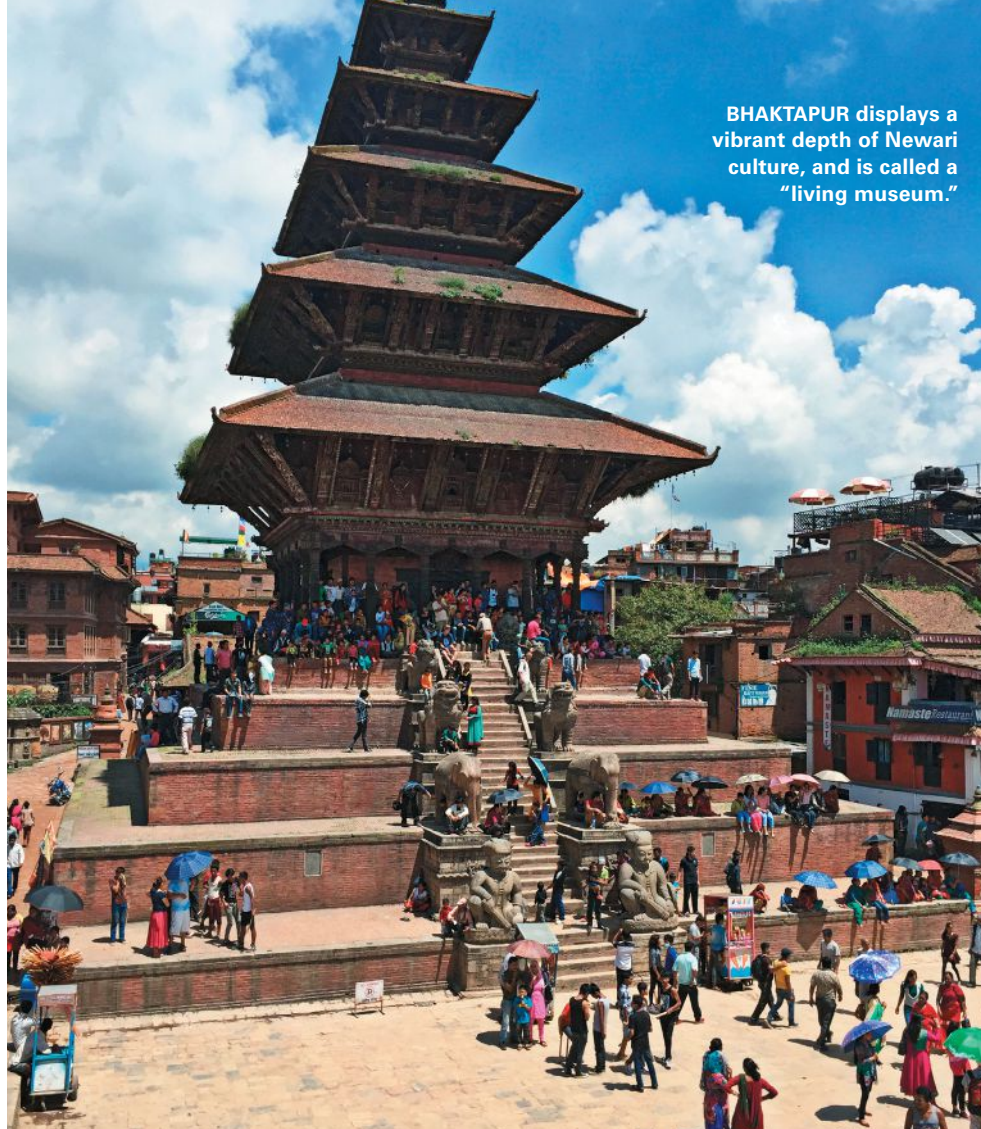
REBECCA SLATER at Swayambhunath, one of Nepal's oldest Buddhist temples that can be reached by climbing 365 ancient steps through a forest populated with hundreds of monkeys.



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High on my trip agenda was to visit all seven UNESCO groups of monuments and buildings within the Kathmandu Valley. I achieved that with the exception of seeing the ancient Hindu temple Changu Narayan, perched on a high hilltop just a couple of miles north of Bhaktapur. As luck would have it, my visit coincided with two festivals, Janai Purnima and Gai Jatra. I observed and joined in the festivities of Janai Purnima in Patan, also known as Lalitpur, the city of fine arts. Thankfully, only two temples were really damaged here with everything else intact. The next day was Gai Jatra, the festival of cows that commemorates the death of people during the year. Starting in the old part of Kathmandu, walking through the old market was a visual feast: young children trying to look like cows, people playing musical instruments and sporadic “holy men” joining the congregation, all providing a kaleidoscope of color and great energy. Watching people incorporate one of the many festivals celebrated in Nepal is a fantastic local experience not to be missed.

As this trip was focused purely on the Kathmandu Valley, I split my eight-night stay between two hotels. The first, **Dwarika's**, “a tribute to the architectural and cultural heritage of Nepal,” has become one of my favorite hotels in the world. The hotel, which has won many awards, has garnered reputation due to the Shrestha family and the visionary behind the hotel, Dwarika Das



BHAKTAPUR displays a vibrant depth of Newari culture, and is called a “living museum.”

Shrestha, whose commitment to heritage conservation dates back to 1952. In March, I had the opportunity to take a helicopter from the great heights of Kongde Ri, in the Everest region, to stay at the sister property, **Dwarika's Resort**, in Dhulikhel, currently the finest resort in the country and waiting to be discovered by many.

My second home was the **Gokarna Forest Resort**, traditionally the royal hunting grounds of the kings of Nepal. It is situated within a 470-acre forest, which offers shelter to birds and animals in the Kathmandu Valley; one can even enjoy a round of golf on their par-72 course.

Bhaktapur, one of my favorite places to visit within the Kathmandu Valley, is the cultural capital of Nepal with history dating back to the eighth century; it has been called a “living museum,” displaying the vibrant depth of Newari culture. We were lucky enough to get a seat at Nyatapola Restaurant overlooking the whole of Bhaktapur Durbar Square where you can watch daily life unfold.

The charming narrow streets house producers of local handicrafts, pottery and pashminas. The city is proud to be listed as one of the 10 cleanest within Asia. The surrounding local area of Bhaktapur also offers amazing natural beauty, historical monuments and, on a clear day, a panoramic view of the Himalayas.

Another afternoon was spent at Swayambhunath (Monkey Temple), one of Nepal's oldest Buddhist temples. Perched on a hill on the western edge of the Kathmandu Valley, it holds great cultural, historical and religious value for Buddhists and Hindus all over the world. The all-seeing Buddha eyes that stare out from the top of the Stupa have become synonymous with Nepal. I approached the temple by climbing the 365 ancient steps through the forest, which is populated with hundreds of monkeys that give the temple its nickname. The site has a wonderful ancient atmosphere, especially when you approach on foot with the pilgrims. From the top of the hillock you are rewarded with fantastic views of the Kathmandu Valley.



GAI JATRA is a festival of cows that commemorates the death of people during the year. Children dress up like cows on this day.

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BEAD MARKET (above) in Kathmandu, frequented by local married women, has a range of beads usually imported from India, Indonesia, Japan and China.

RESILIENT PEOPLE (above right) have ensured that life returns to normal in Kathmandu.

DWARIKA'S (below) hotel was founded by Dwarika Das Shrestha, whose commitment to heritage conservation dates back to 1952.



Khokana & Bungamati: Two 7th-century traditional Newari villages that have retained their history and culture, and are mostly dependent on agriculture. Affected quite badly by the earthquake, people from the community were working together to rebuild homes and a temple.

Kathmandu Bead Market: The dazzling alley of the bead dealers is hidden between two buildings and temples. Almost every merchant here is a Muslim, descending from ancestors who came to Nepal from South Asia and Tibet in the 15th century. Beads are usually imported from India, Indonesia, Japan and China. This is a market where local married women from Kathmandu come to purchase the merchandise. Within each Hindu ethnic group there are many castes, and a woman's necklace is a sign of her caste and status.

For shopping, head to Dhukuti, a three-story treasure trove with hand-crafted products from all over Nepal. All products here are produced by the Nepal Association for Craft Producers under certified Fair Trade standards. Mahaguthi is another socially responsible store offering "craft with conscience," particularly pretty hand-made paper and photo frames. **Garden of Dreams:** A neoclassical historical garden created by the late Field Marshal Kaiser Shamsher Rana in the 1920s, is located in Thamel, the center of the tourism industry in Kathmandu.

For an enchanting evening experience, I visited Pashupatinath Temple and witnessed the Aarti ceremony. Dating back to 400 A.D., it is one of the oldest Hindu Temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. Situated amid the banks of the sacred Bagmati River, which flows into the Ganges, the temple is built in a pagoda style with gilded roof and richly carved silver doors. Only Hindus are allowed inside the temple, but as a visitor you get a great view of the whole temple complex from the other side of the river.

Kathmandu Durbar Square, the heart of the capital, which was the most-affected square during the earthquake, is still incredibly impressive. The "hippy" temple where the so-called people hung out in the '60s, had come tumbling down, as had the Kasthamandap Temple from where you get the name Kathmandu, meaning wood-covered shelter.

In March, my group had experienced a private audience with the Kumari of Patan. On this trip, I went to Kumar Ghar, the house of Kathmandu's "living goddess" that dates back to 1757, and was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of her at her window. The temple housing the nine-year-old girl worshipped as a "living goddess" was remarkably unscathed by the April earthquake even though four other major temples nearby were brought to the ground. According to Gautam Shakya, an 11th-generation caretaker of Kumari, it was because of the Kumari's powers that the temple remained intact.

Some of my other highly recommended places to visit:

The country is now moving into what should be its high season. However, hotel reservations have been affected well into the spring of 2016, with regular trekking expeditions and group trips either postponed or canceled. I would encourage anyone who has ever wanted to experience Nepal to travel there now. You will have the luxury of a rich cultural experience, spirituality, impressive heritage, a genuine warmth and welcome from the local people and the feel of the magnitude of the great outdoors. You will be helping a country full of resilient and inspirational people when they need it the most.

Having been recognized as an Honorary Tourism Goodwill Ambassador of Nepal, I hope to continue to support tourism recovery, not only in the short term but also in the foreseeable future. My ultimate wish is to see the new constitution bringing economic stability to Nepal and to witness the country emerge with an even stronger tourism business, with the combined efforts of so many organizations wanting to help the mountain kingdom.

—Rebecca Slater