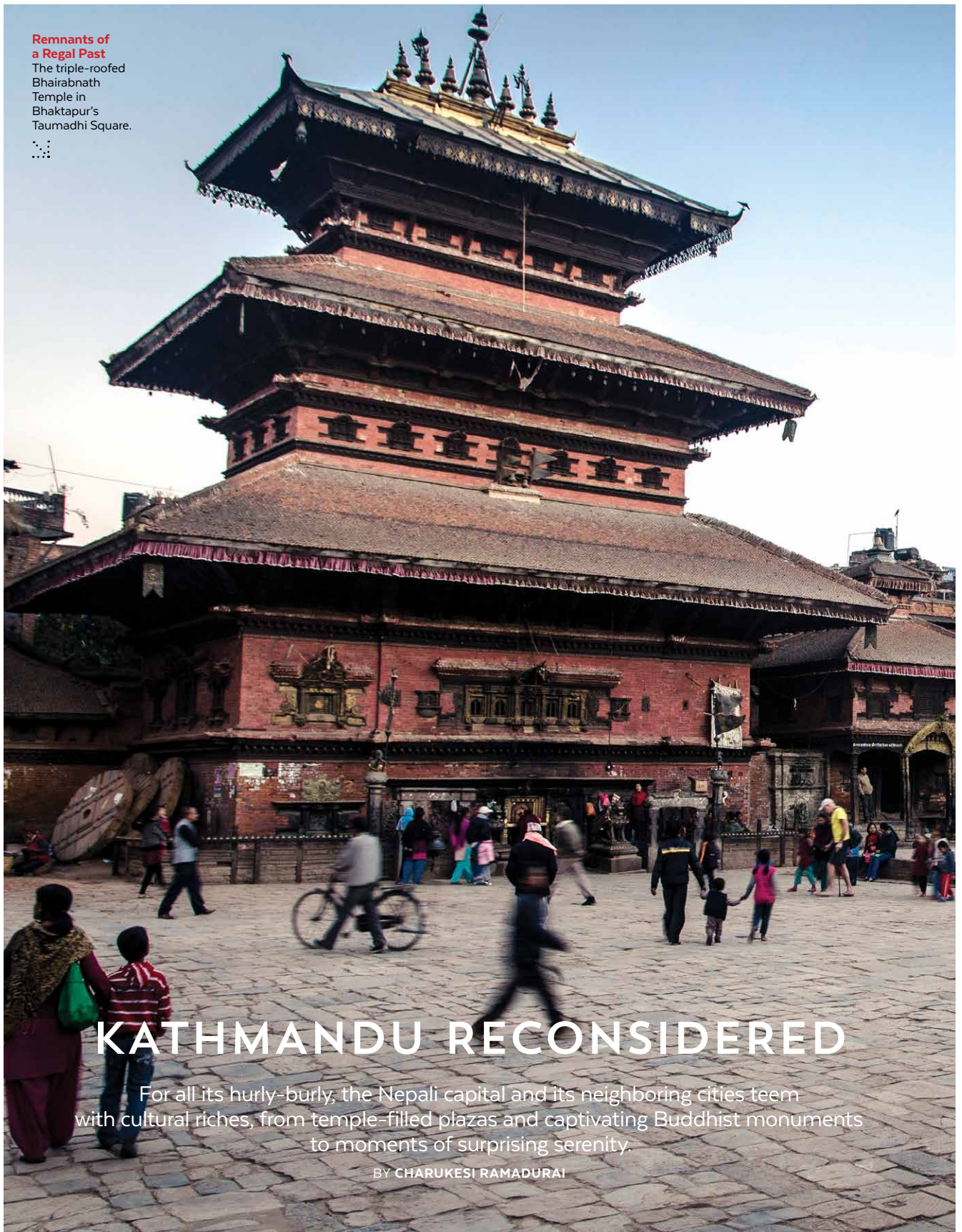


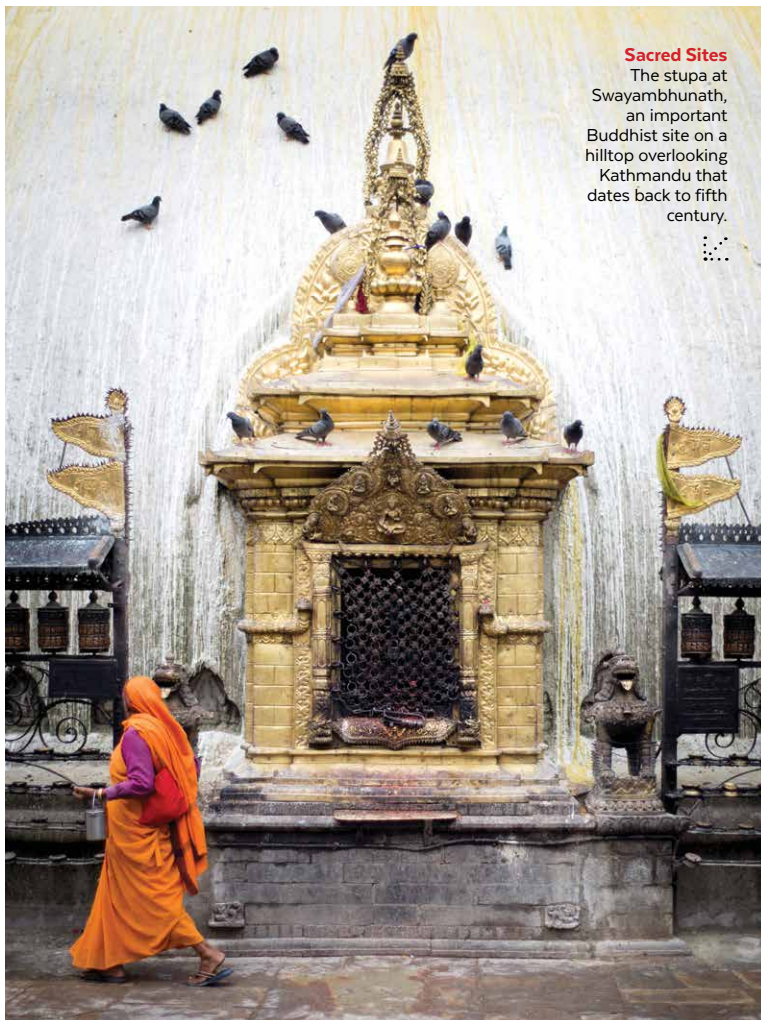
**Remnants of  
a Regal Past**  
The triple-roofed  
Bhairabnath  
Temple in  
Bhaktapur's  
Taumadhi Square.



# KATHMANDU RECONSIDERED

For all its hurly-burly, the Nepali capital and its neighboring cities teem with cultural riches, from temple-filled plazas and captivating Buddhist monuments to moments of surprising serenity.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



#### Sacred Sites

The stupa at Swayambhunath, an important Buddhist site on a hilltop overlooking Kathmandu that dates back to fifth century.

When I talk about my plans for Nepal, the first thing I hear is, “But why would you waste so much time around Kathmandu?” People seem to expect that I would only want to spend a day reveling in the heady chaos of the city’s Thamel district before quickly moving on to popular stops like Pokhara or Chitwan National Park. After all, that’s what everyone does.

I, however, intend to spend my time exploring the riches of Kathmandu Valley’s trio of royal cities: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur. From the 15th to mid 18th centuries, when the valley was divided among three Newar kingdoms, its rulers vied to outdo each other in terms of art and architecture, ushering in a period of cultural efflorescence. Enriched by trade, they spent lavishly on their palaces and royal plazas (known as Durbar Squares), commissioning ever-more-spectacular temples, statues, and residences. So outstanding is the craftsmanship—in stone and wood, brick and bronze—that UNESCO in-



#### Getting There

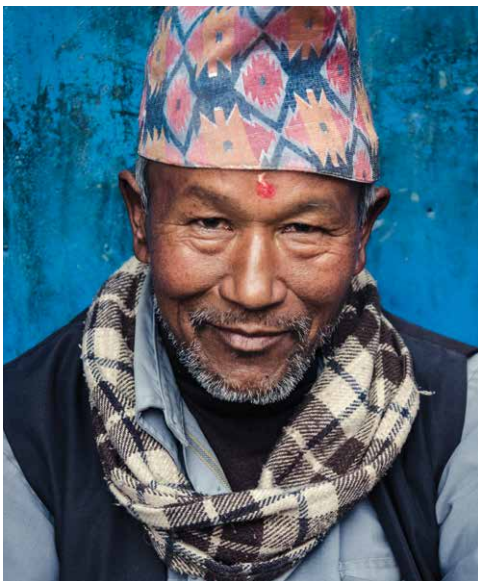
**SilkAir** ([silkair.com](http://silkair.com)) flies direct to Kathmandu from Singapore, as does **Dragonair** ([dragonair.com](http://dragonair.com)) from Hong Kong and **Thai Airways** ([thaiairways.com](http://thaiairways.com)) from Bangkok. Both Bhaktapur and Lalitpur are less than a 20-minute drive from the airport.

scribed the bowl-shaped valley and its monuments as a World Heritage Site in 1979. With a few days on my hands, I plan to take in as much of it as possible.

From Kathmandu’s international airport, my husband and I make a beeline to our guesthouse in Lalitpur, drop our bags, and head straight back out into the street. Walking through a narrow market lane toward the city’s Durbar Square, I keep craning my neck to better see the elegantly carved wooden windows that punctuate the facades above me. Lalitpur (also known as Patan in Nepali) is home to Nepal’s largest community of artists, including a bevy of metalsmiths and woodworkers, and this lane is dotted with their ateliers, tempting us to linger over the beautiful works of art displayed casually outside. But the light is fading fast, so we press on.

Suddenly, we emerge into a large open plaza and stop short in awe. Brimming with pagoda-roofed temples and shrines, the brick-paved Durbar Square immediately reminds me that Lalitpur means “city of beauty.” The buildings are all exquisite, with their perfect symmetry and lushly carved wooden pillars and beams (including some unexpectedly risqué motifs). One temple, the 17th-century Krishna Mandir, is built of stone in the *shikhara* style of northern India, its slender central tower rising elegantly above tiered pavilions. But worshippers are few on the ground, as the square today serves more as a social hub than a religious one. I don’t spot many tourists either, just a few Japanese visitors engrossed by their camera phones and selfie sticks. But there are dozens of locals floating around—old men shooting the breeze, perched on wobbly benches in front of the temples; families out for an evening stroll, oblivious or perhaps inured to the beauty around them; children chasing after balloons intent on flying their way to freedom; gangs of teenage girls giggling over jokes that only the very young can find funny.

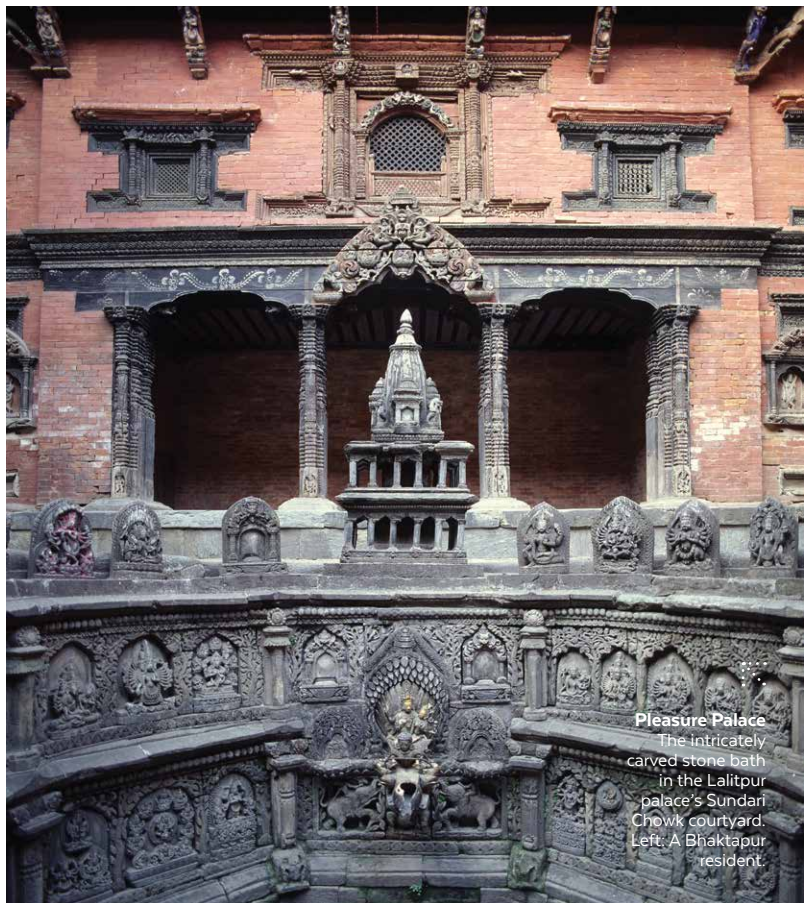
Lalitpur was founded in the third century B.C., making it the oldest town in the Kathmandu Valley. Like its neighboring cities, medieval Lalitpur grew rich from its position on the ancient trade route between India and Tibet, and the wealth it acquired makes itself obvious inside the Patan Royal Palace complex. Sundari Chowk, one of the palace’s three main inner courtyards, is centered on a 17th-century stone bath lined with intricately sculpted bas-reliefs. It’s stunning. As I stop to admire the carvings, a man with a camera appears next to me and introduces himself as Mike from London. After telling me that he’s been traveling around Asia for months now, he says with a thoroughly be-



mused look, “You know, this reminds me of Angkor Wat—I never expected anything like this in Nepal.” Nor, to be honest, had I.

If Lalitpur proves a revelation, the Durbar Square in Bhaktapur, 12 kilometers to the east, delivers a jolt of *déjà vu*, and not at all unpleasantly. The temples here are similarly magnificent, as is the Palace of Fifty-five Windows, a former royal residence that now houses the National Art Gallery. But Bhaktapur’s real star is a short walk away in the middle of Taumadhi Square: Nyatapola, a pagoda-style temple of five increasingly smaller levels that give it the look of a house of cards that might come toppling down at any minute. Despite the cafés and shops that ring the square, it is absolutely quiet. In the stillness of the evening, it’s difficult to imagine that this temple was built to house the idol of a goddess so fierce—Siddhi Lakshmi—that its inner sanctum is off-limits to all but temple priests. I spend the rest of my time there ambling happily through the neighborhood’s labyrinth of narrow shopping streets and chatting with craftspeople at Pottery Square, where all manner of clay jugs, bowls, and vases are lined up on the ground to dry in the sun.

Over the last few decades, the backpacking hordes have come, seen, and conquered Nepal, so I’m surprised by how much of the valley has remained relatively untouched by the madding crowds. Not all of it, though—Kathmandu city is very much the urban disaster it is proclaimed to be. The streets here teem with people and vehicles, as does the Durbar Square, where taxis somehow squeeze through the cobbled lanes and vendors loudly hawk everything from hot tea to tacky trinkets and plastic hair clips. The air is punctuated by the squeals of children as they race after pigeons



**Pleasure Palace**  
The intricately carved stone bath in the Lalitpur palace’s Sundari Chowk courtyard. Left: A Bhaktapur resident.

#### Where to Stay

The **Hyatt Regency Kathmandu** (977-1/449-1234; [kathmandu.regency.hyatt.com](http://kathmandu.regency.hyatt.com); doubles from US\$165) sits on the road leading to the Boudhanath stupa and features 280 rooms with wooden floors and hand-woven Tibetan carpets. In Lalitpur, go for **Traditional Homes Swatha** ([traditionalhomes.com.np](http://traditionalhomes.com.np); doubles from US\$90), a Newari mansion restored into a bed-and-breakfast with seven spacious rooms. In Bhaktapur, **Hotel Heritage** ([hotelheritage.com.np](http://hotelheritage.com.np); doubles from US\$130) is the plushest option, its 25 rooms outfitted with local textiles and antique wood.

that take flight with a loud whoosh at the slightest provocation. Yet somehow amid the clamor, a few locals manage to nap on the broad stone steps of the temples.

Venture beyond Kathmandu’s central neighborhoods, though, and you find quieter, more likeable places to explore. People often talk about the Garden of Dreams as Kathmandu’s urban oasis, an expanse of neoclassical gardens that belonged to the son of Nepal’s fifth prime minister. But I find my sanctuary at the Boudhanath, a huge Tibetan-Buddhist stupa on the eastern outskirts of town. We head there early one morning and encounter a brilliant tableau of faith, with pilgrims in traditional Tibetan garb and maroon-robed monks circumambulating the monument, prayer wheels in hand.

As with the rest of the city, the Boudhanath—or Boudha, as it is known locally—pulsates with life. But here, the cacophony is muted to a soothing hum that envelops both the believers who deem themselves blessed by the stupa’s benevolent Buddha eyes and the visitors like me who watch it all from a distance, immersed serenely in the moment. ☉