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Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu.

THE OTHER FACE OF NEPAL

Kathmandu's growing hotel options offer tourists a luxury experience far from the city's well-trodden budget paths

TEXT BY ANGELA SHAH

THE NEPALESE CAPITAL has long been known as a backpacker's paradise. Scruffy tourists fresh from Himalayan treks are easy to spot in Kathmandu. But if you set off the patchouli-scented path, a more luxurious respite can be had in the city.

Our first taste of Nepali luxury came at the grande dame of the capital's hotels, Dwarika's. Hidden by brick walls from the city's streets, the hotel is a cluster of brick buildings of various sizes scattered across a tree-filled compound. Originally built in 1952 as the family home of its founder, Dwarika Das Shrestha, the hotel has expanded over the decades. Today, Dwarika's is a living experiment in preserving Nepali heritage, especially its architecture.

In 1952, Shrestha saw carpenters sawing off the intricately carved window and door coverings for firewood. Alarmed, he created a workshop on his property that would not only house these carvings and others he bought throughout the valley, but also the master craftsmen of this dying art so that they could teach others.

The end result is a secluded mini-village in the middle of bustling Kathmandu that provides guests a serene spot to relax and rejuvenate. We especially enjoyed meals outside in the sun-dappled courtyard where the resident dogs and cats would come around and beg playfully. On Friday nights, Dwarika's holds its weekly barbecue, now a Kathmandu tradition, which features grilled meats from beef to boar and a wide selection of both western style and Nepali vegetable preparations.

But for us, Dwarika's signature culinary experience is that at Krishnarpan, its Newari cuisine restaurant, which offers diners the chance to sample traditional Nepali hospitality in sumptuous surroundings.

So if Dwarika's is the yin of Newari hospitality, the Hyatt Regency Kathmandu represents the yang. The American hotel chain built its property here as a "city resort" stretched over 37 acres and looks like it might have been an old Nepali plantation home.

What appeals about the Hyatt is its familiar luxury. After a day immersing all five of our senses along the streets of Kathmandu,



ILLUSTRATION: CHARLIE BANALO

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the hotel was a tranquil home to which to return. While Hyatt has infused the property with indigenous touches with the herbal bath products and a Nepali-style front lounge, the hotel has kept faithful to the look and feel of premier Hyatt rooms worldwide. "The room looks like a Hyatt room," my travel companion said. "There's something nice about knowing exactly how everything will be."

The Hyatt is conveniently located just a few kilometres from the Kathmandu International Airport, making it an ideal stop for the start of a Nepal trip, or an end to one, as it was for us. The day before our evening departure, we took another quick trip to the Boudhanath Stupa – the most holy of Tibetan Buddhist shrines outside Tibet and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site — only a 10-minute walk away.

Families will find the hotel especially appealing as a place to relax and unwind amidst the Himalayas. The "backyard" contains two pools, one reserved for children, three tennis courts and a 1,600-metre jogging track around the hotel grounds.

During our stay there, a monsoon pounded its way through the city, so we stayed in and enjoyed a cozy dinner at Rox Restaurant and Bar. And we got the chance to savour a rare but welcome luxury for Dubai-dwellers: rain. GB

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The old and new sit side by side in Nepal's capital city.



World heritage

Spend an afternoon at one of Nepal's UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Bhaktapur, an hour's drive outside of Kathmandu. No cars are allowed in the city, which is full of architectural gems from the 15th century, including the gates of Durbar Square and the Temple of Nyatapola, one of the tallest pagoda-style temples in the Kathmandu Valley.

Holy shrines

The Boudhanath Stupa is one of the holiest shrines in Buddhism and one of the world's largest. The eyes of the Buddha are painted on each of the four sides of the tower and keep a watchful eye over the penitents spinning prayer wheels or merchants hawking prayer beads, handmade pouches and hats and idols.



Holiday peaks

No trip to Nepal is complete with a sighting of Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak. For those of us without the stamina to trek to base camp, several airlines offer hour-long flights around Everest and its sibling peaks. (*buddhaair.com*)

Eating out

Feeling hungry? Then the 22-course tasting menu at Dwarika's Nepali restaurant, Krishnarpan, is for you. Following local custom, diners are asked to take off their shoes at reception and proceed to low tables in a traditional style. Our favorites included chicken and yam curries in addition to dishes made with vegetables sourced from Dwarika's own farm.