

Nepal Unveiled: A First-Timer's Guide to Exploring the Land of the Himalayas

This is episode 50 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast

Tracy: Planning your first trip to Nepal and wondering where to start? When's the best time to visit? How do you get around? And what cultural tips should you know before you go? This is episode 50 of the Global Travel Planner podcast where you'll discover everything you need to know as a first time visitor. Hi, and welcome to the Global Travel Planning Podcast. I'm your host, Tracy Collins, who with my expert guests will take you on a weekly journey to destinations around the globe, providing travel inspiration, itinerary ideas, practical tips, and more to help you plan your next travel adventure. Hi, everybody and welcome to episode 50 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. And this week I'm very, very excited to talk to my friend Abigail from Aotearoa Adventures, who is a fellow podcaster and knows a lot about Nepal. So she's here today to kind of share all her tips for first time visitors, of which I will be one.

Abigail: My second favorite place is probably Nepal

So it'll be great to chat with you all about Nepal, but let's start off, Abigail, by you introducing yourself and telling us a bit. At the moment you're in the States, but normally you don't live in America. You're just there visiting. So where do you normally live and what do you do?

Abigail: Well, kia ora, Tracy, it's a pleasure to be back on the podcast again. my zone of genius is usually New Zealand travel, and that's what we spoke about in a previous episode. I don't remember that number off the top of my head. but my second favorite place in the world is probably Nepal, so I'm excited to talk about that today. and yeah, I live in New Zealand. I am a marketing. I run a marketing agency and I work with travel brands. So it's all just a lot of fun.

Tracy: It is. And I actually should have mentioned that you were previously in episode 16 of the podcast talking all about van life in New Zealand, which was a fantastic episode. So if you have not been to New Zealand, if you're interested to find out about New Zealand, definitely pop over and have a listen not only to episode 16, but also to, Abigail's podcast as well, which is excellent and all about travel around New Zealand now. So that much for that introduction, all about New Zealand, let's focus on Nepal today.

Edward, what's your connection to Nepal? Tracy's parents live there

I mean, I could talk about New Zealand all day because you know how much I love it. But let's, let's learn about Nepal. So what's your connection to Nepal?

Abigail: Yeah, well, I also, I don't think I've told you this, but we're moving into our van Full time this year, in New Zealand. So there'll be a lot more Van Life content coming if anyone else is wanting to do a trip. But we were in Nepal just a couple of months ago. like Tracy said, I'm in the States at the moment. We've kind of done a around the world trip where we left New Zealand, went to Nepal. And our, connection there is my husband's parents live in Nepal. My husband grew up in Nepal, lived there for 14 years.

his parents are still there. So it's very much, a place we still have a really strong connection to. So I think I've been there five times probably, the first time would have been 2015. And yeah, it's a very special place, very close to our heart. So that's our connection. And if I was to describe Nepal to someone who's never been, I'd say it's kind of like India. And I say that because I also grew up in India, so that's familiar to me. But I feel like most people have an idea what they think India is. So it's quite similar, but it's more friendly, it's less intense, it's less kind of in your face. and it's, yeah, just a bit more laid back. So I think I really love it for all of those reasons.

Tracy: And as you know, actually I visited India last year and completely fell in love with it. I'm actually yet to talk about that on the podcast, that visit. And, we should actually talk about India, I think, in another episode. and, and that kind of piqued my interest because I loved India. It absolutely captured my heart. And, our guide actually lived. She was from close to Nepal, so not actually from Nepal, but, but she was talking all about it and she does trips to Nepal. And I was like, wow, this just sounds like something that's right up my street. So I would be a first time visitor. So what sort of things do I need to know? And Edward listening, who's thinking about, you know, Nepal sounds like a fascinating place to visit.

What do I need to know before I go to Nepal

What do I need to know before I go?

Abigail: Yeah, I guess, Nepal is really popular for a lot of the people that love the outdoors. Like, it's obviously this amazing, like, massive, trekking destination. People go on hikes. Everest Base Camp is super popular. But in my opinion, do something else.

go to one of the less known tricks. But it's also this incredible cultural place. And I know we're going to talk about that more in a future episode because the Kathmandu Valley is just this kind of melting pot of, like, Buddhist culture and Hindu culture, and it's kind of, like, super, super interesting. And there's so many historic sites and UNESCO World Heritage sites. So I guess, like, before you go to Nepal, you kind of need to decide whether you want to stay in one place and just experience culture or if you want to go, into the mountains, do a trek, stay in Kathmandu and do some cultural experiences. And the other really cool thing you can do is, there's

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Abigail: this location called Chitwan. And, there's like, a wildlife park, so you can go on safaris and stuff. So, like, Nepal really does have it all. and there's. There's just so much you can spend your time doing there.

Tracy: It's really good to know because I guess when I think about it, I was a bit overwhelmed just at the thought of it, because I kind of think about Everest and I certainly don't want it. You know, I'm not a hater, so it wouldn't be something that I'd want to do, but there are other things that would appeal to me and other things that I'd want to do. So I guess it's like, so how do you. I mean, how do you kind of decide in terms of. I kind of think I'm, interested in culture, I'm interested in food, I'm interested in history. So I don't necessarily want to do any hiking. I don't. I don't. I might say that. Any hiking, but certainly not to Base Camp. That's just not for me. but how would I. What are the. What other things could I find to do? I mean, what else is there that you would kind of say, right, you've discounted the hiking, but these are other ideas and things to do.

Abigail: Yeah. So there's plenty of, cultural, like, UNESCO World Heritage sites in the

Kathmandu Valley, and there's lots of sort of other cultural things outside the valley as well. But I think, like, you want to kind of appreciate the scenery and take that in when you go into Nepal as well. So there's plenty of, like, luxury resorts and hotels, that you can stay at that just have these, like, panoramic views of, like, the tallest mountains in the world. Right. Like, I remember my first time seeing these mountains, because you can't usually see them from the Kathmandu Valley. So we'd gone out to Pokhara. The first couple of days were cloudy, and we were out on Pokhara Lake in a little rowboat, and the clouds are starting to clear. And Isaac goes, oh, look, there are the mountains. And I'm like, where? Where are the mountains? I can't see them. He said, no, look higher, look higher. And I was like, whoa, there are the mountains. Like the, the scale of it is just so unreal. Nothing like anywhere else I'd experience. So, Pokhara is a really good destination. It's a lakeside town and you can kind of base yourself there. I hear rumors that there's a new, chairlift that kind of goes up to this viewpoint. So that could be something that you could do. And there's lots of food and just like it's a little bit hippie, what used to be hippie back in the day. So there's plenty of stuff to just kind of get involved in along the lakefront there, but you could just spend a couple of days walking down the streets. Yeah, there'll be plenty to keep you busy even if you don't like hiking.

Tracy: And if so, how long would you reckon I should go for as not as a non hiker?

Abigail: Yeah, I would say like a 10 day minimum especially.

There are many options for hiking in Nepal and most of them start in Pokhara

So let me give you like a rough itinerary. Okay. you can start in Kathmandu, have maybe

one or two days there. in a day you could probably hit maybe half of the main attractions. And then if you've got a second day, you can hit the other half to do them really well, and then either fly, which is a little bit more expensive for international visitors, or take a coach to Pokhara, which on the coach I think it's about 10 hours. The roads aren't great, so if you've got the budget, definitely worth flying. and that's a safe flight. It's not like the one to Everest, which is kind of like dodgy airport. So you get into Pokhara, that's the lakeside town that I was talking about. So you can spend a couple of days there. I went paragliding there. If you want to. If that's kind of something you're interested in. You can also do like. Tracy's shaking her head. there's like rafting and whitewater activities that you can do as well. If that's not. If that's your thing. Probably also not you, Tracy. but yeah, there's cafes and restaurants you can kind of just enjoy that. You, can go across the lake to this monastery. There's some caves. So you can spend about three days in Pokhara. And then you can either again fly or take a coach to Chitwan, which is where that. Wildlife, nature places you can go on a Jeep safari. They've got crocodiles, rhinos, tigers, you know, all sorts. Like, so that I haven't actually done that experience yet, so it's on the bucket list. But I've heard really good things. and then, yeah, you go back to Kathmandu in a little triangle. So like three days in each place and that kind of takes you to your, to your 10 days.

Tracy: That's great. Now, that would, that sounds perfect for me. But I would be remiss of all my listeners who are into hiking. And I know you are a massive fan of hiking. Hiking. So for those hikers out there, what, what, what would you recommend that they look at doing?

Abigail: Yeah, so I mentioned Pokhara, the lakeside town that really is a great hub for starting hikes and it's set up for that. so again, you've got to get, find your way from Kathmandu to Pokhara and there's this really great, like, I call it a short hike. It's definitely

short in, Nepal standards because a lot of their hikes are like two or three weeks long. but this is like a three night. I think it's three nights, four days. And you can possibly do it in two nights, three days. And it's to a viewpoint which looks out, it's called Poon Hill. And it looks out over the Annapurna Ranges, which is this like stunning bowl of mountains. And I think the range has, I don't know, four mountains that are in the top

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Abigail: 10 tallest mountains in the world or something like that. So on the actual morning, like, you always do a sunrise at Poon Hill and, it's supposed to be beautiful. Again, I haven't done this particular hike, but it was one that is kind of on bucket list. And ah, if you've got longer, if you've got a week, if you've got 10 days, two weeks, a month. There are so many other options for hiking in Nepal and most of them will start out of Pokro as well. A few of them might start out of Kathmandu, for example. If you're doing Everest, you fly to Lukla and then you start walking from there. So there's plenty of options. I think the other thing I would say is, all the Nepali, like tour guides and trekking companies do a really good job. Like they know what's up, they do this day in and day out. So for most of them, and particularly if you're in like a conservation area, you have to have a guide. a lot of people will choose to take a porter as well. and the porters carry your bags. And some people get a bit weird about that, but it's part of the culture and you're still supporting the economy. And honestly, it makes trekking so much easier when you're not carrying two weeks of stuff on your back. So, yeah, that's something that, listeners can kind of look into as well. But it's a very different way of hiking and I enjoy it. It's like, it's a lot more relaxed. there's tea houses along the way, there's restaurants where you can stop and get a hot meal. so it's different to. Like in New Zealand, for example, we go out into the bush, into the wilderness, and there's nothing. You bring everything in with you, you take it all out. it's quite different. And most

of the trekking trails are kind of along these. They pass through, like, historic villages. Great. I love trekking in Nepal and I know everyone who listens will. They'll love it too.

Tracy: It does sound amazing, I have to say. And, I like the idea of not having to carry my own pack and all the rest of it because I know I would struggle. And I was just talking to Daniel actually, for the UK Travel plan podcast. He's just returned from Kilimanjaro, and climbed. I was like, fascinated to chat about that. That was amazing.

Abigail says altitude sickness can affect anyone, no matter how fit

So I do say that I don't hike. And, you know, I have done a shortish hike in New Zealand and absolutely loved it. But what sort of level of fitness do you need to do these hikes in Nepal? Abigail?

Abigail: Yeah, this is a super interesting question. And when we were back there, two months ago, I. I'm not a very fit person. Yes, I do go hiking, but I usually do, like, no physical activity for two months and then I go on like a three day hike and my body's like, what are you doing? So I probably need to change that and actually do some more physical exercise in between. But the thing about trekking in Nepal is not actually about how fit, but it's about the altitude. Right. When we went trekking in a couple months ago, we started our trek at 3,000 meters. And for reference, the tallest mountain in New Zealand, which is still pretty tall, is like three and a half thousand meters. So you're already really high up. I don't know how tall like Kilimanjaro is or any other mountains to kind of give people a reference, but like, you're starting at three, and we finished at, I don't know, four and a half, I think. So where we finished our hike is taller than New Zealand's tallest mountain. So altitude sickness is a thing. and what that means is your

body just. There's less oxygen in the air because there's less air, and your body just needs to take time to kind of figure out how to absorb more oxygen. So if you're up in the mountains for a long time, your body actually makes more red blood cells. But, I won't go into the science of it. Basically, altitude sickness can affect anybody. No matter how much training you've done, no matter how fit you are or if you've done nothing at all, it doesn't. It, like, it can impact anyone, and it seems to be pretty random. It doesn't discriminate against age or. Yeah, it just. It can affect anyone. So you. So it's good to be fit, but you can't sort of train or plan for altitude sickness. And me having not done any training for our, trek that we did two months ago, I was fine. And you can take, meds beforehand. And all of the tour companies will know about altitude sickness. And the way to kind of just prevent it is just to go slowly up the hill. So you're only gaining about, I think they say, 200 or 300 meters a day, which isn't much. So most. That's why the trekking is also, like, quite easy, is because you're not going up, you know, a thousand meters, like up a steep mountain. You're doing a little bit and you're stopping, and you're doing a little bit more and you're stopping so that your body can adjust. And if you do get sick, it's not the end of the world. You just go back down and your body is like, okay, we can breathe again. We're okay.

Tracy: Well, it's definitely appealing more the fact that you said it's slow. That sounds good. That sounds like that would appeal to me because I certainly don't want to go up any very steep mountains. It's not for me. The flatter the better. Or a slight gradient I can deal with.

Abigail: there's this thing

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Abigail: called Nepali flat. and that is. Nothing is flat. Everything is up or down.

Tracy: All right, I'll have to think about. I need to look at some of your photographs, I think.

April and October are the best times to visit Nepal for trekking

Now, what about the best time of year to visit Nepal? Is there a best time of year to visit or a time of year.

Abigail: To avoid Great question. Yeah. So the busiest time of year is, April and October. And that's because it's the best time for trekking. That's kind of spring and autumn, I guess. And that's when it's not too hot, it's not too cold. it's not dangerous with any of the sn. so those are kind of, if you want to be trekking, definitely go there in April or October and then like a couple of months either side of that. So we were there, trekking in early November, for example. the monsoon kind of sits between. I think it's like June, July through to September somewhere around there. So you probably want to be avoiding monsoon, unless that's your thing. But transport becomes a little bit more risky because everything is a hill. They have a lot of landslides. Roads get washed away all the time. I think this is actually something I need to prepare first time listeners for. the roads in Nepal, they are, they are, yeah, not really roads as we'd think of them. They're not usually paved. If they are, they're full of potholes. And it's just because of the nature of the landscape. Like every couple of years a landslide comes through and washes it out. So they've got to rebuild it. And so, that's definitely something to be prepared for. but yeah, April and October, best times to visit.

Tracy: Okay, sounds good. And, you kind of touched on there before about getting around. So the easiest way to get around is literally a bus or flying. Those are your options.

Abigail: Yeah, absolutely. And if it's just around town, if it's around Kathmandu, then taxis are really affordable. yeah.

Tracy: Okay, perfect.

Abigail: Is Nepal food spicy or milder than Indian food

And I'm going to pivot to my. One of my favorite topics to talk about. Now. I know you love talking about, you love talking about hiking. I like talking about food. So what, what food and drinks should I be looking out for when I'm in Nepal?

Abigail: so you've got to try Momo, which are, ah, the dumplings of Nepal. they're Tibetan, I believe. but they're really great. They're just like dumplings and you eat them with like a chutney or like a sauce that's kind of spicy. So, yeah, they're amazing. You'll see them everywhere. They're definitely worth getting. the other really classic dish is called dal bat, and it's literally just rice and dal. But there is something about dalbat that is just so good. And you'll get it on like a thali Plate, which, if people have been to India, they might have heard of this. But it's a big plate with lots of, like, little dishes and then like your rice and dal in the middle. And that's actually a really good, like a budget way to eat. If you, if you're in Nepal and you just want to keep costs low, like, the dal baht will always be pretty affordable on the menu and you get free refills of, like, rice and dal, and most of the side dishes as well. So that's a classic. You've got to try those.

Tracy: Is the food spicy, Abigail?

Abigail: it's a lot milder. I'm the wrong person to ask because my spice tolerance is through the roof. I find it milder than Indian food. and I think they are kind of used to having foreigners, there. So they do tone it down a little bit. but yeah, if you're ever concerned, just ask. And they're so friendly and I'm sure they'll be able to accommodate if you don't like things spicy.

Okay, so I'm going to ask you about etiquette and cultural norms

Tracy: Okay, so I'm going to ask you about, etiquette and kind of, you know, cultural norms, things that we need to know to not offend Nepalese people or, just to be able to fit in a bit better. You know, it's a bit like not asking for a cappuccino after lunch or in Italy, those sort of tips.

Abigail: well, since we're talking about food, one thing that actually comes to mind is that it's quite rude to eat food off somebody else's plate. you're supposed to only eat food off your plate, which is. Yeah, I guess that's something a bit unique that I haven't come across in other places. And then of course, if you're visiting cultural sites, any temples, places like that, as women like and as men actually just cover up, shorts for men or women aren't acceptable. And I know the boys are like, we're not allowed to wear shorts. What? Just put pants on. Bring some loose, like cotton or like chino pants. Like you can, you can wear that for an afternoon. You'll survive. and ladies, like, just bring a shawl to cover up. Like, T shirts are better than, kind of strappy tops or loose or low cut tops. so, yeah, just be aware of that. And I think like, the best rule of thumb, especially when you're thinking about what to dress, is look at the Nepalis around you.

What are they wearing at these sites? And that's probably a good clue at what you should be wearing. Yeah. So that's, that's probably my two main pieces of advice for being culturally sensitive.

Tracy: Those are good, really helpful.

Is Nepal comparable to India in terms of being budget friendly

Now, I actually have no idea about

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how expensive or not Nepal is. I should know, but I literally have no idea. So in terms of. I found India very budget friendly last year when I was there. Is Nepal comparable or other ways that you can save money in Nepal if it's a little bit more expensive? Where would you put it in terms of cost for, somebody visiting?

Abigail: I would put it quite similar to India, in terms of being budget friendly. the US dollar does go quite far in, in Nepal, like, for context, I think the conversion rate, the US dollar is 100 Nepali rupees. And a lunch, like a Dalba lunch that we were talking about might be three or four hundred rupees. So we're talking three or four dollars for like a solid, solid meal. In terms of trekking and stuff, that kind of gets slight of the more remote you're walking and the further in the mountains you get, because everything that's up there at your lodge at the top of this pass has been carried in by somebody or it's come up on donkeys if the, if the trail is sort of big enough for that. So talking about Dalba again, we were paying \$10 for a plate when we were up in the mountains and

that was super expensive. so it does kind of depend a little bit on where you are, and that's something to be aware of. I. And similarly, with accommodation like, the, the further, the more remote you're getting, the more expensive it gets. And I think as well, like, Nepal is just such a great place for people of any budget. If you want to do Nepal on a smaller budget, you totally can. You can eat the local food, you can catch like a bus instead of flying to Pokhara. and you can stay in these, like, smaller, more budget friendly guest houses. But if you've got a massive budget and you want to go crazy, you can do scenic flights, you can do helicopter tours. I actually wouldn't advise doing helicopters in nep. They're not the most safe. planes generally seem to be better, but there's like, fancy, food places you can go. Like, you can do it as a luxury trip as well, but it would probably be a more affordable luxury trip than somewhere else.

Tracy: Okay, that's good to know.

What is your number one tip for anyone planning a trip to Nepal

So, is there anything else you want to share about Nepal? I know we're going to be doing an episode. Ah, In a minute with your husband who is from Kathmandu, which is going to be fantastic. And that's going to be coming out in five weeks. That's episode 55. But is there anything else that you can think of that would be useful to share with visitors? planning the first time trip to Nepal Because I'm going to end as you know, I always end with the same question, which would be what is your number one tip for anyone planning to visit a trip to Nepal? so what else would you kind of say we need to know?

Abigail: Yeah, I feel like we're really, we've covered a lot there and I think, yeah, my

number one tip would just be like, be open to it and be open to what's going to happen. It is kind of like quite a laid back culture and things can change, plans can change, but like, just have fun. It's such a beautiful country, culturally, I love it. We, like I said, we're going back there again and again and again. And even once Isaac's parents, my husband's parents leave Nepal, I know it'll be a destination that we find ourselves coming back to. So if it's your first time visiting Nepal, it probably won't be your last. You might be back again. But, but actually I've got one more number one tip and this is to kind of just avoid getting sick. don't, you don't want to get sick. So just be careful of the water that you're drinking while you're in Nepal. we took, you know those bottles you can get with a filter in them. Those are just really great. And it means that you're just, you've got that extra level of protection everywhere you are and it means you don't have to buy like plastic water bottles that you're, you're throwing away. So that's a really, really good idea as well, just to keep yourself safe because you don't want to end up in a Nepali hospital. Probably not going to be.

Tracy: No, no, I don't think that's on anybody's itinerary to do that for sure.

Abigail shares her experience and love about Nepal on Global Travel Planning podcast

Thanks so much, Abigail for joining us this week and sharing your experience and love and ah, knowledge about Nepal. It was brilliant to chat to you.

Abigail: Awesome. Well, I'm excited for the episode in a couple of weeks as well because I thought I'd bring my husband in because he's got the real knowledge about Kathmandu.

Tracy: Oh, no. Brilliant. Well, we're going to get on to record that in a minute, but for this episode, thanks so much.

Abigail: I would go thank you so much, Tracy.

Tracy: Thank you for joining us on this episode of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. For more details and links to everything we discussed today, check out the show notes [@globaltravelplanning.com](https://www.globaltravelplanning.com) Remember, if you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on your favorite podcast app because your feedback helps us reach more travel enthusiasts just like you. Anyway, that leaves me to say, as always, happy Global Travel Planning.

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