

Top 5 Must-Do Experiences in Kathmandu: A Cultural Journey Through Nepal's Capital

This is episode 55 of the Global Travel Planning podcast

Tracy: Visiting

Tracy: Visiting Kathmandu and wondering what you absolutely can't miss. Which temples, markets and cultural experiences should be at the top of your list, and what insider tips will help you make the most of your time in Nepal's capital. This is episode 55 of the Global Travel Planner podcast, where we're sharing the top five must do experiences in Kathmandu. 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 55 of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. And, this week I have once again got Abigail from Aetura Adventures onto the podcast to talk about, well, Nepal, but specifically Kathmandu, with her husband Isaac, who is from Kathmandu. He was born in Kathmandu. So who best to talk to about Kathmandu than Isaac? So thank you so much, Abigail, for suggesting that Isaac come on the episode.

Would you guys like to introduce yourselves before we go into all things Kathmandu

Would you guys like to introduce yourselves before we go into all things Kathmandu? And, tell us a little bit about. About what you do and where you are, and just a general introduction would be great.

Abigail: So I'm Abigail. and Isaac's here too. We live in New Zealand, but we actually, I grew up in India and Isaac grew up in Nep. We met at high school. We're high school sweethearts. For some reason, Isaac flew around the world to be with me and now we've been in New Zealand for nine years and that's our life. But I'll let you introduce yourself too.

Isaac: Yeah. So I wasn't actually born in Kathmandu, but I moved there when I was two months old, so pretty much, so I spent the first, yeah, 14 years of my life growing up in Kathmandu. went to a local school there. And, yeah, that was my life. And then moved to India, met Abby in high school, and then moved to New Zealand after that. But it's still a place that's really dear to my heart and my parents are still living there. I've still got a family home. So.

Tracy: That's amazing. I mean, being there at two months old, it just about qualifies you for being born there, doesn't it, really?

Isaac: Yeah.

Tracy: Taken there as a small babe. So tell me, what was it like growing up in Kathmandu, Isaac?

Isaac: Ah, yeah. I mean, for me, it was normal. I didn't really know anything else. yeah, but I loved it. It was a real fun place to grow up as a kid. I mean, from pretty much when

I Could ride a bike. I could go wherever I wanted. It was like. Yeah. My parents would just send me back by dinner time and I'd be out riding around and. Yeah, it was a really awesome place. It's. It's a. A place where people are really friendly and welcoming and quite an easy place to grow up as a kid.

Abigail: for context, when we were back there two months ago, we're just walking down the street near Isaac's house, and the shopkeeper's like, ah, hello, Isaac. And they've been the same shopkeeper that's seen him growing up from, like, I don't know, two years old, coming to the shop to buy his candy or whatever.

Isaac: Yeah.

Abigail: and they recognize him. And it's. It's. There's such a strong community feel every time I go back, and I'm just like, oh, everyone knows you.

Isaac: Yeah.

Tracy: yeah, that's so lovely.

Your parents live in Nepal and have been there for 30 years

And the fact I'm gonna be really nosy and ask why your parents moved to Kathmandu.

Isaac: Yeah.

Tracy: Of all places.

Isaac: so they both work as linguists, working with some of the, like, smaller tribal languages in Nepal. so my dad especially is involved in a lot of adult literacy, teaching, like, adults how to read and write, and, like, developing curriculums and resources for people in their own languages as opposed to English or the national language. Yeah.

Abigail: So they've been there for 30 years. I think it's just home for them now. They don't want to leave. They keep telling us that they're going to leave and retire somewhere else, but we'll believe it when we see them.

Tracy: Yeah, they will. I mean, after 30 years, it's a big thing to move a place where you're settled and you've brought your kids up and, you know, it's home. It would be really difficult to choose somewhere.

Abigail: We're not complaining because we love visiting them and we get to stay with them whenever we're in Kathmandu. Yeah, fine by us.

Tracy: Exactly. You get to visit all the time. So what. What makes Kathmandu so special?

Isaac: I think it's just such a. Yeah, it's a friendly and welcoming place, and it's a really easy place to go to as, somebody who maybe has never been to Nepal before or even not traveled around Asia much. It's. English is pretty widely spoken everywhere. It's kind of one of the main languages of commerce, so you don't really need to know much Nepali to get around. Although people love it. If you do pick up bits and pieces, they always really appreciate it. And there's just so much rich history and culture, I guess, all enclosed in one little valley. Like, it's. It's not too big of a city, really, but there's so much to see and do and explore and eat and. Yeah, you can spend so long down all the little back alleys discovering all sorts of hidden gems.

Tracy: and of course, I mean, you grew up there, so you're gonna know it like the back of your hand. So, yeah, so imagine I'm gonna visit. I never been before. What would be the experiences that you would say that I shouldn't

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Tracy: miss?

Isaac: Yeah, there's a few key ones kind of that are really popular, and they're popular for a reason, because they're pretty special. and most of them are either parts of the old cities that were in the valley, where there's lots of really historic temples and kind, of along with that, old buildings and just a lot of history. And then, the other ones would just be temple sites. So Kamidu is quite an interesting junction between Hinduism from the south and India and Buddhism coming down from the north. You get both of those religions kind of mixing, so you can get to see both sides of. Of that kind of culture and that religion. so kind of one of the big ones would be Bauda Stupa. It's the largest. One of the largest, like, Tibetan Buddhist, like, pilgrimage sites in the world. So that's quite an amazing place to see. You see all the monks kind of going around it, doing their. Yeah. Doing their pilgrimages.

Abigail: And people might have seen this, in photos or, I don't know, magazines before, but it's this giant, like, white dome kind of thing with, like, flags around it, like, lots of prayer flags. You'll know when you see it. It's very iconic, and it's one of my favorite places to sit in Kathmandu. And people watch. so, like, surrounding the stupa are a whole bunch of, like, cafes. So you can, like, go onto the second or third floor and you're looking down on this. and there's all the pilgrims going around. And this is actually a really good tip. You only go round the super clockwise. It's very bad karma to go around

anticlockwise. but just follow the direction that everyone else is doing.

Isaac: Yeah, it's pretty obvious. Yeah.

Abigail: So that's probably the main, Tibetan Buddhist site. And then Pashupatinath is a, Hindu. It's their burning grounds where they cremate the bodies of their dead and their loved ones. And it's a Very important religious site for them, so it can be quite confronting. It was my first time ever going to Burning Ghats when we were there two months ago. And you do literally see these bodies on. On P.S. and the, the holy river, the Bagmati, goes straight through. And that's why this is such a sacred place. But somewhere like that, I would really recommend getting a guide so that you kind of understand some of these important cultural rituals, and the significance of what you're seeing there.

Isaac: Yeah, it's. It's. I m. Mean, it's wholly. For Hindus, the river flows all the way down into the Ganges, so it's quite a. Yeah, quite a significant place. But, yeah, like Abby said, definitely having a guide to kind of explain some of the nuances and the kind of. Yeah, symbolism surrounding what's going on is really helpful. at that place, there are a lot of monkeys, so you'd have to be a bit careful taking. Taking food and drink there. yeah, there's a few big swarms of monkeys that kind of hang around. So top tip, they're not cute.

Abigail: Monkeys aren't cute.

Isaac: No.

Tracy: I know. No. Well, I grew up between Africa and Europe, and I don't like monkeys.

I think we had that conversation before up here. I do not like them.

Abigail: Have.

Tracy: The last time we were in Bali, I was like, they were trying to take photos. We were having, like, a photo shoot, me and Doug, and. And I just kept freaking out because the monkeys kept coming far too close to me. And it's like, nope. Thank you very much. So, yeah, I know. Issue in India as well, last year. And, so it's good to know that that's also something you need to be aware of in Nepal, for sure.

Isaac: Yeah.

Bhaktapur is a UNESCO World Heritage site

Tracy: So what else. What else should I add into my itinerary?

Abigail: Yeah, so covered two, I think the next two big ones. one is called Patan Durbar Square, and the other is called Bhakt. And these are both the centers of kind of these ancient, cities. So Kathmandu Valley used to kind of have three different kingdoms and three different rulers, and these were the centers of these cities. And now, of course, like, with urbanization, Kathmandu is just all melted into one another. So these are more like neighborhoods. But Bhaktapur is actually a really cool place to visit. it's a UNESCO World Heritage site, but it's run entirely by the people of Bhaktapur. And they have, like, you'll have your family name, and that's what you do. Like, that is your Your trade, your art, and it is the center of art. we met painters. We met pottery people.

Isaac: Pottery potters. Yeah. Wood carvers.

Abigail: Like, yeah, it was wood carvers, metalsmiths, like, bricklayers. And like, our guide has been a painter in his, like, his family for generations, so he was learning the art of painting as well. And it's so cool. Like, not only is this a historic site, but it is still like, I. Living history. and everyone that lives there, they still live in these same houses. And they visit all these sites, these temples and other cultural sites that have been there for ages. And it was actually Isaac's first time in Bhaktapur, which I was like, you've lived in Kathmandu. How have you not been here? This is one of the biggest tourist attractions. But I guess sometimes you forget the tourist attractions when you live there. So why don't you share your, like, impressions of Bhaktapur?

Isaac: Yeah, it was like Abby said, it's amazing that it's just still like this living, breathing place and all these artisans practicing art in the same way that they have for, like, a thousand years. And these temples that have. Have been there for, in some cases, 800,000 years. It's amazing to see these buildings and. And just all the people that,

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Isaac: like, it's this amazing UNESCO site, but there's still people going about their daily lives. And, while we were there, like, we had some school kids come through, and I don't know, it's just such a. An amazing blend of history and culture and. And livelihoods.

Abigail: And there was something about the fact that it's still run entirely by the people that live there. So it is a UNESCO site, but I think they. All the tour guides are from that area, and they get to kind of keep that money within their community as well. So it's not only is it, like a great place to visit, but you also know you're supporting these, these

artisans, the whole. The whole culture there. So it's a really, really cool place.

Isaac: Yeah.

Tracy: Now I was gonna say, is it easy to get a guide to take you around? Is that the best way to do it?

Isaac: Yeah. So we didn't pre organize a guide. Like, we just got a taxi. There's gate. We got a taxi there, and there's like a, like all these guides next to the ticket office who are like the official guides. So you, know you're getting someone who, like, knows this thing, and you're not going to get ripped off, but you definitely want to take a whole day for it. Like, Some of the tour companies will combine that with a few other things in a day and like you're just going to get rushed through it and not actually get to spend the time there. So it's definitely worth taking a whole day to go do.

Abigail: Yeah. So Patan Dea Square is another one of these centers. and it's got these, all these like, yeah, similar temples and stuff. there's not too much to kind of do in Patan, but it's just fun to wander around the streets. And you'll definitely notice this when you're in Nepal, but it's got the highest density of temples per capita or something. But like every single street corner will have another little shrine or temple and you're just like, there's another, there's another, there's another. So that's something that's really interesting. And again if you can get like a rooftop cafe there and just, just people watch, it's so much fun. And the last place I'll probably mention is Tamil. And this is quite close to the third center, the third historic kind of city. but everyone that goes to Kathmandu, you're probably likely to stay in Tamil. It's kind of the center of where like the center where tourists kind of stay.

Isaac: And yeah, I mean it's close to the center of the city geographically as well. Like it's near downtown and definitely the tourist hub. that's where. Yeah, you've got all the like hotels and hostels and every kind of cuisine you could ever want. But yeah, it's a really fun place. There's lots of narrow streets with unlimited shopping. Like you can, you can spend days just wandering around. But yeah, that's, that's a really good.

What would I buy in Nepal when I go shopping

Tracy: What would I buy? You've mentioned shopping so I'm now like. So, so what sort of things are there for sale? I saw Abigail smile.

Abigail: So there's lots of like knickknacks and souvenirs that you can take home. anything you can think of.

Isaac: There's lots of like handicrafts that people like, like hand knitted wool jumpers. You can buy like beautiful silk carpets, lots of like kind of knockoff like trekking gear. So it might not be original but it's pretty cheap and normally pretty good quality. so a lot of people kind of come back with a lot of the, the knockoff trekking gear. but it's, yeah, most of it's pretty good. And yeah, a lot of knickknacks you can, any sort of souvenir. there's all sorts of. Yeah, I guess a lot of very typically Nepali stuff that you might not find other places. or things that have originated in Nepal and then spread. Yeah, but there's. Yeah, there's a million little back alleys that you could spend forever getting lost in. Yeah, it's lots of fun.

Tracy: Sounds amazing.

Are there any seasonal, uh, events that go on in Kathmandu

Are there any kind of seasonal, events and things that go on in Kathmandu that are worth kind of planning your itinerary around?

Abigail: They have some big festivals that are really fun.

Isaac: So, yeah, the kind of the autumn season is kind of the season for the big festivals. so normally it kind of changes the do it off the lunar calendar, so every year it'll be slightly different, but generally kind of between September and November, there's two main festivals. There's Tihar and there's Desai. And these are nationwide huge religious festivals. Tihar is kind of the equivalent to the Indian Diwali, so they have lots of lights and fireworks and, Yeah, it's. It's a really special time to be in the city. There's all sorts of activities and dancing and. Yeah. Religious sorts of things. so those are definitely highlights, like, highlight times of year to go. And they also coincide well with the. Like, the trekking season. So if you're wanting to explore the rest of Nepal, that's a great time. You can spend a while in Kathmandu, kind of getting all the culture and the. That religion side of it, and then head out into the mountains when there's good weather.

Abigail: What's the one with the chariot that they take through the streets?

Isaac: Yeah, they have one at the beginning of July, and it's kind of bringing the monsoon and the rains, which they need for their crops. But they build this giant chariot, must be, like, 10 stories tall on these massive wooden wheels. And then, like, whole teams of guys pull it through the city on wooden. Like. Yeah, on these massive wooden wheels. But they have to cut all the electrical lines because it's. All the electrical lines go

across the street. So you see there's a guy going ahead with, like, yes, this is cutting all the electrical lines ahead so they can get the chariot through.

Tracy: Oh, that's so funny. Yeah, so you kind of know. You kind of know at that time of year, you're gonna. You know you're gonna lose your electricity.

Isaac: Oh, yeah. Electricity and Internet and phones. Yeah. It can be. Can be quite disruptive.

Tracy: So, how am I gonna get around Kathmandu? So I arrive at the airport, and I'm gonna go to my hotel. So how

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Tracy: Do I get around, like, the basic stuff, like.

Isaac: Yeah. So from the airport, a lot of hotels can organize a pickup, but taxis are kind of the easiest way to get around. Taxi drivers are pretty good at knowing the city, and, if they don't know exactly, they'll always stop and ask. But they're pretty affordable. A more recent development, which I only kind of encountered our last trip back, was like, rideshare apps, kind of like the Nepali version of Uber. but they're kind of easy because you don't have to haggle. It's a fixed price kind of from the app.

Abigail: You can actually haggle on the app, which I think is so funny. But that's a different conversation.

Isaac: Well, it's. I think it's easier as a tourist because the prices are kind of set, so you

have an idea of how much it should cost. and you can also, like, schedule them, like, if you. Yeah, if you want to know that you book head something for tomorrow and you're not just reliant on trying to find a taxi.

Tracy: Oh, that's good.

Isaac: Kathmandu has a great restaurant scene

So, we talked about food in episode 50, and it does sound nice because, yeah, I mean, I have a fairly high spice tolerance. So we did talk about food, the. The kind of spice level. But what are your favorite foods to eat when you're back in Kathmandu? Isaac?

Isaac: Yeah, I mean, there's definitely the typical Nepali cuisine, which is quite different. You don't tend to find it too much around the world, but Kathmandu also just has a great restaurant scene. There's kind of whatever. Whatever sort of cuisine you're into. There's a. An Italian pizza place that opened, like, the 1940s or 50s, and it's still been going, and it's kind of an icon. It's right in Tamel, where the tourist center is. And I think for a lot of people, it's a nice slice of home for them. When they're sick of eating Nepali food, they can have some normal pizza and pasta and feel a bit at home. I think there's just so much choice. Whatever floats your boat, you can find. Which, is quite nice in Kathmandu, at least, because a lot of the times if you go out trekking or other places, it's quite limited the cuisine that you can find, so it's nice to have a bit of variety. but I don't know if Abby mentioned this earlier, but Momos are kind of the Nepali version of dumplings, and they're. Yeah, they're definitely a highlight for me. We. I'm sure I ate my body weight in momos when we were there.

Abigail: That's the aim. Every trip. That's what we aim to do.

Tracy: I was going to say this. There's always, you know, when you go back home or somewhere that you've got strong connection and ties with, there's always the first thing you want to eat when you arrive that you have on your. Like, I can't wait to have. So it's. It sounds like you definitely enjoy the dumplings. You say they. Are they filled with something? Have they got different. Different fillings or kind of a standard fil. Filling or.

Isaac: Yeah, you can get all sorts of different fillings. Typically, they'll have, like, vegetarian ones. Chicken, they do buff, like, which is buffalo instead of beef. Those are kind of the three normal ones that you'll get. But then they get prepared in all sorts of different ways. They're steamed or fried or boiled or in a soup or like, in. With a curry. So you can. There's quite a bit of variety.

Abigail: Try them all.

Tracy: Yeah, I think I will. I'll just have to wait until I lose all the carb weight that I seem to put on in the winter in the Northern hemisphere, I have to say.

Isaac: Yeah.

Tracy: Because it's. Yes. It's not being good. That's one thing I actually need to do a little bit of, not trekking, but walking. That's for sure.

Isaac: Yeah.

Tracy: I know.

One of the big things is to do with cash when visiting Nepal

So share some. Tell me a stories. Tell me one of your favorite experiences together as a couple that you've had when you've been in Kathmandu.

Abigail: Oh, I have one that comes.

Isaac: Yeah, you go. Go ahead.

Abigail: when we were at Boudenath Stupa, which is this. Yeah. One of the oldest, Buddhist temples in the world, they were actually, like, renovating it. and we were sitting up at this restaurant just looking over, and it took us a while to figure out what they're doing. But they're walking up the side of this dome, and there's these little steps carved into it, and they're carrying these buckets of something up, and we realized it was paint. And they're just kind of like throwing this paint onto the, Onto the stupa. Ah. And then this guy goes up with a whole bunch of prayer flags, like, all the way to the top, and they're stringing up these new prayer flag. And it was just, like, super unique. Like, I don't know how many times a year they do this. And then we just happened to be right place, right time, and we got to watch them, like. Yeah. Just give a little bit of a facelift to this temple.

Isaac: Yeah, it was really special. I'd never seen it before and I'd been heaps of times and yeah, like Abby said, it was just a fun place to people watch. We just sat in the window of this cafe for hours and just watched the world go by. And yeah, it was real special.

Tracy: I love that. Except it's those sort of things that you can't plan those things, can

you? You just have to use in the right place at the right time and it happens, which is amazing. I'm just thinking again of like first time visitors. Are there any mistakes that you think that people may make when they visit Kathmandu for the first time? Like maybe not spending too much time there? I'm wondering because I was kind of thinking, like, how much time do I need to spend there? You know, it's those sort of things.

Isaac: Yeah, I think, yeah, that is one of them. Lots of people will just have it as a quick stop before they go trekking because they've got limited time. But if you do have it in your travel like time budget, it's definitely worth spending. like a week is great. Like you can be busy the whole week. You're not going to be bored. if you have a couple days, you can kind of hit some of the places. But it can also be quite a nice place to

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Isaac: kind of like either relax and recover from your long flight and get over jet lag before you go trekking or on the other end, like once you finished your checking or whatever else you're doing to kind of have a couple days to wind down. And yeah, it's just a special place like that. I think one of the big things is to do with cash. I think like in the west nowadays we're so used to just using our debit cards for everything. But Nepal's still very much a cash culture, even within the city. only really, like big restaurants will accept cards. So you'll need cash, for the majority that you always use the atm. Yeah, atm. Well, I mean, my family always uses the same bank. It's Nabil Bank. They like have a big green sign. But ATMs are kind of going to be the easiest way to take out money you can if you've brought foreign currency and there's plenty of foreign currency converters where you can trade in your pounds or your dollars. but cash is definitely king and making sure you always have enough because sometimes, especially outside of the city, you might be a little ways away from an atm. so just

having a good cash reserve on you, especially for those impromptu purchases that you might not expect.

Abigail: And if you are doing trekking and you might be carrying a lot of cash, if you book with a tour company, you probably don't need to, but our recent trek, we kind of yourself booked, make sure you've got your cash in a few different places or a few different bags so that you're not losing it all. If, if it was to go missing or get stolen. It's just something to kind of be mindful of.

Tracy: Yeah, no, that's a good idea.

What's the tipping culture in Nepal? Is there a tipping culture

And I'm going to ask because I know, I get asked this all the time for the UK, but what's the tipping? Is there a tipping culture in Nepal?

Isaac: Yeah, Abby actually asked me this before the interview, but, in some regards, yes, I think lots of restaurants will have a surcharge added already onto your bill, including like a 10 or 15% tip. So most restaurants and cafes and that sort, so you don't really need to add anything extra. The tipping, where I would say is kind of expected, is more around the tourism activities. If you've had a tour guide for the day, it would generally be expected to tip, like, not a taxi driver, but like, yeah, a tour guide. Or if you've been trekking and you've had porters or guides or things like that, that's kind of more where that, that tipping would be expected. And I think a lot of it, it's more just to show your appreciation and kind of. Yeah, it's not necessarily expected from them. They're still going to be getting paid, but it's more just saying thanks for helping us and

for sharing your culture with us. yeah, great.

Tracy: Well, it's useful to know because around the world every culture has a different tip and culture and you don't want to do the wrong thing. You need to know exactly what the expectation is. I think it's just to be comfortable with it, really. So. So it's been great to chat with you guys about Kathmandu. it's definitely on my bucket list of destinations. I certainly will be returning to India and hoping to then add a trip to Nepal on at the same time. So I will be probably chatting with you again to find out any more if I need some, any more information. But, I think we've covered a lot in episode 50 and 55 about Nepal and Kathmandu, so it's been great to chat.

Isaac: Just walk around and explore. Tracy: Make your own adventure

Now, I'm going to ask you the classic question asked at the end of every episode. So I'm going to throw this at you, Isaac, what would be the one tip that you would share with anyone who visits is planning a visit to Kathmandu for the first time?

Isaac: Oh, one tip. I think my one tip is just to walk around and explore. Like, there's so much that you can see from having an unplanned adventure where you're not on a tour group or following a tour guide. Like, just go wander around, get lost in the streets. You'll never know what you're going to see. You'll never know what you come across. So, yeah, just. Just have some of that unstructured time to just explore and make your own. Make your own adventure.

Abigail: Tracy, I'm going to slide in with a trip with a tip as well, and this is specifically for you. we did this experience probably eight years ago, but you can take a scenic flight

from the Kathmandu airport, and it flies past so you can see Mount Everest, and then it lands back in Kathmandu. So if you don't want to go trekking, but you still want to see the mountains and you want to see Mount Everest, it's a really cool do. It takes a couple of hours. and it's just pretty epic.

Isaac: Yeah, right.

Tracy: That's going on to my itinerary for sure. So thank.

Abigail and Abigail join Global Travel Planning Podcast this week

Anyway, it's been great to talk to you guys this week, so I'm so happy that you both agreed to come on. It's. It's wonderful to talk to somebody who grew up in a destination. And obviously, Abigail, you've been so many times. You've got so much attachment and love for Kathmandu and Nepal as well. So thanks so much for coming on and sharing that with us.

Abigail: Us. Thank you so much.

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 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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