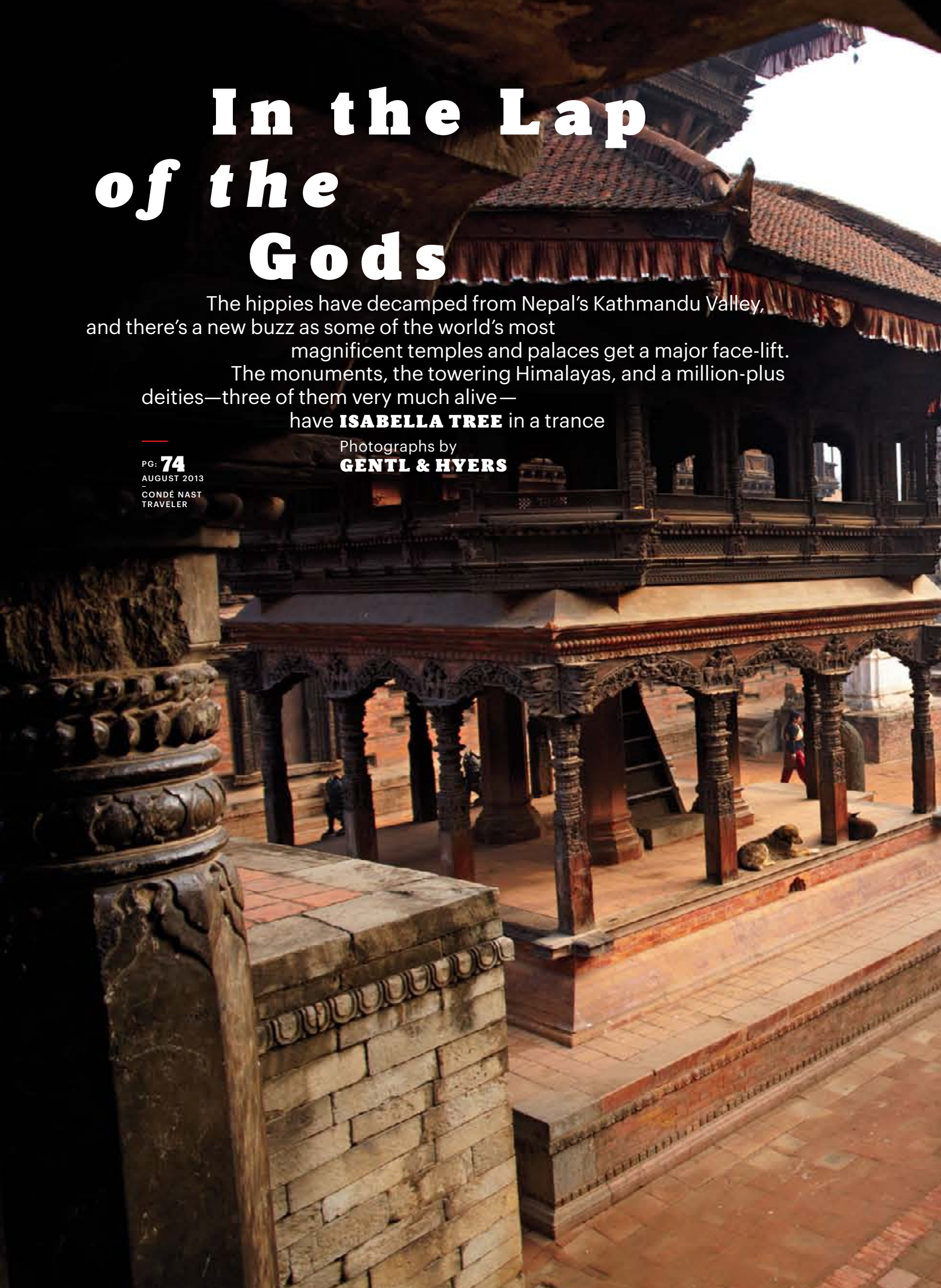
In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**

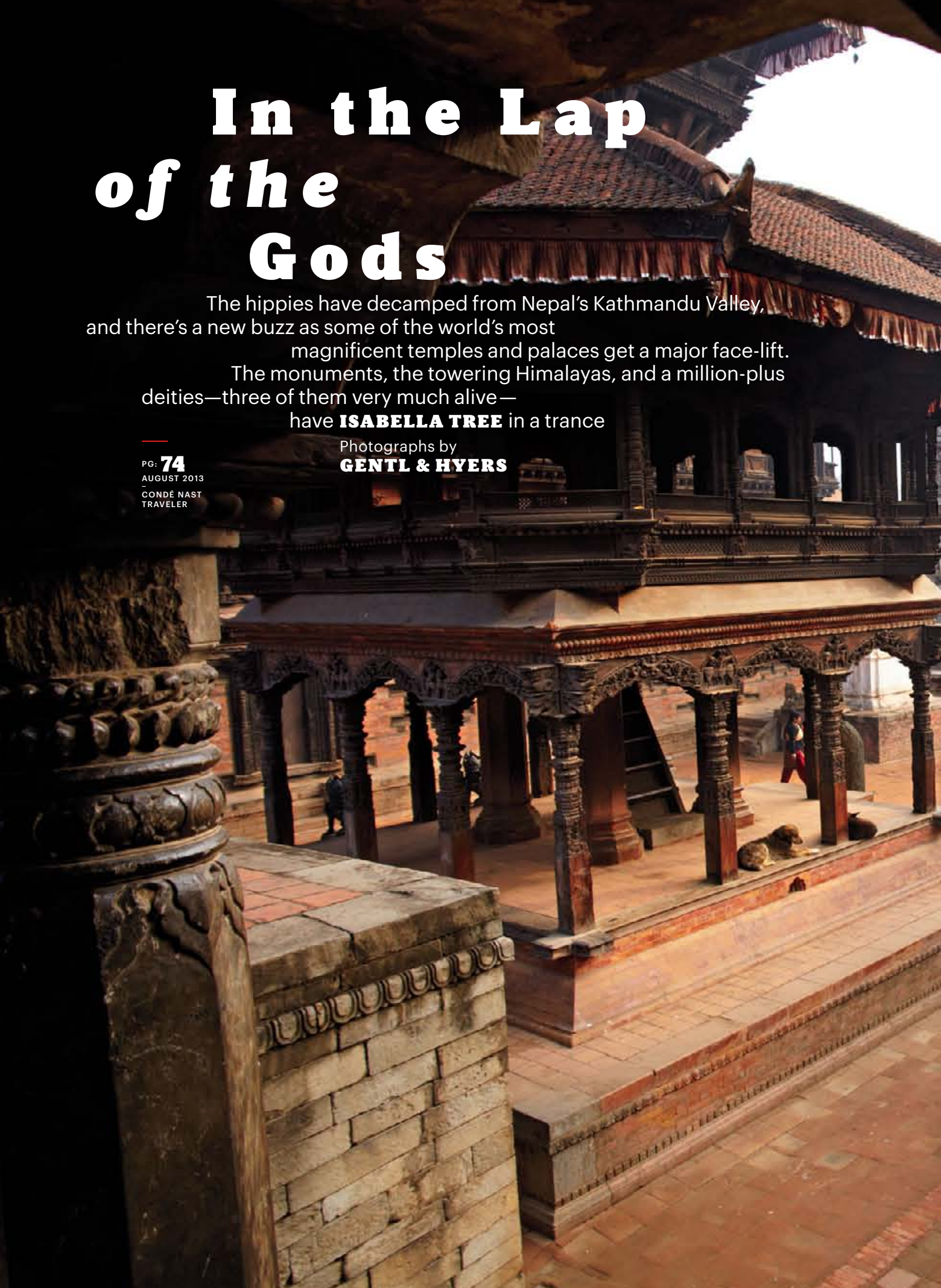
PG: 74
AUGUST 2013
CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER



In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

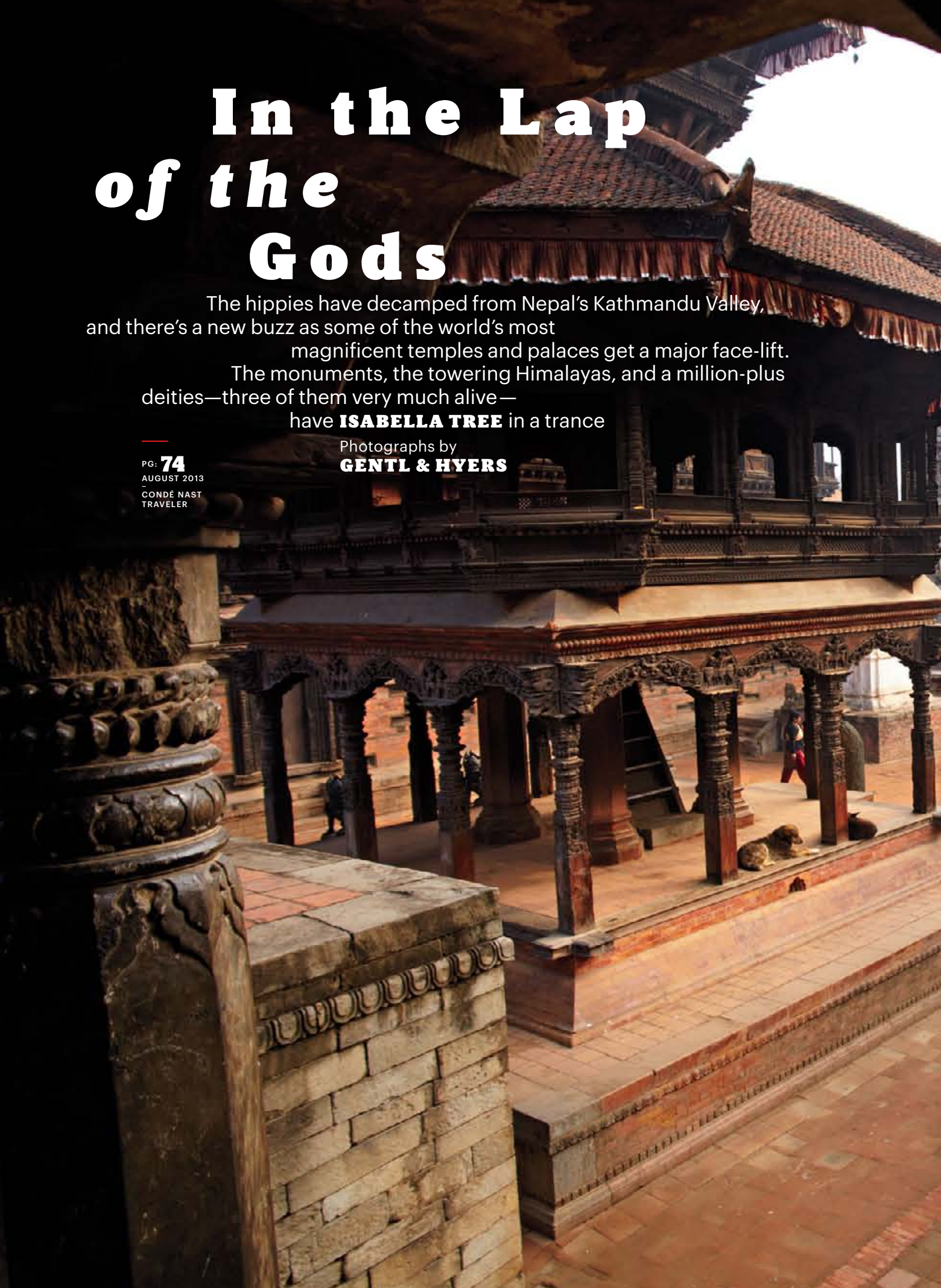
Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

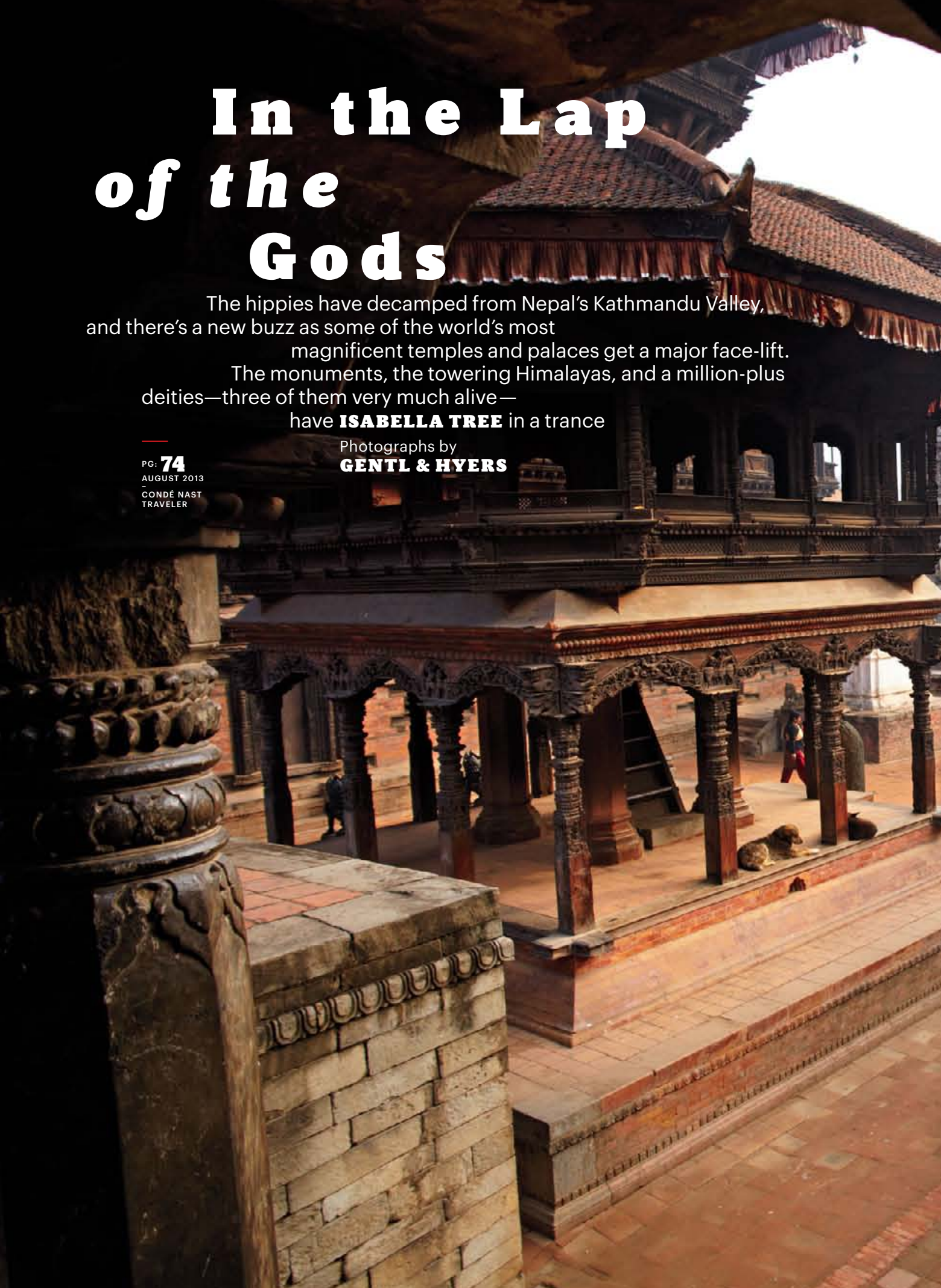
Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

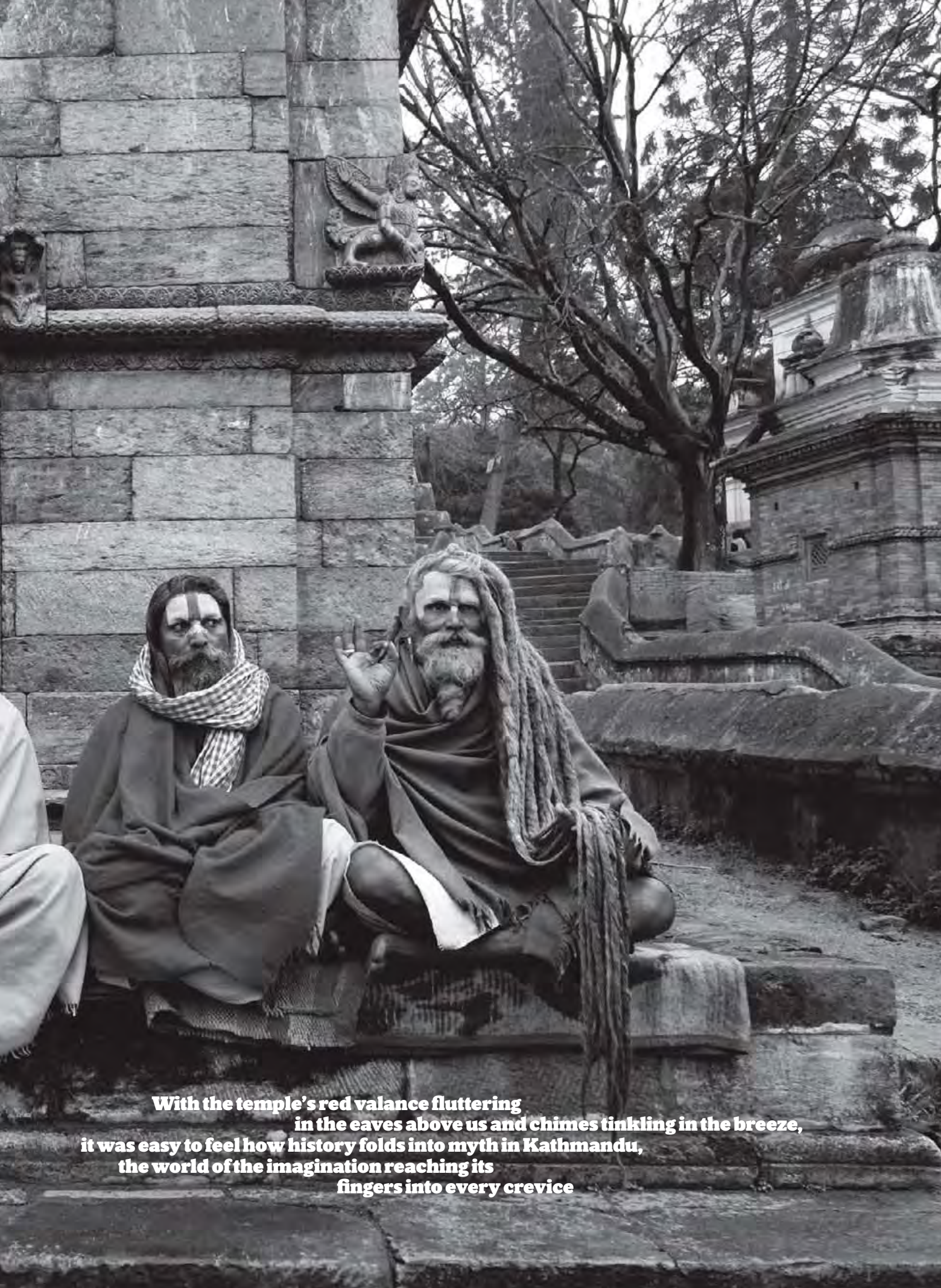
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

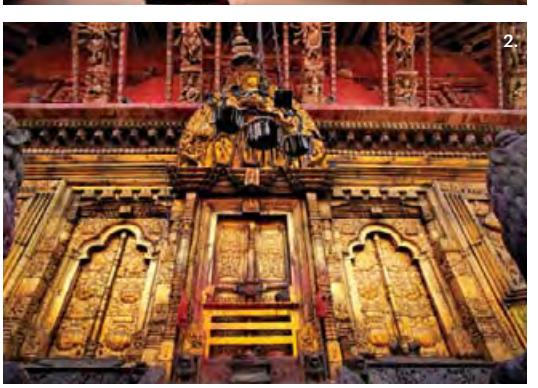
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

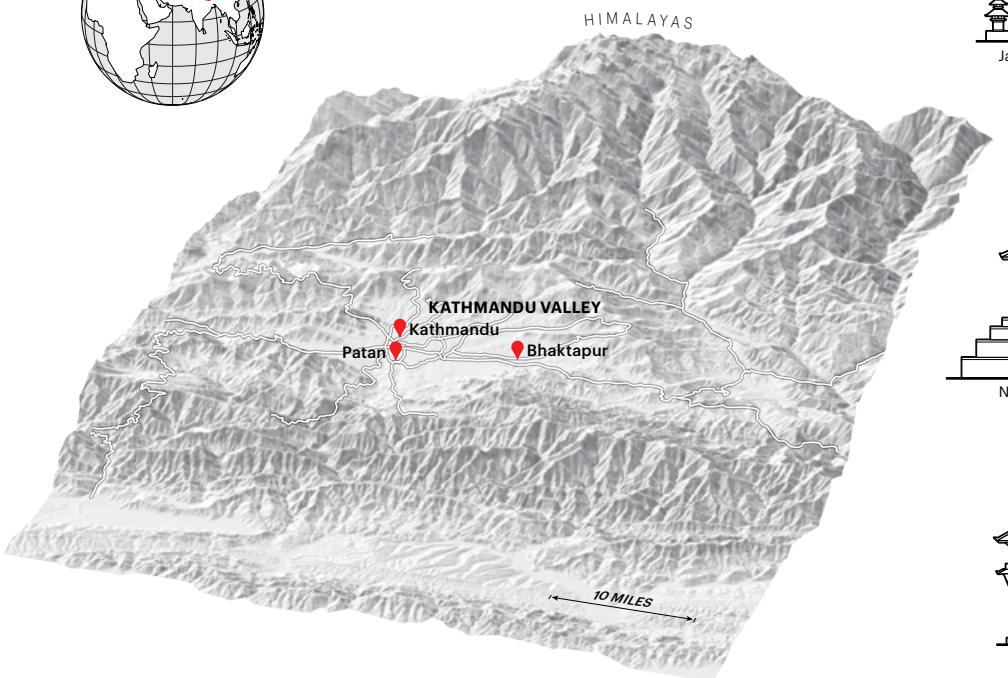
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

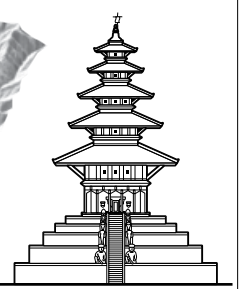
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures



Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU



Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR

Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

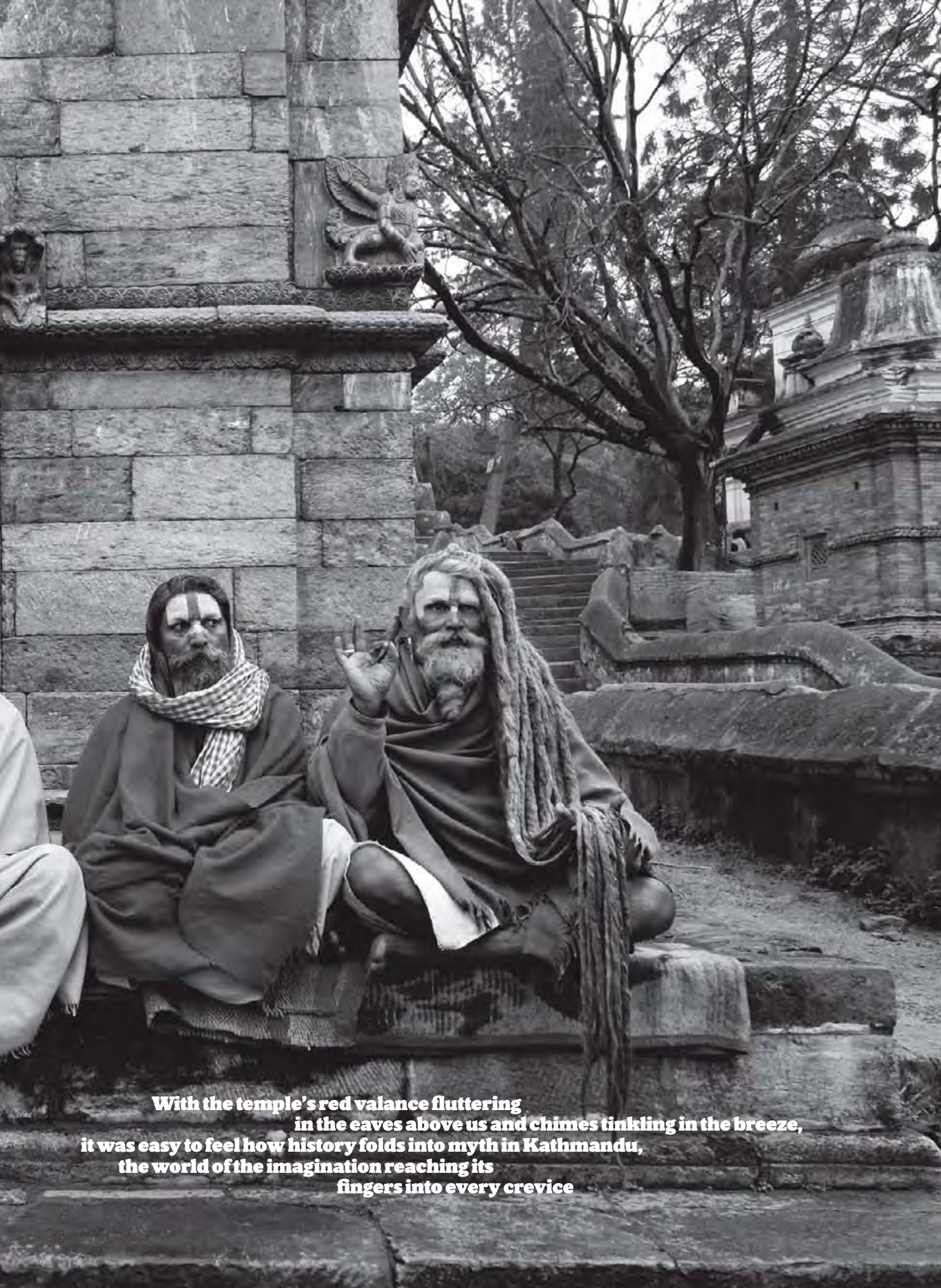
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

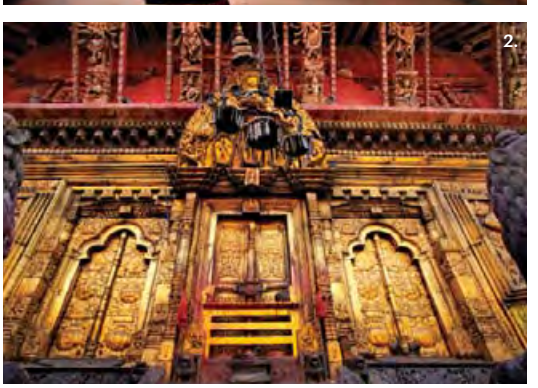
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

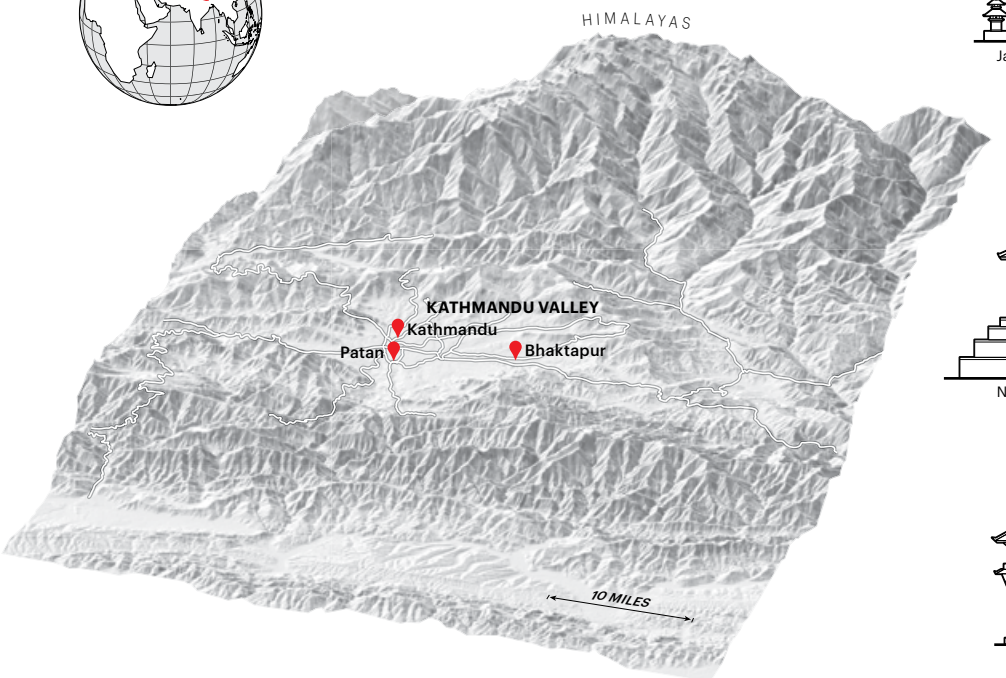
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

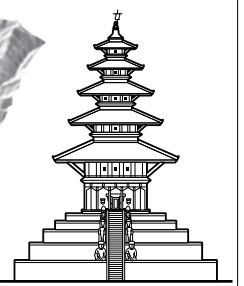
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures



Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU



Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR

Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

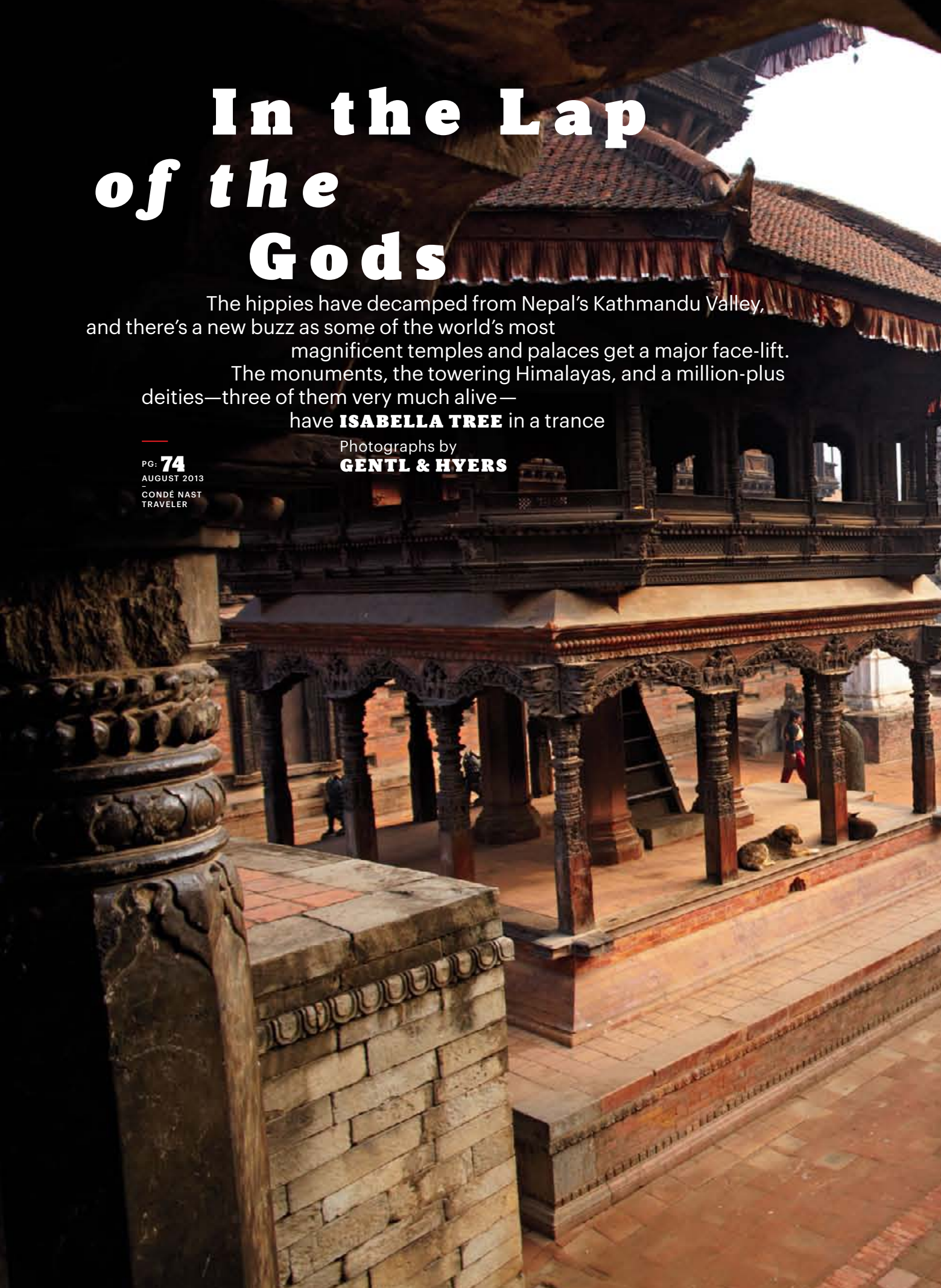
The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

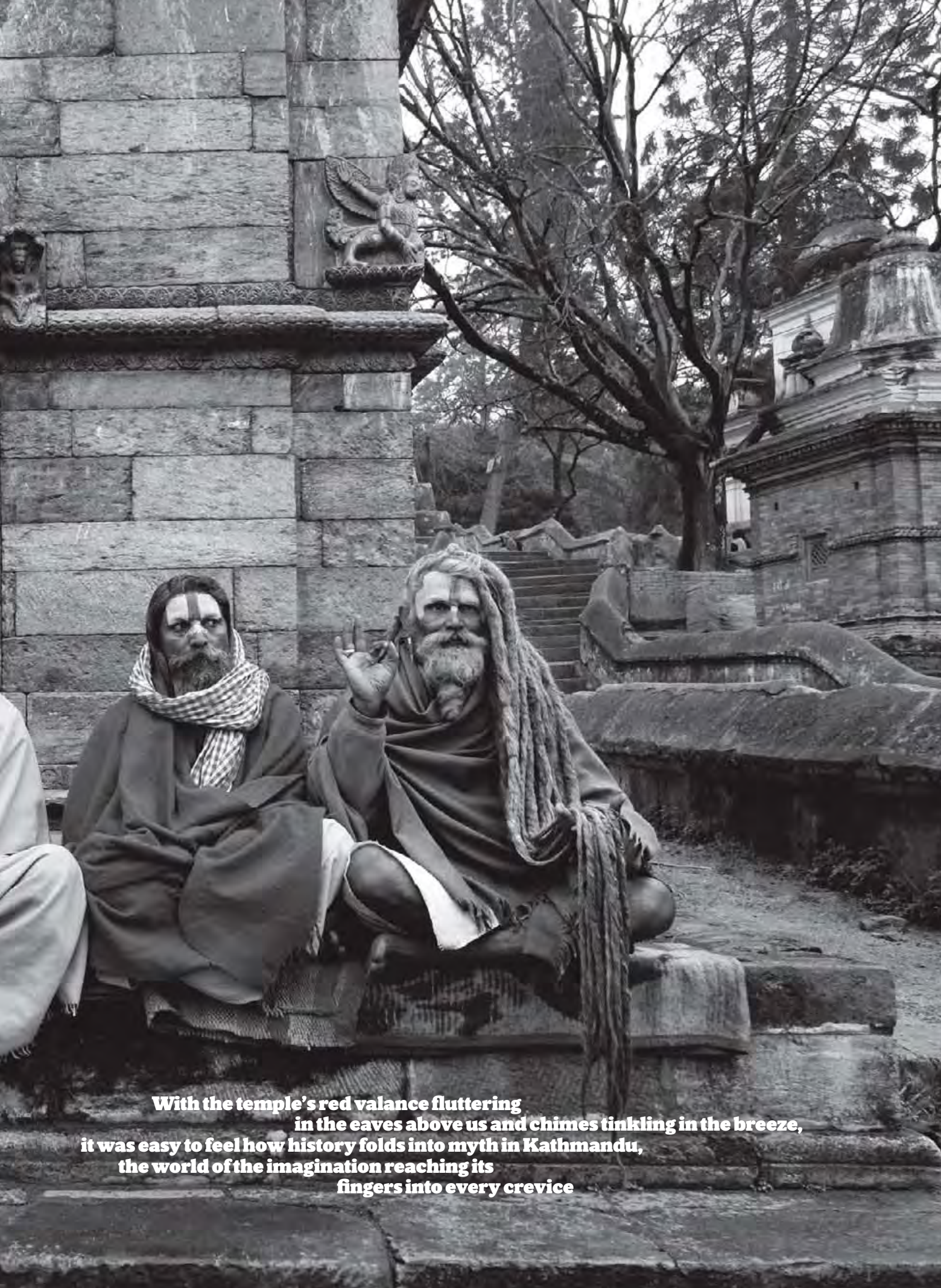
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

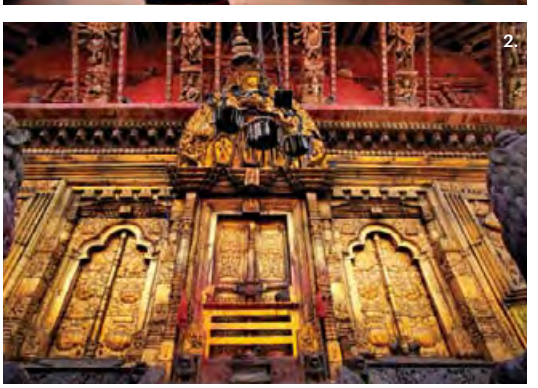
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

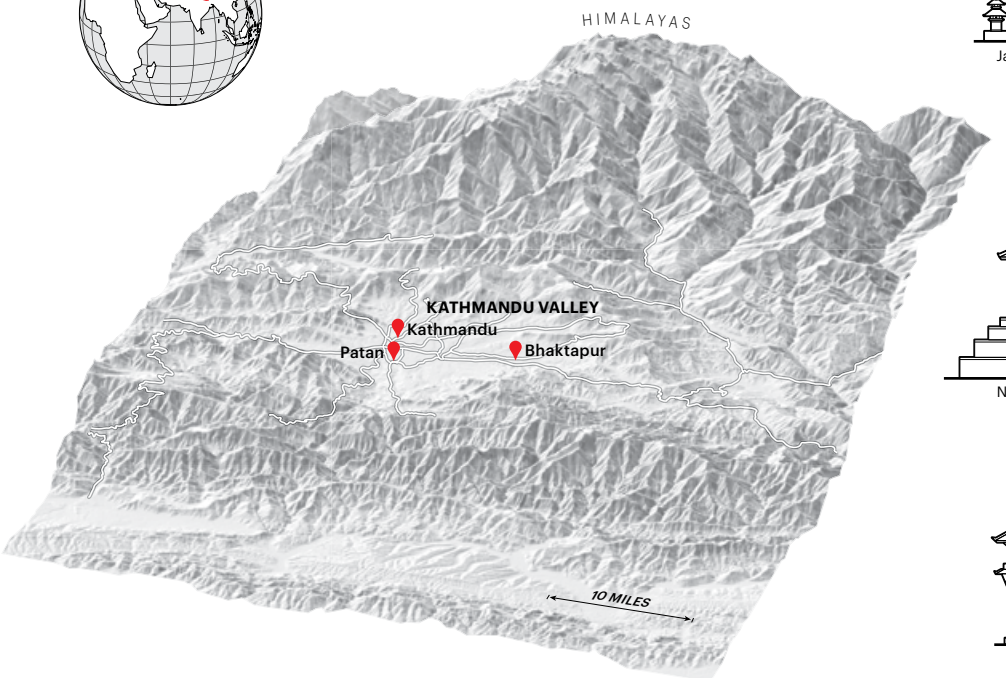
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

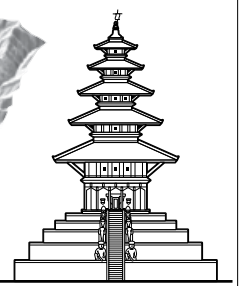
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures



Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU



Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR

Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

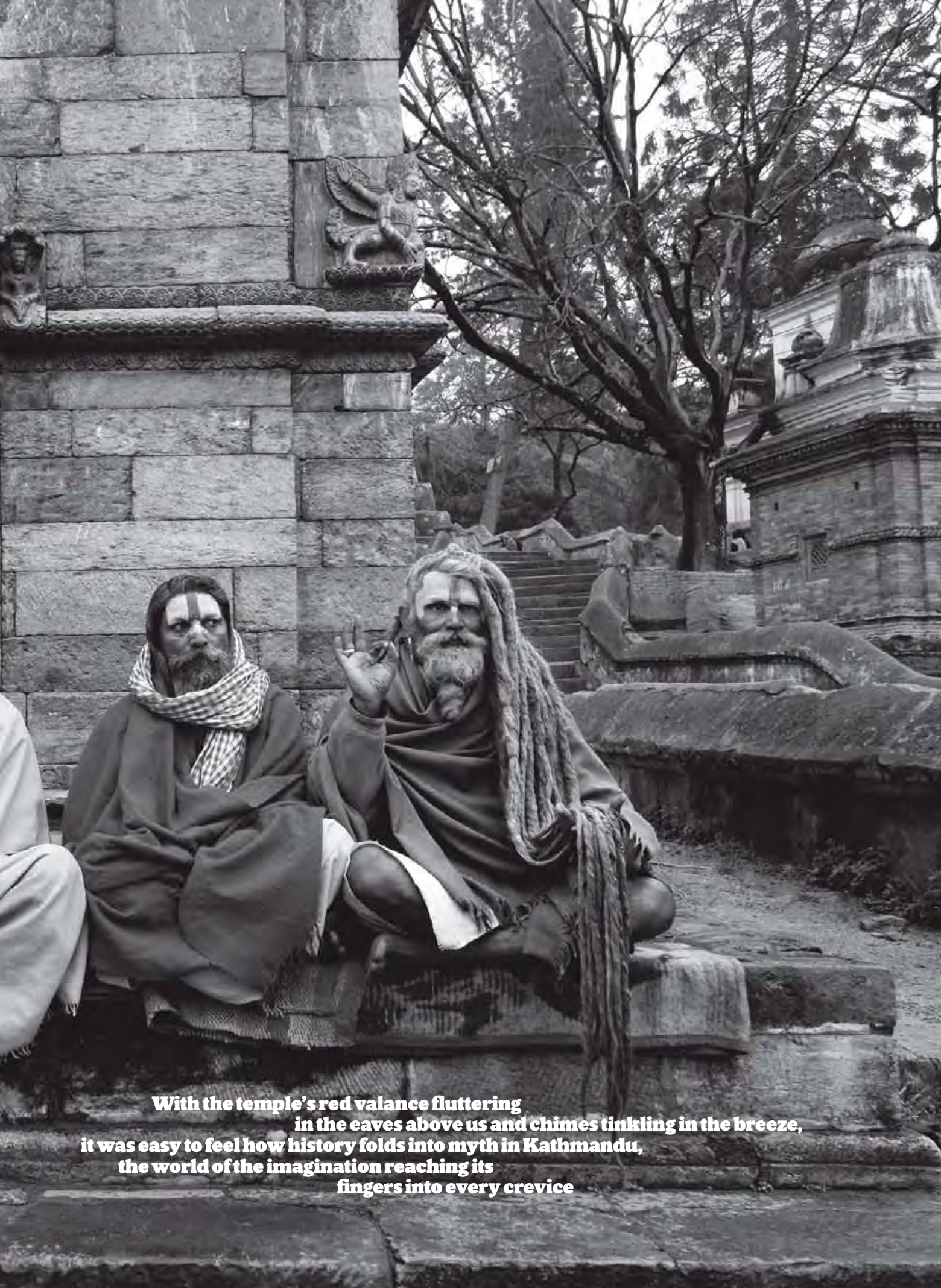
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

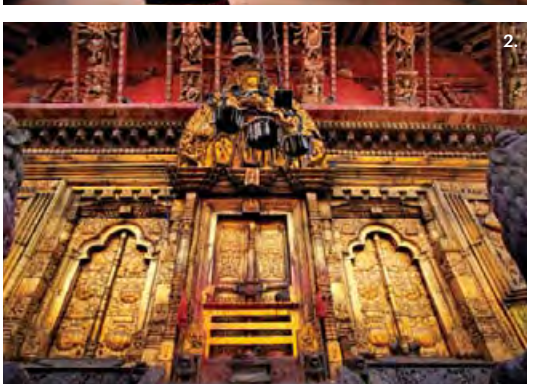
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

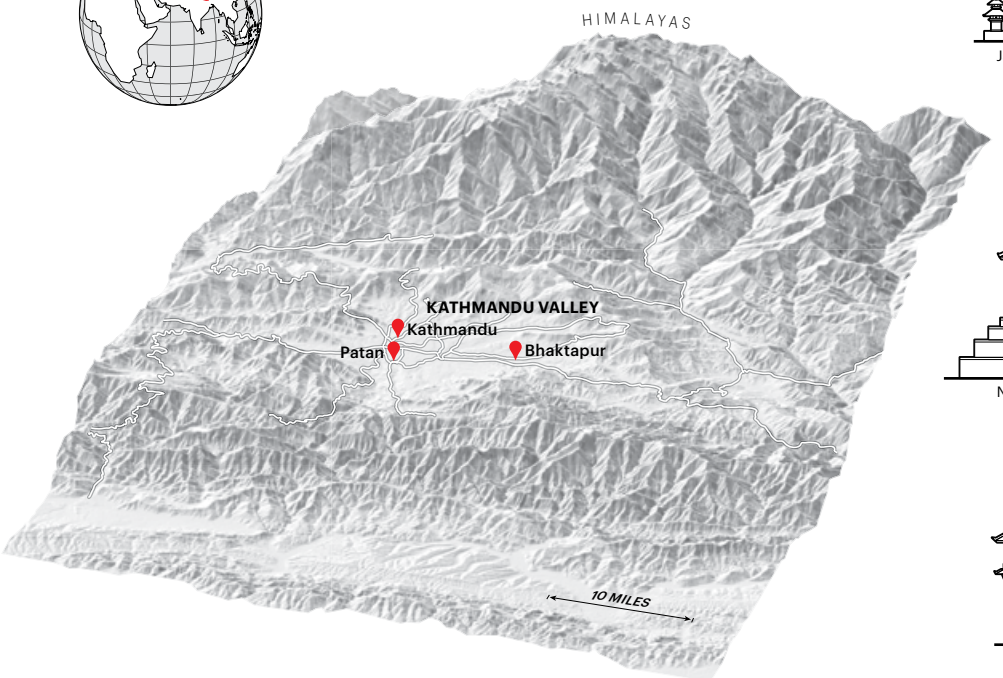
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

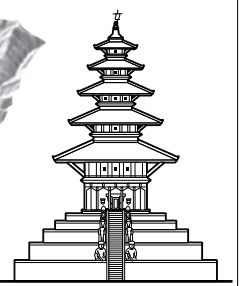
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures




Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU


Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR


Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

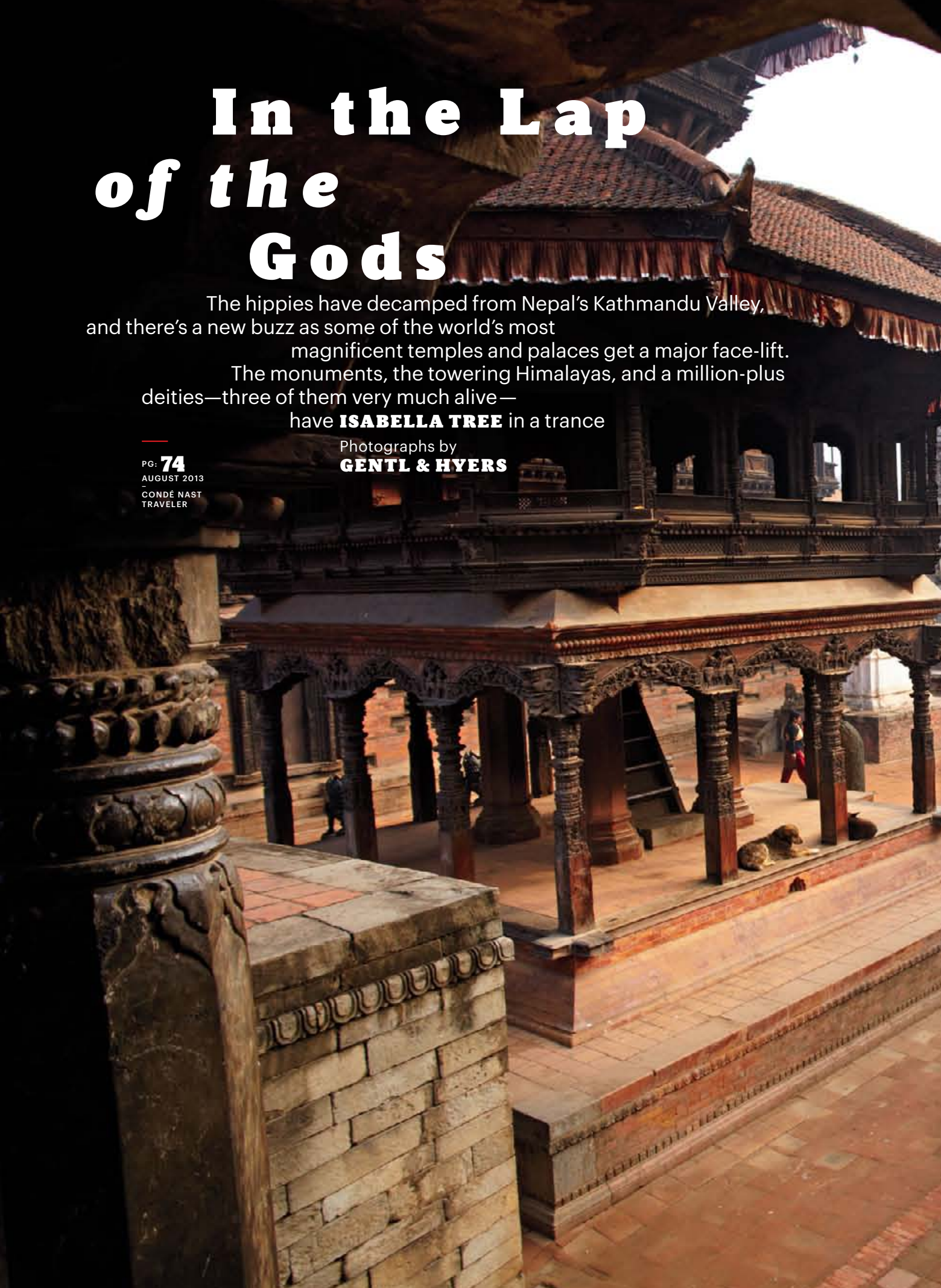
The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

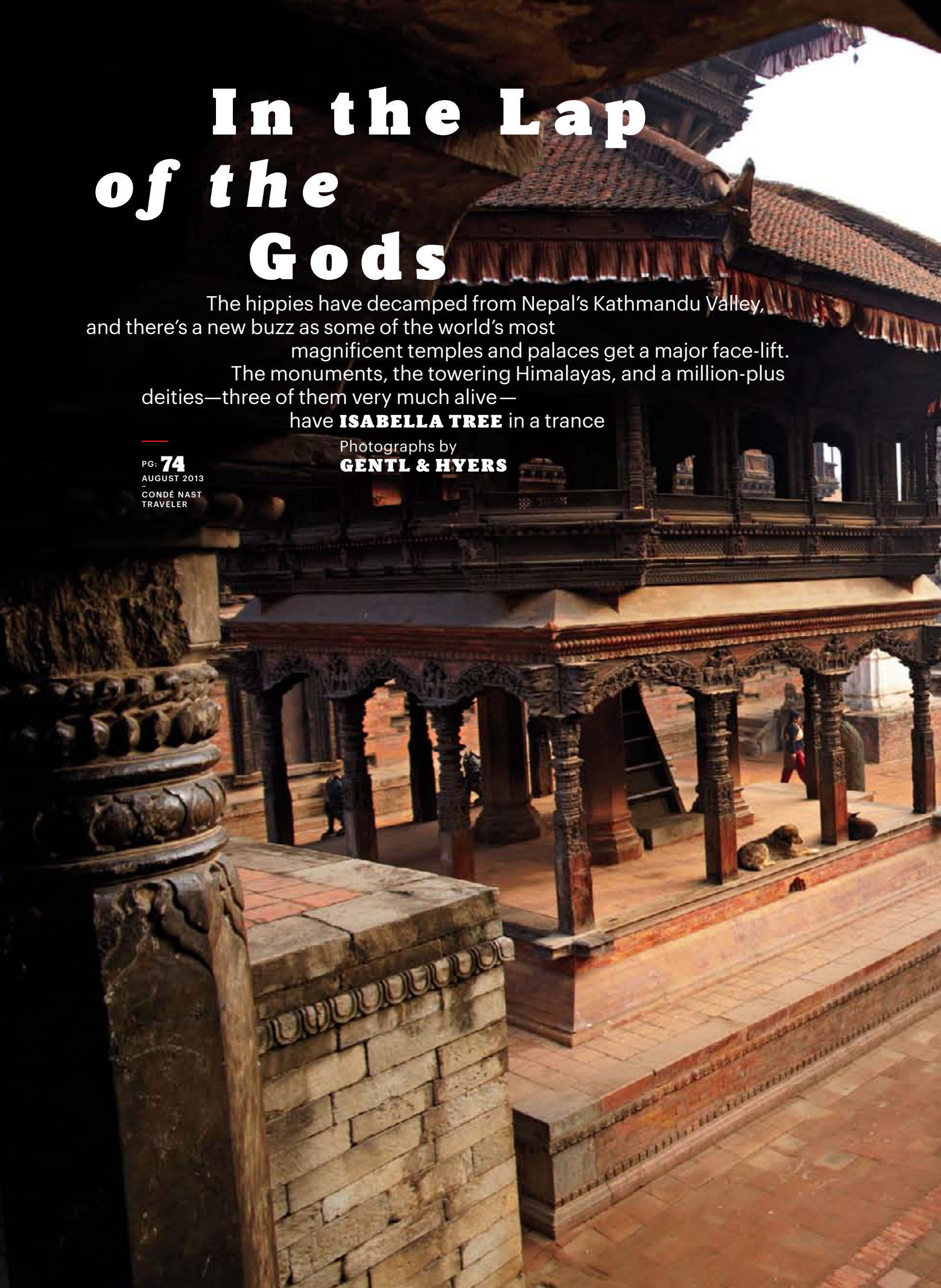
Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

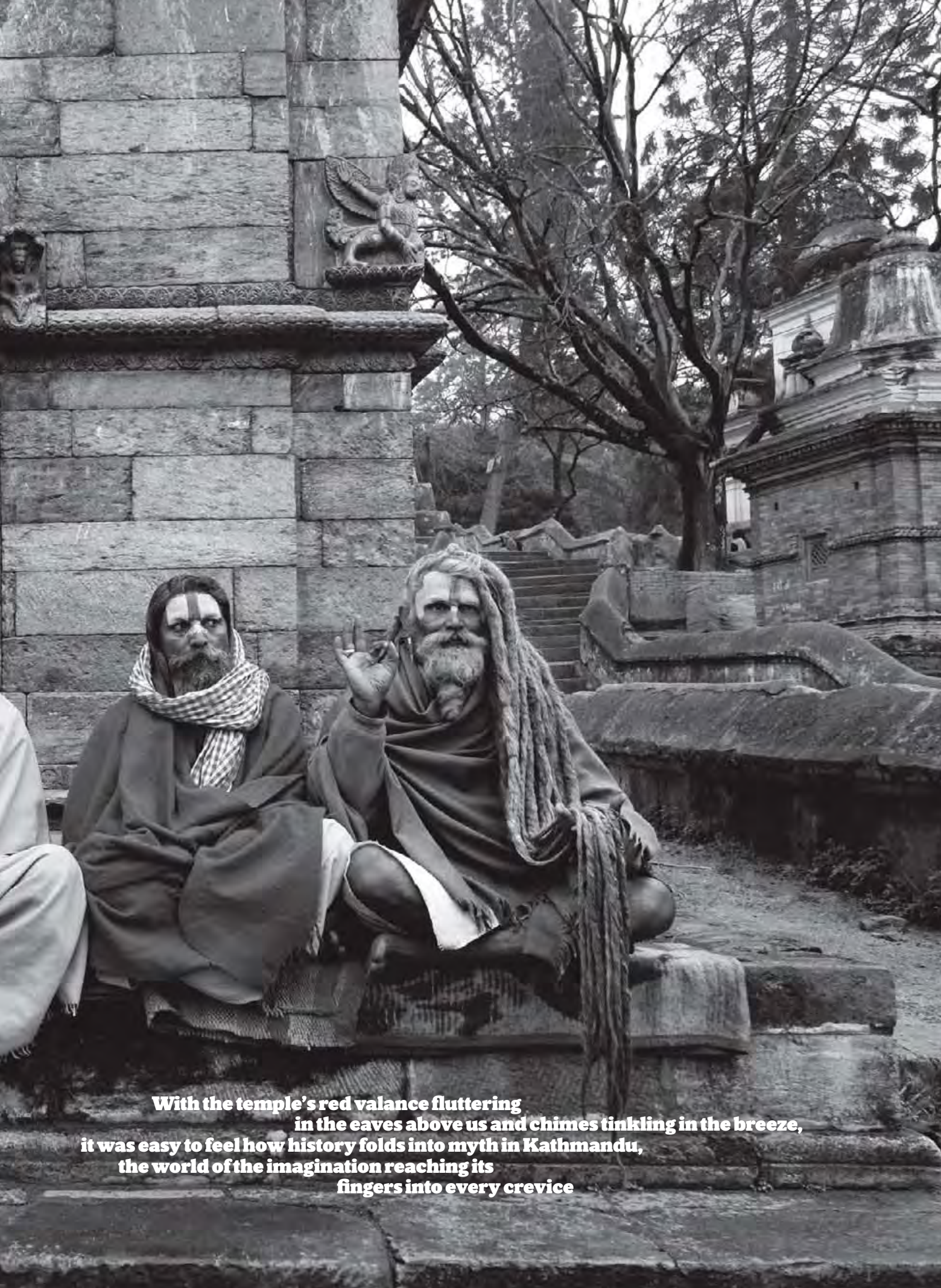
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

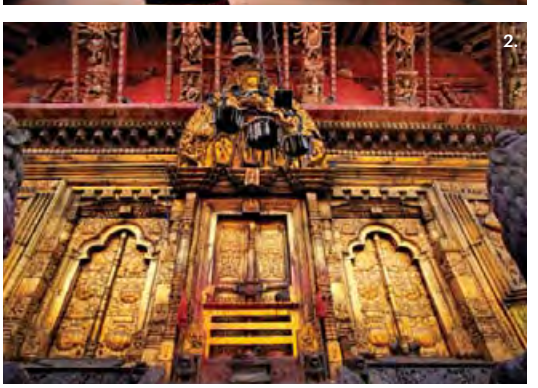
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

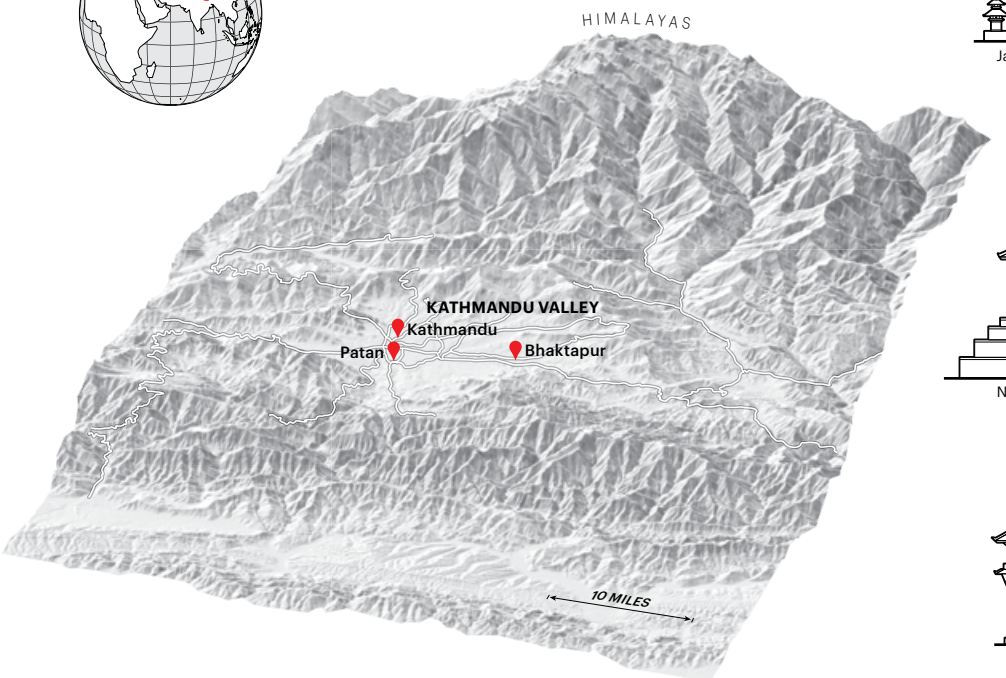
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

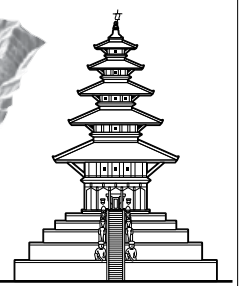
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures



Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU



Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR

Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

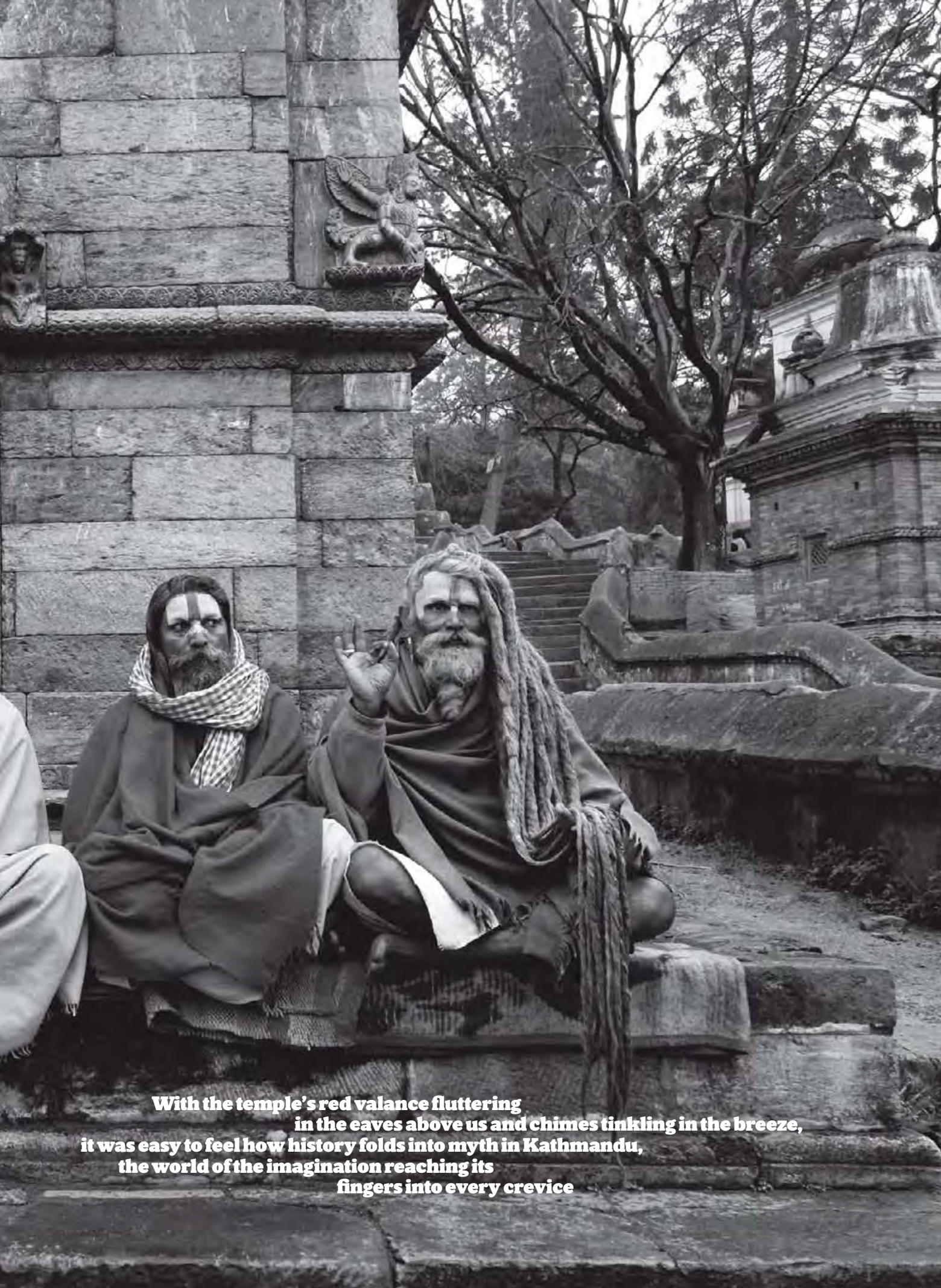
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

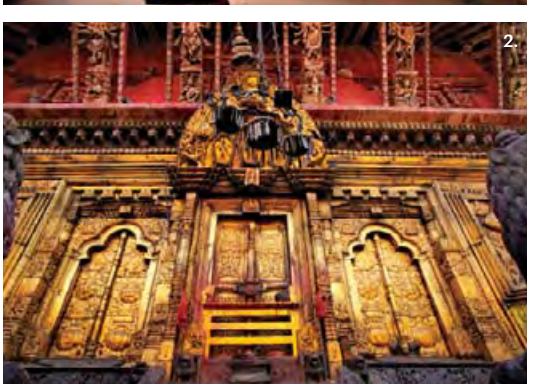
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

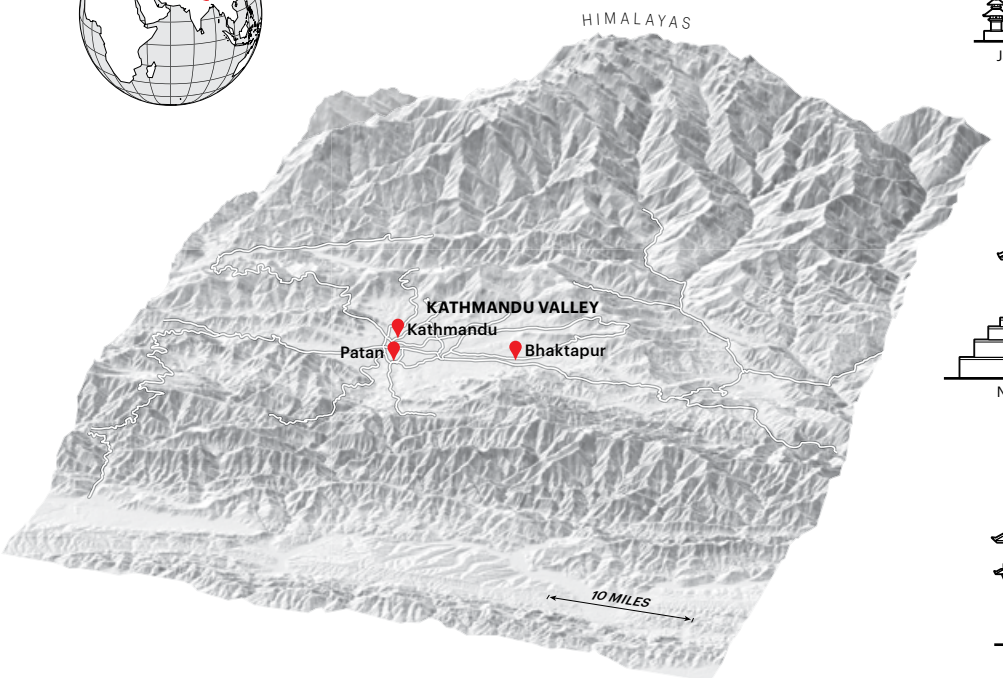
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

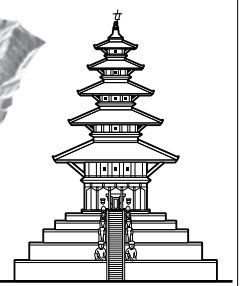
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures




Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU


Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR


Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

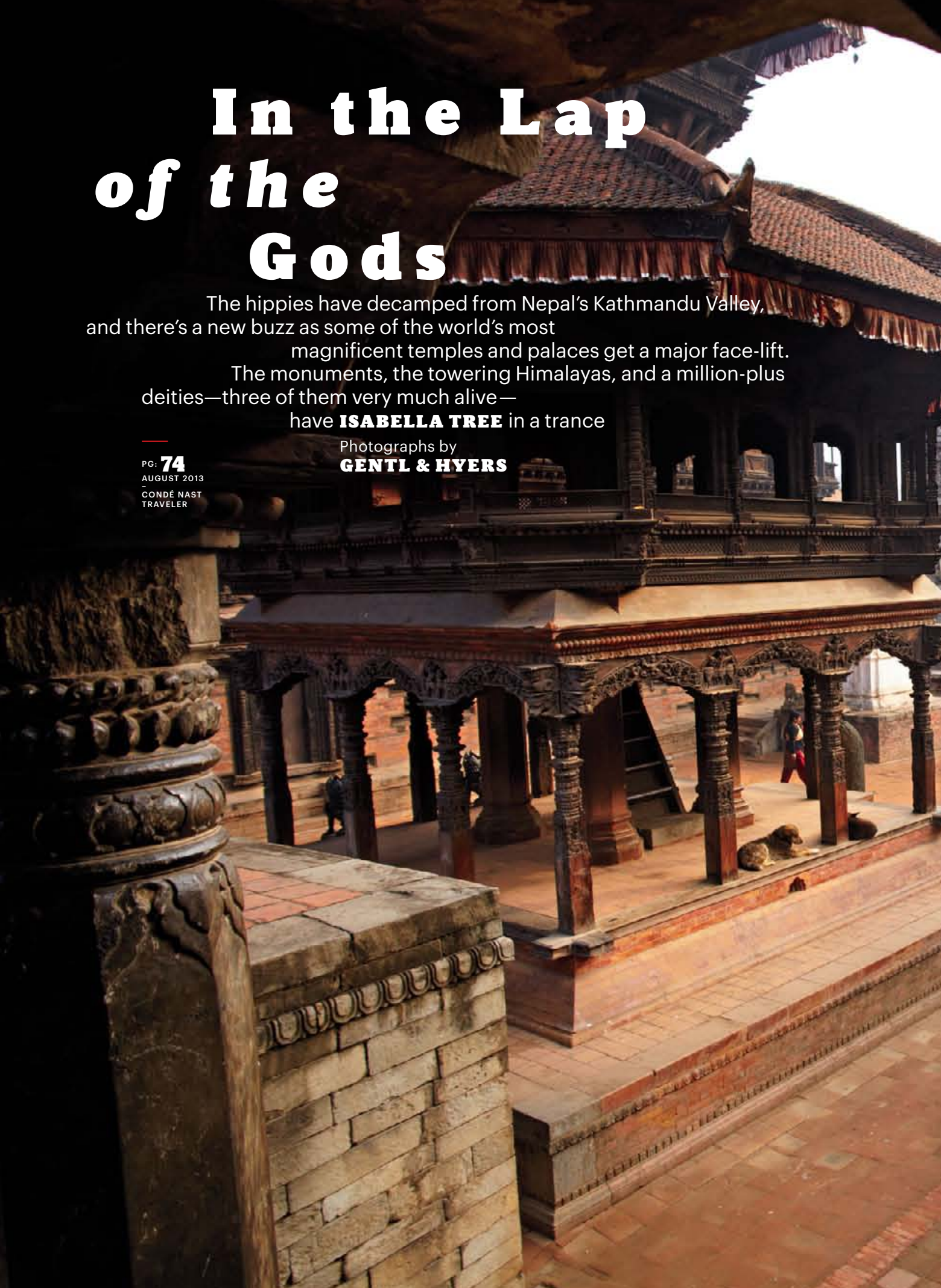
The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

In the Lap of the Gods

The hippies have decamped from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and there's a new buzz as some of the world's most magnificent temples and palaces get a major face-lift. The monuments, the towering Himalayas, and a million-plus deities—three of them very much alive—have **ISABELLA TREE** in a trance

Photographs by **GENTL & HYERS**



ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

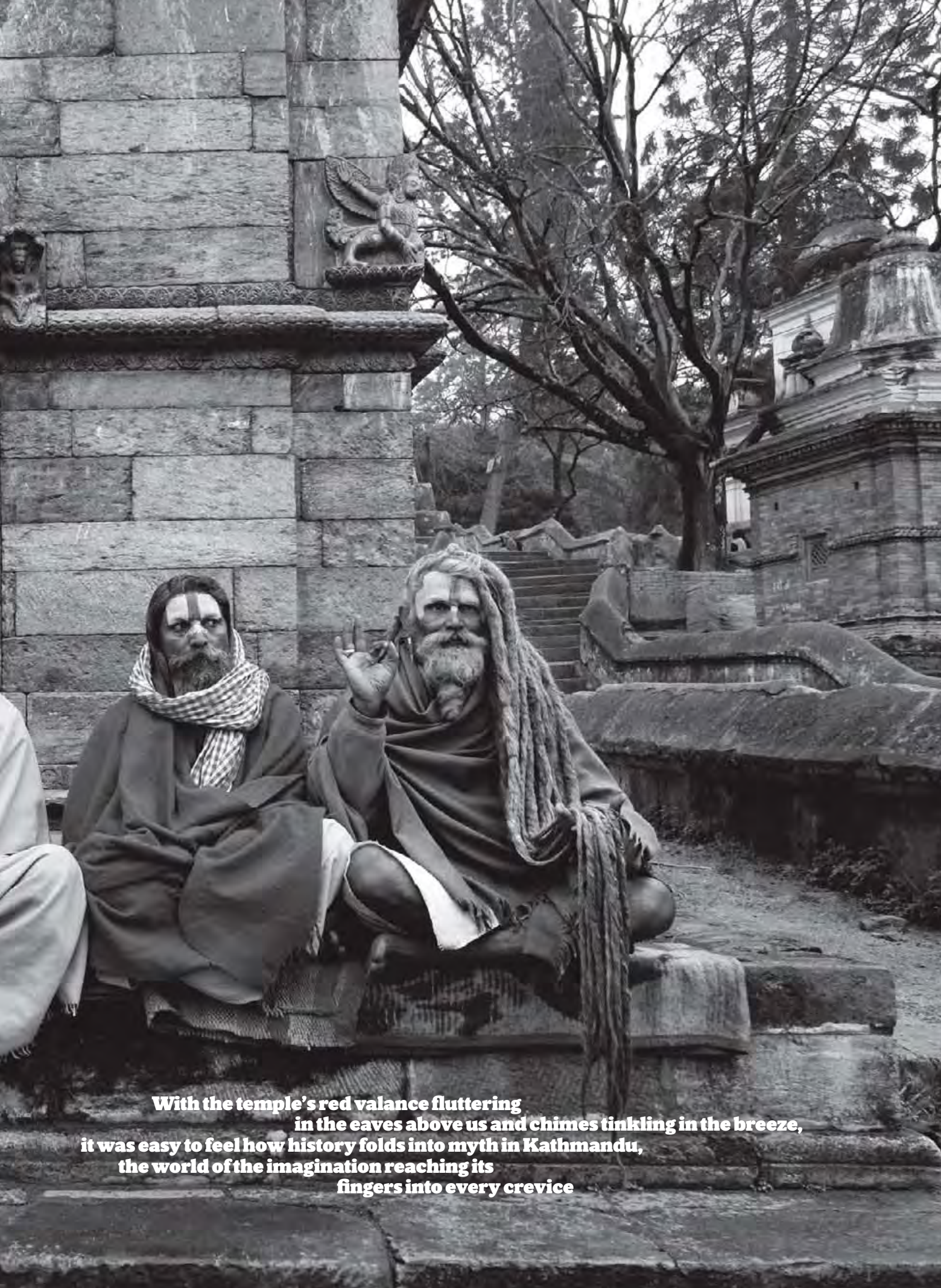
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

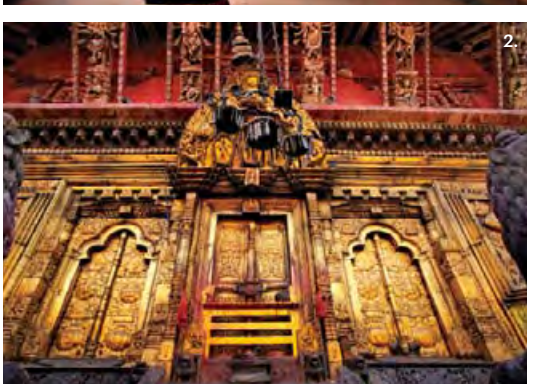
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

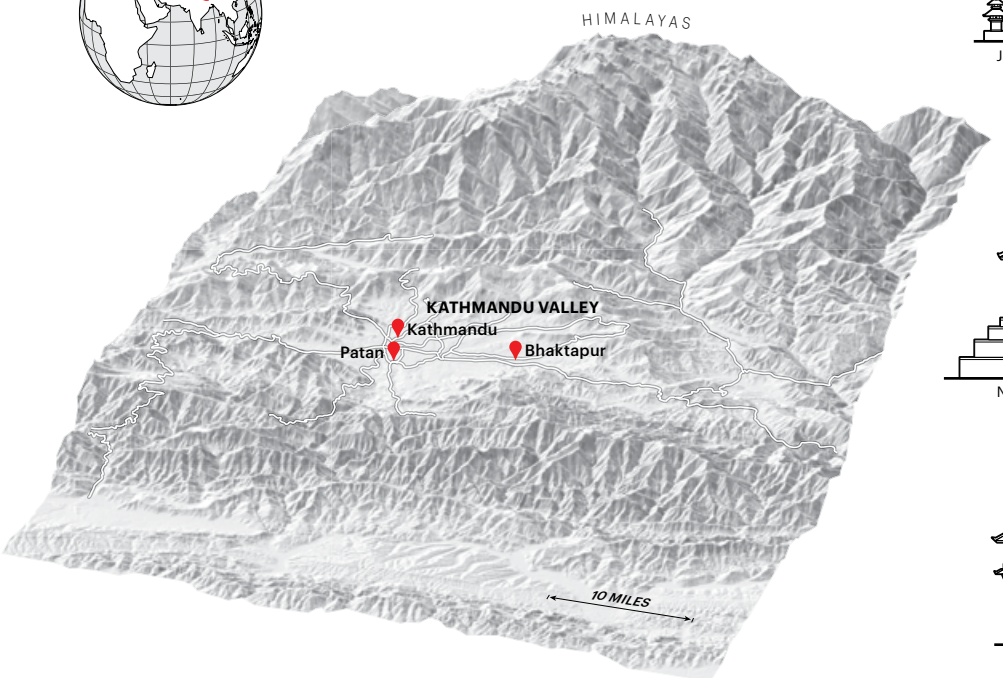
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

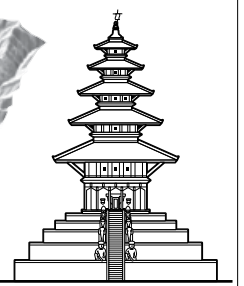
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures




Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU


Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR


Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**

ROYAL TREATMENT The temple-filled Durbar Square ("Palace Square") in Bhaktapur, one of three ancient Nepalese royal cities, covers three and a half acres. Today the square is as much a social hub as a religious gathering place.

A HUSH DESCENDED ON THE TINY STONE COURTYARD, an expectant lull in which every footfall, every cough, the beating of a pigeon's wings resounded like a thunderclap. Outside, Kathmandu's diurnal jangling of rickshaw bells and motorbike horns seemed part of another world. At a nod from their guide, a group of Japanese tourists put away their cameras.

Without warning, a child appeared at the window. No more than eight or nine years old, she gazed sternly down on the assembled foreigners, pouting slightly, looking mildly inconvenienced. Her eyes were exaggerated with thick lines of kohl reaching all the way to her temples. She had bright-red lips and her hair was bound up tightly in a topknot. Dressed entirely in red, she had gold ornaments around her neck and bangles on her wrists. Her tiny hands, with red-painted fingernails, clasped a wooden rail across the bottom of the window, as if she were a captain at a ship's helm.

Just as suddenly she was gone, leaving a flutter of red curtains.

I'd just caught a glimpse—or had *darshan*, as the Nepalese say—of the living goddess, or Kumari, of Kathmandu. The practice of worshipping Kumaris was once widespread in the Kathmandu Valley, a lush emerald-green region about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard and ringed by the Himalayas. The tradition remains strongest in the valley's three ancient royal cities—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The Kumaris are chosen at around the age of three or four from the valley's indigenous, relatively well-educated Newar community, after being put forward by their parents as candidates. Astrologers then select the girl with the most auspicious horoscope, after checking her for physical imperfections like scars or birthmarks. Life for the chosen girl becomes a rarefied existence governed by centuries-old codes of behavior; her friends and family can visit, but they must show her deference. The Kumari of Kathmandu is regarded as the guardian of the nation, and her reactions are scrutinized for presentiments of earthquakes and civil unrest. Every year, Nepal's president kneels at her feet to receive her blessing. When the goddesses retire at puberty, they become mortal again, joining the swim of everyday life.

The Kumaris remain a tender echo of a time when Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur were resplendent capitals of separate kingdoms just a few miles apart. From the late fifteenth century up until Nepal was unified in the eighteenth century, the so-called Malla kings of those cities would build palaces and splurge on temples and devotional sculptures honoring the region's blend of Buddhist and Hindu deities. The most vivid reminders of these old kingdoms are the "Durbar Squares"—the open plazas in front of the palaces, which contain temples, devotional columns, dancing platforms, public bathing tanks, water fountains, and other striking architectural features. "As an ensemble," wrote the English journalist Perceval Landon in the 1920s, "the Durbar Square in Patan probably remains the most picturesque collection of buildings that has ever been set up in so small a space by the piety and the pride of Oriental man."

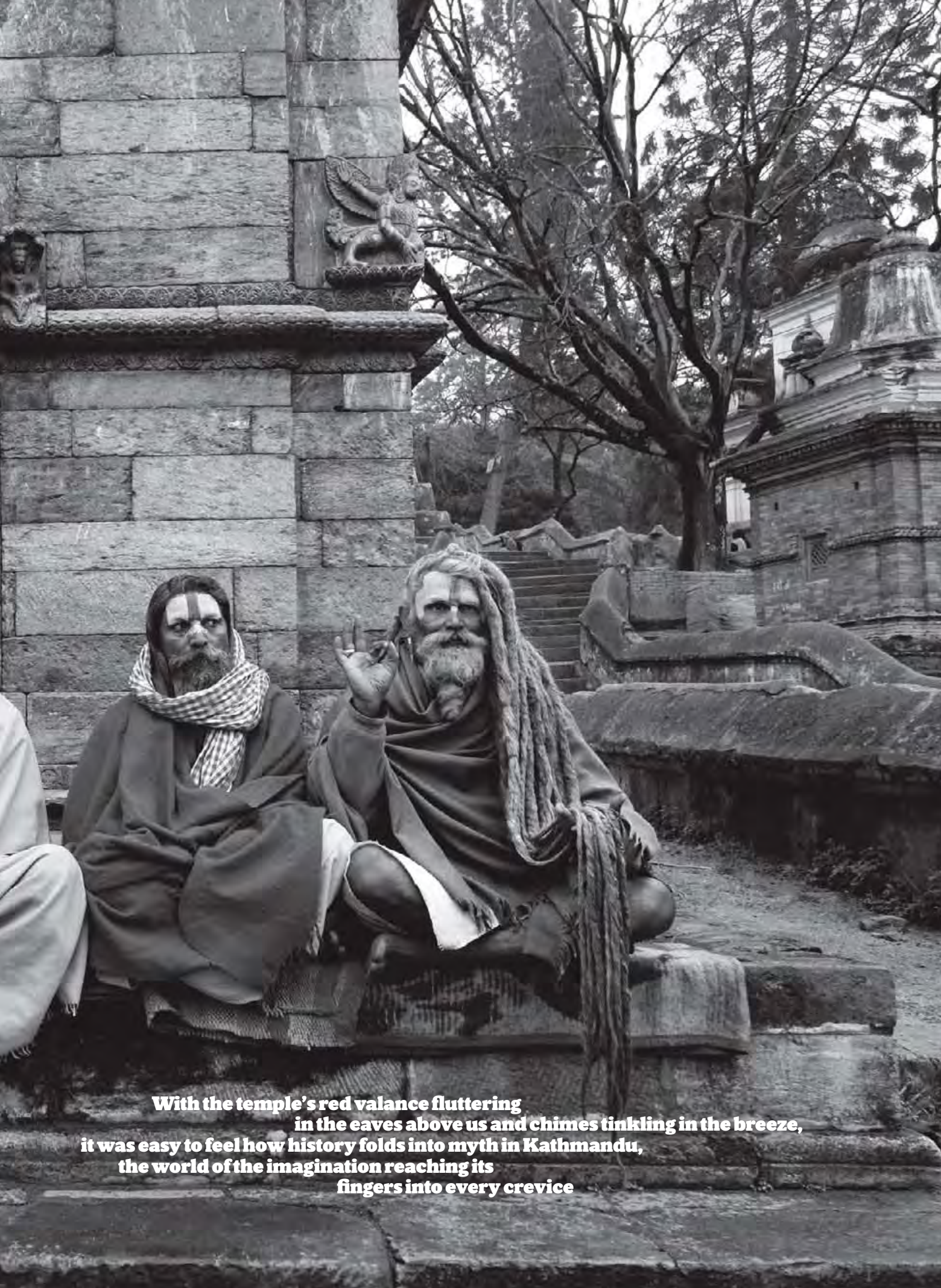
In 1934, however, the devastating Bihar earthquake—which killed more than ten thousand people in India and Nepal—severely damaged all three cities. In the aftermath, materials were scarce, leading to the hasty reconstruction of some structures and the abandonment of others—a courtyard of one temple in Patan, for example, was used for years as a latrine and garbage dump.

IN GOOD HANDS 1. Kublai Khan was an admirer of the region's craftsmanship, as seen today in these devotional statuettes. **2.** Bhaktapur's Golden Gate, overseen by the goddess Taleju, is among the most exquisite works of art in the valley.

I craned forward to receive her blessing, and the cold, wet touch of vermilion paste from her fingertips sent a tiny shock wave through my forehead

GIRL POWER The Nepalese believe their living goddesses, or Kumaris, are manifestations of divine female energy that protects them from evils such as earthquakes and civil war. Here, Patan's Kumari, age eleven.

HOLY SMOKE Each year thousands of sadhus ("holy men") from Nepal and India descend on the sprawling complex around Kathmandu's Golden Temple of Pashupati, the most sacred Hindu shrine in Nepal. Wandering ascetics, they renounce all material possessions in pursuit of enlightenment—sometimes with a little help from hashish.



With the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice

The singing bowl near my head was composed of an amalgam of five sacred metals hammered into shape during the hours of twilight. The sound it emitted was from the DNA of history

ANSWERED PRAYERS
Generations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century kings devoted themselves to the building of Bhaktapur's Durbar Square as it is configured today. "We're lucky," said one of the town's leading architectural restorers. "We still have the skills. It's more than a job—there's a spiritual connection."

It took time for the West, and its dollars, to notice. In 1979 the Durbar Square of each city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And recently, restoration projects, overseen by the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and other nonprofits, have been dusting off and illuminating the architectural and sculptural treasures that once defined the valley's peak of power and beauty.

"The gods live with us in Kathmandu," said Gyam Man Pati Vajracharya, a Buddhist priest I'd met several years earlier through a Nepalese filmmaker friend. He and I had just climbed the steps to the top of the Maju Deval Temple after seeing the Kumari in the window. "All these temples were made by people who were pure of heart, who followed the *niyamas*—religious laws and disciplines. They knew how to make places the gods wanted to live in. We have to preserve the conditions that allow the gods to stay here. But nowadays, that is not so easy."

Gyam Man and I surveyed the crush of street vendors, marigold sellers, monks, sadhus, lottery touts, dark-skinned Indian boys wheeling bicycles loaded with fruit, clerks and office managers and civil servants rushing to work, and sherpas from the hills staggering full tilt, heads bowed, under some monstrous load such as an oven or a refrigerator. As we sat up there, with the temple's red valance fluttering in the eaves above us and chimes tinkling in the breeze, it was easy to feel how history folds into myth in Kathmandu, the world of the imagination reaching its fingers into every crevice, and to understand why residents of the Kathmandu Valley consider themselves to be, quite literally, in the lap of the gods.

In the adjoining square of Basantpur—once the royal elephant stables, where the trinket sellers now lay out their mats like magic carpets on the pavement—I could see the entrance to Freak Street and the open shutters of the flat where my teenage friends and I had spent a hedonistic summer in the 1980s. Back then, the Kathmandu Valley was clinging to the hippie era. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the valley had become the end of the line for a stream of rainbow buses crossing the great continent of Asia from Europe. It was then that I first saw a Kumari—we used to enter her courtyard and, if we were lucky, catch sight of her when she appeared at her window.

But now the freaks have vanished—either grown up or gone to Goa—and there have been dramatic transformations on the political scene. Nepal is no longer a kingdom. King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the avuncular figure we used to see taking part in festivals in his trademark shades and clipped mustache, was murdered by his own son, the crown prince, along with nine other members of his family—gunned down in their billiard room at a family soiree in 2001. The popular uprisings that followed heralded the peaceful conclusion to a decade-long conflict with Maoist insurgents in the hills and, eventually, the end of Nepal's monarchy in 2008.

Today Nepal is looking to the future, and foreign investment is returning with confidence. Under the new democracy, archaeological finds that were once the preserve of kings and priests are being opened to the public.

"Kathmandu was founded by the great bodhisattva Manjushri, in the shape of his sword," said Gyam Man. The crux of the sword, he explained, was in the heart of the city, where two mighty trade routes would one day connect—one running south to north, from India to Tibet and China, and the other east to west, from Bhutan and Sikkim to Mustang and Kashmir.

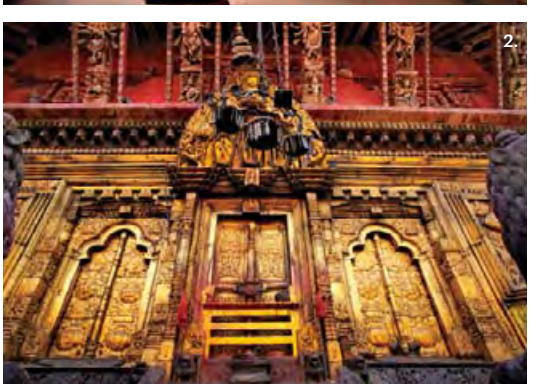
To Nepalese Buddhists like Gyam Man, Manjushri was an enlightened being associated with transcendent wisdom and a key figure in the origins of Nepal. The creation story they tell is that in ancient times, the Kathmandu Valley contained a lake—that much, at least, is corroborated by geological evidence. Manjushri is said to have drained away the waters by slicing through the mountains with his sword, at the place now known as Chobar Gorge, to make the valley habitable for the Newars.

The historical record is almost as lyrical. The early Licchavi kings—shadowy figures ruling between roughly the fourth and ninth centuries A.D.—seem to have built palaces here at the sacred confluence of the Vishnumati and Bagmati rivers. But Kathmandu took its present shape as a city in the time of the Malla kings.

That evening, as I sat cross-legged and barefoot on cushions in the Krishnarpan restaurant at Dwarika's Hotel, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, a waitress wearing a traditional red-bordered, calf-length black sari showed me how to leave a sample

MONK-Y BUSINESS 1. Turning a prayer wheel at Boudhanath stupa. **2.** Thought to be Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, Changu Narayan is known for its ornate embossed gilt bronze exterior.


1.


2.

To the Newars, indigenous inhabitants of the valley, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation

50 SHADES OF GREEN Terraced farms, such as these fields outside Bhaktapur, are a familiar sight in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's economic and cultural backbone.

SPICE OF LIFE
Turmeric, coriander, buckwheat greens, and tree tomatoes are among the staples at one of Bhaktapur's markets. Nepal's spicy cuisine isn't all vegan, though—most people also eat meat.

EXTRA! EXTRA! A rare moment of calm in downtown Kathmandu. An impressive 86 percent of the city's residents can read—the highest literacy rate in the country.

pinch of every dish as an offering to the gods. To the Newars, eating is a pleasure laced with sacredness and ritual. I ate, as she instructed, with the fingers of my right hand, my left discreetly tucked away in my lap. The starter was *samay baji*, an assortment of lentil cakes, black-eyed peas, spiced shredded buffalo meat, duck egg, ginger, and puffed rice. I was too inept to drink Nepalese-style—pouring a stream of water from the spout of a vessel into one's mouth without touching the lips—and opted instead for a hand-cast bronze goblet. Pan-fried river fish followed, then roasted quail and tender spiced lamb kebabs. (Most Buddhists and Hindus are meat eaters in Nepal—only sacred cows are exempt, and pigs, which are considered polluted.) Then came *momos* (steamed dumplings) and stuffed bottle gourd, followed by the Nepalese staple of *dal bhat* (steamed rice with lentil sauce), chicken curry with spicy tomato salsa, and piquant hog-plum pickle, served on a hammered-bronze dish. Dessert was the Five Nectars, an emulsion of substances honored for their purity: milk, ghee, yogurt, sugar, and honey. At the end of eighteen exquisite courses and feeling fat as a raja, I flicked water at my mouth and rinsed my fingers in a purifying oblation.

THE TAXI RIDE TO PATAN during rush hour the next morning took forty-five minutes, even though the city is only three and a half miles from the heart of Kathmandu. Bouncing about on spent shock absorbers over the Bagmati River, exhaust fumes chuffing through the driver's open window, horns blaring, I wondered if it might not have been better to walk. But the pavements themselves were an obstacle course of potholes, balloon vendors, fornicating stray dogs, and the odd recumbent cow. I was heading to Patan to meet with Dr. Rohit Ranjitkar, program director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and a conservation architect. Upon my arrival, the chaos of the road gave way to the calm of the ancient city. With justification, predominantly Buddhist Patan still goes by the ancient name of Lalitpur—City of Beauty. Here, a gentler rhythm of life prevails. The streets were a riot of smells: turmeric, ginger, marigolds, cardamom, fresh meat, incense, fried onion, and cow dung. In sunken stone bathing tanks, women in clinging saris were washing their hair. Children chased one another around Buddhist chaityas, or miniature stone stupas. Courtyards echoed with the hiss of bellows and the tap of hammers from bronze casters making statues of gods and goddesses, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Once, these skills were sought by Kublai Khan. Today, the "god makers" of Patan work on commission for devotees and collectors in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Tibet and for Buddhist *sanghas* ("communities") in the United States. In shop windows down Patan's labyrinthine backstreets, displays of golden deities attracted the eyes of tourists.

There is something of Maya, the demon architect

TOUCHING THE SKY A rooftop view of Patan's palace- and temple-filled, five-acre Durbar Square, under the gaze of the Himalayas.

of Hindu mythology, about Ranjitkar. We met in his office in a beautifully restored nineteenth-century merchant's house with traditional wooden stair-ladders between floors. Amid maps and plans and ancient texts, he showed me before and after photographs portraying the phoenix-like rise of temples and towers from piles of rubble—buildings that had collapsed from earthquakes or simply from neglect.

"We've restored thirty major temples and monuments in the valley in the past twenty years," Ranjitkar told me. "But there is so much to do. The job is endless.

"We don't have a hugely romantic view of history here," he added. "We are always dreaming of the new. The people are still very devout, but when they donate to a temple nowadays, it's modern 'improvements' they're after. That's why you see old temples with shiny new bath tiles on the floor. The impetus for conservation has come from abroad. But I think the tide is slowly turning—Nepalis are beginning to appreciate their architectural heritage."

Ranjitkar led me across Durbar Square, skirting temple plinths and stone columns bearing kneeling kings cast in bronze. Patan's Durbar Square is arguably the most spectacular of all and is mercifully closed to traffic. A fantasia of temples line the left-hand side of the square, while the royal palace stretches more than three hundred feet down the right. In the distance, I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas.

Building here went into overdrive in the seventeenth century under one of the valley's most illustrious kings, Siddhinarasimha Malla. Though Hindu by birth, he, like his cousin kings, subscribed to the valley's unique blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, offering dedications to deities of both persuasions. His subjects considered him to be divine, a manifestation of Vishnu, the Hindu preserver of cosmic law and order.

Perhaps loveliest of all the structures he commissioned is the Vishwanath Temple at the far end of the square, dedicated by Siddhinarasimha to the god Shiva in 1627. The roof of the temple collapsed during heavy rains in 1986, Ranjitkar told me, and many of the roof struts carved with deities had to be replaced, though the ancient wooden pillars stood firm.

Across the way, on platforms on either side of

The king would sit on the platform naked in midwinter and, in the summer, surround himself with blazing fires. So great were his powers as a siddha that he is said to have been able to walk on water

the golden-gated entrance to the royal palace, sat a row of old Newar men in topi caps, waistcoats, and suruwal leggings, indulging in leisurely gossip as visitors passed between them through the imposing repoussé bronze doors. This part of the palace, restored in the 1980s under a joint venture between the Nepalese and Austrian governments, now houses the astonishing Patan Museum. On display in the brick-and-timber galleries, where cool breezes play through lattice windows, is a collection of beautiful sacred art dating back to the eleventh century—mostly cast bronzes of Hindu and Buddhist deities from the Kathmandu Valley. The exhibitions—ranging from the lost-wax process of bronze casting to the meditative mandala design of temple buildings and stupas and the esoteric practices of Nepalese Buddhist and Hindu Tantra—are intended to open one's eyes to the living culture lying beyond the museum's walls.

Ranjitkar and I entered the palace complex through a courtyard next door, where artisans were chiseling finishing touches to windows and roof struts featuring multi-armed goddesses carved out of sal wood. The pieces are slotted together in the traditional way with no nails, like a puzzle, and jammed into the walls. Past the shadowy porticos, ducking our heads through another tiny doorway, he led me into the Bhandarkhal, the former palace garden. There before us, full to the brim and as exquisite as the day it was created nearly four centuries ago, was the newly restored royal bathing tank—a sunken pond seventy two feet long and six and a half feet deep, stone lions standing guard at the corners. At the far end, freshwater gushed from the mouth of a snarling makara water-creature. Beside it, the king's *(Continued on page 115)*

SAY OM 1. You can order up to 22 courses of traditional Nepalese food at the Krishnarpan restaurant, in Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu. **2.** The pool at Dwarika's, modeled on twelfth-century Nepalese royal baths, is a serene setting for taking in the centuries-old art and architectural features.


1.


2.

PLACES & PRICES

A Tale of Three Cities

It's worth spending a night or two in all three Malla cities, each of which anchored its own kingdom in the Kathmandu Valley before Nepal was unified in 1769. The cities' main plazas, called Durbar Squares, are UNESCO World Heritage Sites with a nominal entrance fee ($2–$12). Travel between the cities is easily accomplished via taxi. For warm daytime temps and clear mountain views, visit September through November and March through May.

The country code for Nepal is 977. Prices quoted are for August 2013.

KATHMANDU

LODGING

At first, the chaos and traffic of Kathmandu can seem overwhelming, but behind the Third World metropolis is a hidden web of quiet courtyards and backstreets. The most serene and comfortable place to stay is **Dwarika's Hotel.** Designed along the lines of a traditional Buddhist courtyard, it includes original architectural features salvaged during Kathmandu's building spree in the 1970s and '80s. The inner courtyard contains trees and shrines and a pagoda that is both library and reading room. The nearby swimming pool features stone Hindu sea serpents spouting water (1-447-9488; doubles from $240). If you don't care to stay in Kathmandu proper and want closer views of the Himalayas, Dwarika's is opening a sister hotel this month in Dhulikhel, **The Dwarika's Resort,** about an hour's drive away on the edge of the valley (1-149-0612; doubles from $350).

DINING

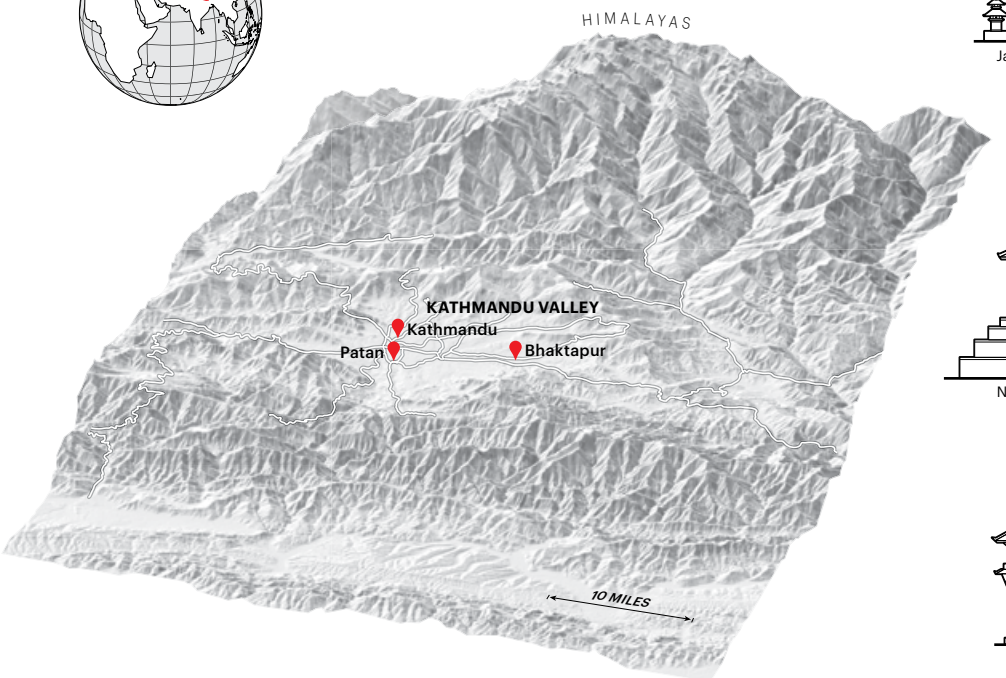
The Nepalese restaurant **Krishnarpan,** in Dwarika's Hotel, offers excellent 6- to 22-course dinners presented in the traditional Nepalese way, which means you'll learn a bit about the customs of the country (1-447-9488; set menus from $36). There are several good places to eat around the Thamel shopping area, a ten-minute rickshaw ride from Durbar Square. The best is the **Kaiser Café**—in a restored Rana palace garden called the Garden of Dreams—which serves salads, sandwiches, and steaks (Tridevi Marg; 1-442-5341; entrées from $9). For a hit of proper Italian coffee and the best pizzas and ice cream in town, head down the road to **Fire and Ice** (Tridevi Marg; 1-425-0210; pizzas from $4). **Café Mitra** serves pan-fried Himalayan trout and a traditional immunity-boosting nine-bean soup (Thamel Marg; 1-425-6336; entrées from $10).

ACTIVITIES

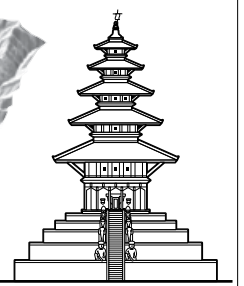
Durbar Square is the site of the old royal palace of **Hanuman Dhoka,** the eclectic **Tribhuvan Museum** (stuffed birds, 1950s typewriters, peacock thrones, tiger-hunting trophies), and the stunning newly opened courtyards of **Mohan Chowk** and **Kalidaman Chowk** (no phone). The traditional Bud-

SAVING SHANGRI-LA

Centuries-old palaces and temples in the lush Kathmandu Valley are being returned to their former glory. At right, three of the most striking structures



Jagannath Temple
KATHMANDU



Nyatapola Temple
BHAKTAPUR

Royal Palace
PATAN

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRIMWADE AND HAISAM HUSSEIN

dhist *bahals*, or monastic courtyards, around Durbar Square (such as Jana Bahal, home of White Machhendranath, the god of compassion) are well worth seeking out, as is the **Jagannath Temple,** known for its erotic carvings.

The courtyard of the **Kumari Bahal,** home of the living goddess, on the south side of Durbar Square, is open to the public, but it's forbidden to take photos when she appears at her window. The best time to go is before 10 A.M., when she begins her lessons; there's a box for donations. The spectacular festival of **Indra Jatra,** when the living goddess and her attendants are pulled around the city in golden chariots, is in September and attended by massive crowds (for a list of festivals and dates, go to nepalhomepage.com).

The World Heritage Site of **Swayambhu,** the valley's oldest and most significant Buddhist complex, centers around a stupa high on a hill overlooking Kathmandu and is reached by 365 steps. Try to time your visit for a Tuesday around 7 P.M., when you can watch traditional Nepalese dances at the Hotel Vajra, located in the foothills of the stupa. The most important Hindu temple in Nepal is **Pashupatinath,** on the banks of the Bagmati, a 20-minute taxi ride from the city center; from there, it's a 20-minute walk to the massive Buddhist stupa of **Boudhanath.** (Both are World Heritage Sites.) The restored palace outbuildings of **Baber Mahal Revisited,** between Kathmandu and Patan, are crafts shops and art galleries: Bodhisattva Gallery's **Jewels of Newar Art** is highly recommended (1-425-1341).

PATAN

LODGING

In the Swotha neighborhood, a three-minute walk from Durbar Square, **Traditional Homes Swotha** hotel is in a beautifully renovated Newari building (1-555-1184; doubles from $80). Farther down Kulimha-Kobahal Road, the **Newa Chén** has traditional rooms in a UNESCO-restored house (1-553-3532; doubles from $30).

ACTIVITIES

The **Patan Museum,** in the Austrian-restored part of the **Royal Palace** on Patan's Durbar Square, features exquisite sculptures and bronzes, including several important stolen artifacts returned to Nepal by foreign museums. It also explains the esoteric practices of tantra, the mandalic construction of temples and stupas, and the lost wax and repoussé bronze-casting techniques for which Patan is famous. The **Patan Museum Café** in the rear courtyard is a lovely place to recharge your batteries (98-5101-3743).

Just north of Durbar Square are the beautiful fifteenth-century **Kwa Bahal,** or Golden Temple—remove shoes and any leather before entering the inner courtyard (it's considered polluting)—and the five-story **Kumbeshwar Temple.** To the south is **Mahabouddha Temple,** or Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. The *jatra* of Red Machhendranath—in which the towering 60-foot chariot of the god of compassion is hauled around the city of Patan, inch by tottering inch, during the Nepali month of Baisakh (April–May)—is one of the valley's most spectacular festivals.

BHAKTAPUR

LODGING

Accommodations around Durbar Square are basic, but the setting is spectacular. A seven-minute walk from Durbar, the **Hotel Heritage,** with comfy rooms and extremely helpful staff, makes a good base (1-661-1628; doubles from $130). While in Bhaktapur, be sure to try the creamy yogurt *juju dhau* ("king of curds"), served in earthenware bowls.

ACTIVITIES

Bhaktapur's old royal palace houses the **National Art Gallery,** with an impressive collection of tantric cloth paintings, palm leaf manuscripts, and votive objects (1-661-0004). Admission also includes the **Woodcarving Museum** and the **Brass & Bronze Museum,** both in Tachupal Tole. For one of the best examples of traditional Newari architecture, visit the **Nyatapola Temple.** There are wonderful crafts shops in Bhaktapur, such as the **Heritage Gallery** on the ground floor of the restored Toni Hagen House in the Gachhen neighborhood, and for devotional *thangka* paintings, visit the workshop of renowned traditional artist **Madhu Krishna Chitrakar** on Taumadhi Tole (Bhaktapur-11, Nyatapola Square).

The countryside around Bhaktapur is great for biking and hiking, with the must-see ancient hilltop temple **Changu Narayan,** a World Heritage Site, a pretty four-mile walk to the north. **–I. T.**

FOR A PHOTO PORTFOLIO OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, DOWNLOAD OUR DIGITAL EDITION OR GO TO **CONDENASTTRAVELER.COM.**