







What does one do when  
images that one perceived  
to be get shattered? One  
hopes because goodness  
will always come in the  
end when one hopes and  
does good.



*I am in Bhaktaphur, one of three sister cities that is now part of greater Kathmandu. Just as a figurine in a 400-year-old wood-carving calls out for my attention, I catch a glimpse of an old woman shuffling towards me. Ancient. Shrivelled and weathered. Her shuffles come closer. I move aside. She stops. Our eyes meet. If they can tell, what stories I will hear. Then I find myself comparing the lines and creases on her face to the deep furrows and ridges on the wood-carving. Not a word, but we connect. I smile and lift my camera for permission to take her pictures. Her good eye, the one not clouded by cataracts, twinkled for a merry while; her sagging lips manage a smile. A click. Then another. I hand her my token of appreciation. Strangely, her smile fades. Without another word she shuffles away. Have I offended her, I wonder. She moves on; wraps her faded pashmina tighter to cuddle her shoulders, a 100-rupee note clutched in a fist. Then she stops. Is that a half glance that she is giving me? I hope there is a smile too somewhere in her heart...*

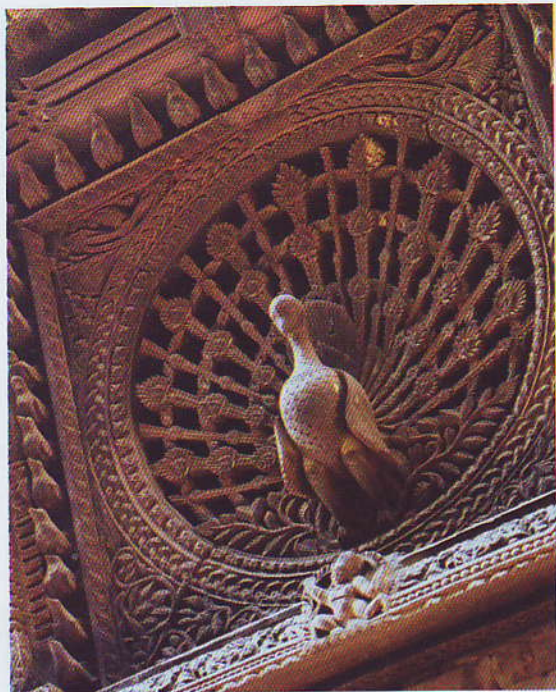
The old lady is very much like Kathmandu and both, she and the city, are at the crossroads. Perhaps on her last lap she harbours a secret wish to see the serenity and vibrance of Kathmandu of her youth once more. It could take the form of a celebration of dance and merriment at the square. After all, the Nepali celebration of *Holi* is just a few days away (in 2008, it's on March 22). Reminders in the form of colourful swatches and stripes of cloth flutter on high poles. Curious tourists will soon join children and adults to celebrate the day of merriment throwing coloured water and powder at each other and everyone to mark the arrival of spring. (*Holi* has religious and health significances as well).

In the meantime, for the city exciting times await. Kathmandu must embrace change to dance with modernity, they say.

# at the crossroads

text by BC Tan | Photography by Chris Leong and Tien Low





is embroidered with an ancient fabric that it appears impossible for her to change. All around me I see images of another time. Kathmandu's template is quite fixed! An interesting hypothesis would be on how to address the idea of moving a highly venerated shrine from a road shoulder whereas it has been there all along, a few hundred years before the concept of the motorcar was even conceived?

History is packed into every shot that my visual memory is now taking in, confirming the rigid template. With a population close to three-quarters of a million, this ancient city has the highest concentration of temples and monasteries. I find myself wondering too how Kathmandu is going to step forward and into the flow of the brave new world? Proof of it swirls all around in the form of haphazard and unmanageable traffic; the ebb and flow of the crowds in the *galli*, the narrow alley that separates old shophouses. The people in the *galli* seem to move in a herd. I could not help think of Led Zep's A Brick in the Wall during the few times that I walked the *galli*.

The city of Kathmandu had been inhabited a few hundred years before Christ; the oldest dated building which are the remains of the palace of the first rulers, the Kirats, has been

found in Patan. Patan is one of the three Newar kingdoms that now make up the city of Kathmandu. The other two warring kingdoms that formed greater Kathmandu, Kantipur (now Kathmandu proper) and Bhagdoan (now Bhaktapur) are also close to 2,000 years old.

Archeological digs show that people have made their home in the Himalayas since 9,000 years ago. Kingdoms rose and fell, clans and tribes waged war to conquer what the others have. From this land also rose one man who changed the world. From the Sakya clan, Siddharta Gautama was born into this world to bring peace through his teachings of Buddhism. In 250 BC, King Ashoka brought Buddhism to Nepal. A stupa that was built by him survives to this day in Patan.

At every turn in Kathmandu one sees religious references. Sweep your eye across the skyline, a stupa, a shrine, fluttering prayer flags all at once compete to arrest your gaze. Perhaps heeding the advice on not allowing your guide a free hand in shaping your itinerary in Kathmandu is a sound one, if you do not want an overload of religious iconography in the head at the end of day! Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims converge to Nepal yearly, but she has more to offer than stupas, temples





and monasteries. Nepal is a natural beauty that will win pageants hands down. Gifted with natural beauty that few other nations have, there is so much that Nepal can share with the world. Yet it struggles to bring in more than 400 000 tourists a year. In 2000 the numbers hit close to the magical 500 000, but sadly in the year that follows, on the first day of June Nepal marked another unfortunate day in her history, the royal massacre of 2001. Regarded the world over as a nation of spiritual people, Nepal's 27 million have seen much upheaval.

Now she is undergoing a political overhaul that threatens to end the 239-year-old monarchy. Is Nepal ready to become a republic with a population so diverse and each ethnic group rightfully demanding to be heard? Royalists think only the king can bind the people together. Others like Manjushree Thapa think otherwise.

Maoists insurgents once tagged with unsavoury adjectives and blamed for placing the nation in poor light now look set to make a viable return. And they appear to be marching towards forming the next democratic government. The immediate question on many lips, especially of those who watch from a distance and make judgments about the country and people is this: Will Nepal ever get her act together?

Like most young minds nurtured on a diet meant to feed the free spirit, mine was also prone to wild imaginings. Dusty and unreal, imagined snatches of visual memory were resurrected before I made the trip. Some even took on new lustre, I must admit.

As the plane prepared to land, the Kathmandu of my youthful imagination was reaffirmed. It felt like the plane hung momentarily in the air, when on my left a vision of cloud hugging hills caught my eye. Romance and adventure were alive and kicking, albeit only in the mind.

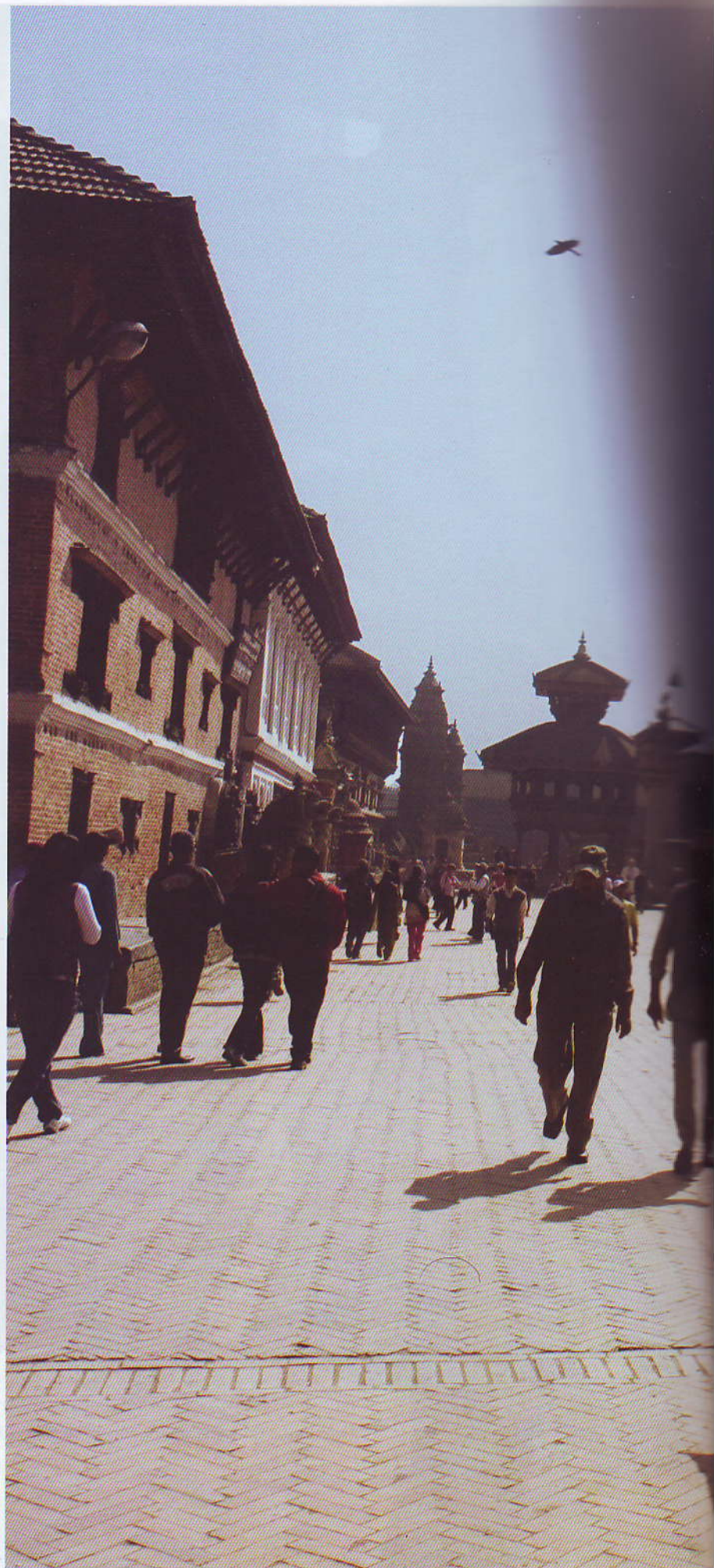


Soon after landing in Tribhuvan International Airport, the pictures that had been languishing in my mind since my youth began to dissipate. The ones in my mind had snow-peaked mountains kissed by the clouds, sweeping valleys dotted with a glorious riot of colours and bathed in rolling green and blackish blue as far as the eyes could discern. But what I saw was totally different! Enough has been said about assumptions having the seeds for big mistakes!

The Nepal of my youthful imaginings was a Himalayan Shangri-La where one could find the answers to many of life's riddles. It was also good for trekking and mountaineering. It still is! As one went higher, one would get closer to the clouds where the spirit could soar to the resting place of souls, I had been told. For what Edmund Hillary had been knighted, the Sherpa did routinely, and across beautiful lakes and valleys, mountain dwellers, hermits and sages could fly... Well, blame it on Lobsang Rampa and who fed my mind with theories of the third eye and astral travelling! He led me to believe that people in neighbouring Tibet could do it. Surely Nepalis that live on the hills could too. Tibet. Nepal. No diff!

And Kathmandu of my youth was a city of love and peace. The name itself conjured up that image in my mind. Howling wolves in the hills still sound faintly in my mind's ear. Just over 30 years ago, literature penned by talents having *bhang*-saturated imagination had helped to draw the picture. In it only a few motorized vehicles mostly laidback two-wheeled easy riders chugged along near-empty streets. Occasionally, a Peter Fonda look-alike astride a Harley would appear if I stretched my imagination a little more.

Now seeing the capital city Kathmandu in all its glory, in 2008, with warts and bumps and all, I tried to shake off the daze. Countless scores of two-wheelers and a good number of cars compete to stake claim on the limited square metres available ahead of







them. Everyone was going somewhere, and in a great hurry too. Someone compared the motorcycles on the streets of Kathmandu to grains in a sack with holes in it. As if pushed by an unseen force, the grains escape in a rush to surge forward.

So, now it looks like I have to erase some of the images of Kathmandu that had been painted into my mind's eye years ago. Hah! It is so easy to fly in and out of a country dismissing it and her people for failing to live up to one's prescription or expectation. But Kathmandu has seen much and is not representative of Nepal. There is much Nepal need to do if she really wants to sweep the world off its feet. And Kathmandu reflects what Nepal promises.

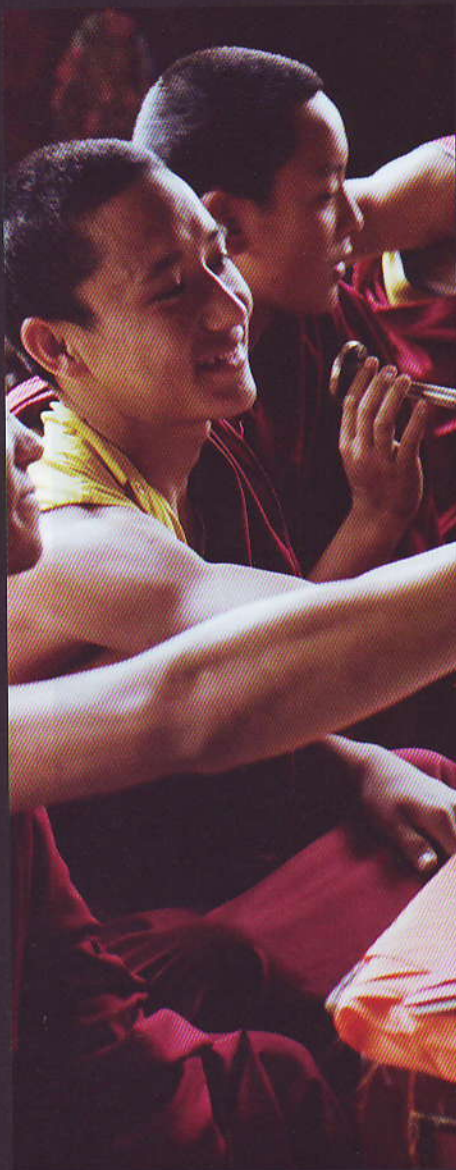
Perhaps like the old woman who may be secretly wishing for another *Holi*, I too nurse a hope to return to see all of Nepal. Hopefully, by then the Maoists or whoever rules the land would have done much to give visitors to this beautiful country a more abiding reason to hope, just like a Nepali would. For Nepal, hope is much needed.





### Freshness

*Besides tourism, which is an important source of revenue, agriculture is the other mainstay of Nepal's economy.*



### Alternative Education

*Besides mainstream schooling, children are sent to monasteries at a young age to be educated and many take up monkhood as their vocation for life.*



### Culture

*The monkey is a revered creature in Hinduism. This one of brass oversees the goings-on in one of the many crowded alleys in Kathmandu.*



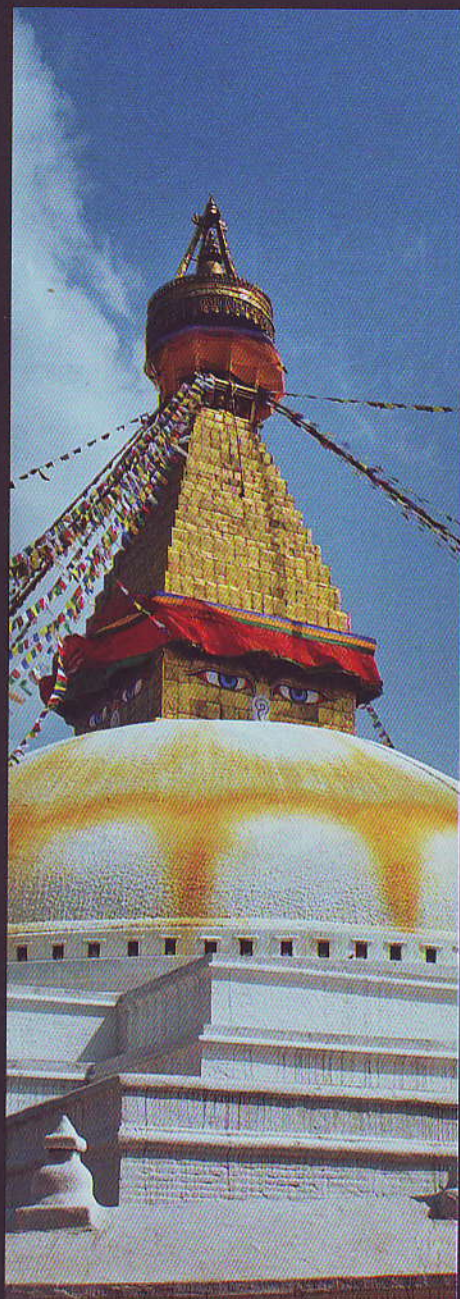
# nepal

a country of  
diversity and hope



## Flavours

*There are over 70 main ethnic groups in Nepal, and each serves unique dishes making Nepal a haven for those with adventurous tastebuds.*



## Ancient Presence

*This 1500-year old Tibetan stupa at Boudhanath, the largest outside Tibet, is the focal point of Tibetans Buddhists living outside their country.*



## Future

*What lies ahead? Through a child's eye, hope is always fresh and full of possibilities. Nepal has much to offer and more through the eye of this child.*



# Spa trekking across divine land

text by Sharon Lai | Photography by Chris Leong and Tien Low

“Surely the gods live here; this is no place for men”  
– Rudyard Kipling







**P**erhaps Kipling's sentiment immortalized in those words still holds, in some ways. That Nepal has not progressed for the last so many years may seem like a lamentation to most. But is it really? This writer suspects for some selfish reasons, no progress is a good thing to many outsiders who travel to this country. In many places life still goes on in the way that bears flashes of what may have inspired Kipling. After all Nepal is like a Land Divine locked in time. She has so much to offer to the hungry tourist out to taste a different experience; and certainly those who come to sample her rich history and unique culture will walk away happy. And almost all of those who may have wished that they were powerful enough to reach Mt. Everest's peak would have to be content just brushing against her skirt in the lower reaches. Nevertheless satisfaction is still guaranteed.

Schools are divided as to whether she should change and ultimately claim her right of place on the international stage. This writer together with 27 million other Nepalis are holding

their breath. Soon, following a constitution election, we hope everything will fall in place again. At press time, disturbing news filters through this landlocked nation saying that all may not be well and underscoring insistence of some that change would not necessarily be for the better for this country.

This writer senses that we are entering a landscape like none other as the plane makes a rapid descent for Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport. We know that we are entering a valley. Snow-capped mountains hold daily communion with the clouds that greet us on both sides. I learn later that approaching Kathmandu from the air is an exercise to be carried out with extreme caution. There is little room for error, especially in bad weather.

Valleys, plateaus, gorges, raging rivers and peaks caressed by dancing clouds are features aplenty in this land and these seem like they have been taken out of a mystical world. Even though it is a great distance away, many

will be pulled to look for Himalaya's resident celebrity, Mt. Everest. We are not so lucky. It is still that time of the year when dust and mist limit visibility.

Many have made their way here trekking the hippy trail, seeking answers, looking for adventure, experiencing spirituality and naturally just indulging in the beauty of wonders. Though blessed with abundance of Mother Nature, Nepal languishes among the world's poorest countries. Many of its population live in grinding poverty and face lives of uncertainty. After years of turmoil, locals wished for peace to reign again and have Nepal enter the era of bloom. Great possibilities abound as it's a myriad treasure chest waiting to be unveiled. It definitely has all the right elements especially with its huge number of UNESCO heritage sites and nature's most beautiful blessings. Most destinations here encourage one to go on a retreat to lose oneself in order to find it back and provoke a sense of spiritual contemplation...