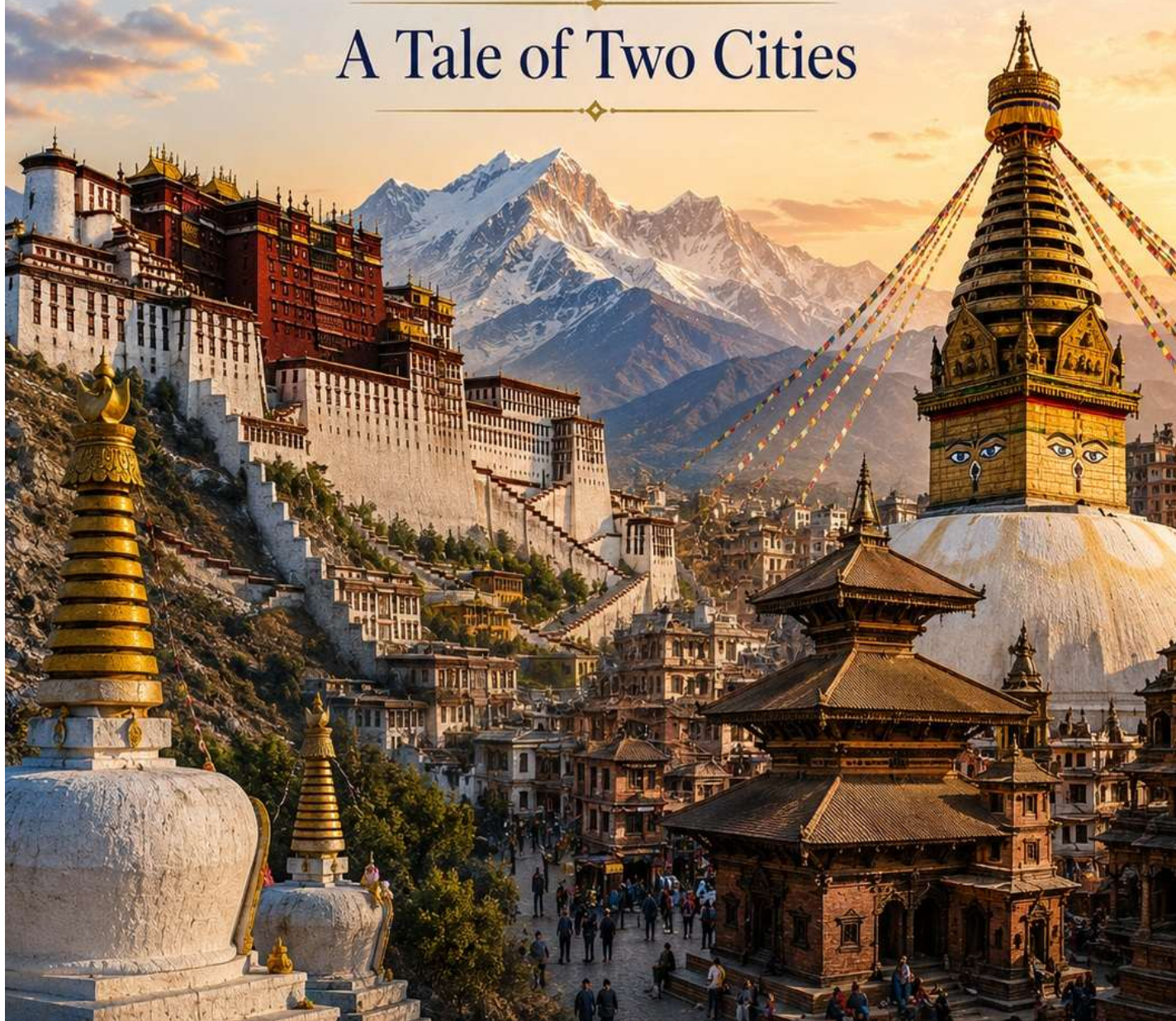




— THE —
WHERE
TO GO

TIBET & NEPAL

A Tale of Two Cities



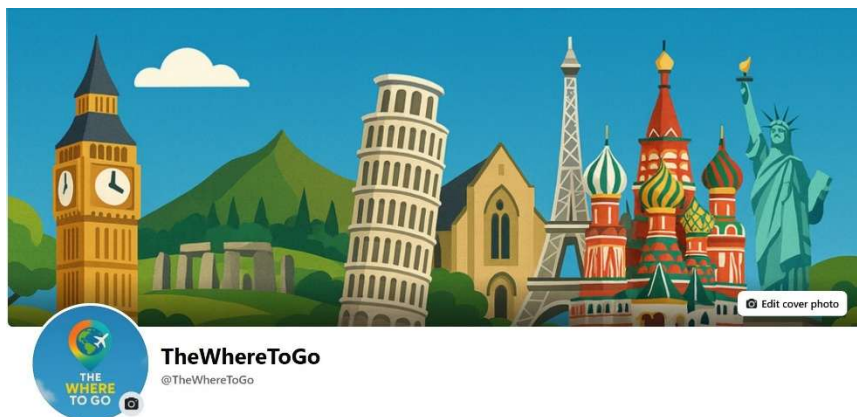
The inside cover for your information.....



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Chapter 1: Introduction & Xining

Introduction

The starting point for my trip to Tibet and Nepal is Xining in China. I arrived here via Beijing and took a flight from Beijing to Xining with China Eastern Airlines. Xining is the capital of Qinghai province in central China and neighbours the Tibetan Plateau. It is approximately 7500 feet above sea level so a good place to acclimatise for Tibet which is situated approximately 14000 feet above sea level. The train journey from Beijing to Tibet takes two days and from Xining just one day..... by express train!!!

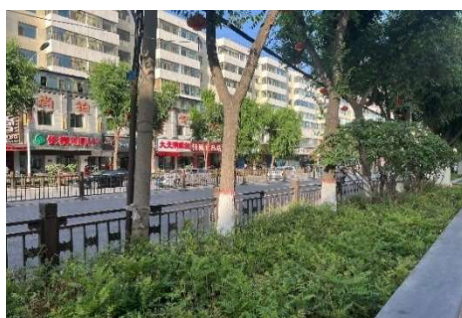
I must admit that I had never heard of Xining either, but my abiding memory of the place is some very ugly (but presumably functional) tower blocks and the considerable number of mosques.... internet sources suggest Xining is home to 80 mosques. Approximately one sixth (limited internet sources suggest one sixth to one third) of Xining's population is Muslim and Xining is home to one of China's largest mosques.



My guidebook which usually lists the top 20 places to visit manages just 7 attractions in Xining and five of those are a considerable way away from the city. For example, the Qinghai Lake, described as one of the largest salt lakes surrounded by a 'golden sea of rapeseed flowers,' is a 180-mile round trip.

This is an excellent place to practice your Chinese or develop your expertise with Google Translate (which is banned in China so you will need your VPN). Very few people here speak English (and why should they?) and the only signposts I saw with an English translation provided were for the public toilets.

Notwithstanding, the public toilets are extremely clean, free and readily available. However, if you are looking for a chemist, then you can forget it. Most of the chemists I visited turned out to be off licenses and unfortunately alcohol is not the best medicine for altitude sickness.



I would strongly recommend staying in Xining for a few days as it does allow you to start getting used to the higher altitudes. I would also recommend the train into Lhasa (rather than flying there) because the journey allows you to acclimatise over a period of time. It certainly worked for me.

Welcome to Xining



The city is also home to one of China's largest mosques called the Dongguan Great Mosque and, less than a quarter of a mile away, is the Nanguan Mosque which is much more typical of the Arabic style building with pillars, arches and domes as well as plenty of seating to sit down and admire the architecture.



Dongguan Great Mosque

The Dongguan Great Mosque was originally built in 1380 and is one of the four great mosques in Northwest China. The original mosque had colourful white arches along the outside and a green and white dome with two tall minarets. The mosque underwent several renovations during its long history and, like many religious buildings in China, suffered damage during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

However, the mosque that is shown in the tourist guidebooks and on social media is nothing like the pictures suggest. The mosque is still open but is presently undergoing redevelopment. I wasn't sure if I was in the right place but the notice on the door welcomed me to the Dongguan Great Mosque and the prayer hall, front gate and the beautiful clock tower remain pretty well intact.



Nanguan Mosque

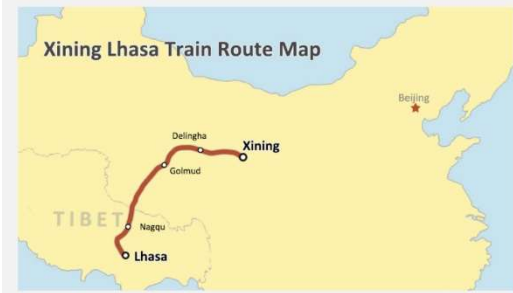
This beautiful and recently (re)constructed mosque is really quite an astonishing sight. Built from marble and a variety of other stones and carved tilework, the entire complex is a photogenic opportunity. The mosque was originally built in 1934 although it is suggested that a mosque existed on the site as far back as the 14th century.

In 1958, it was repurposed as an Embroidery Factory and later used as a school. In 1979, the mosque was returned to the local religious community as part of the nation's policy on restoring religious freedoms. The original dome and the two minarets which can be seen in pictures online have gone but what is left is still beautiful and well used for its original purpose.



Chapter 2: Tibet

Introduction



The journey from Xining in China to Lhasa in Tibet is approximately 1200 miles and reaches the giddy heights of 5000 m above sea level. The Qinghai Express takes 23 hours and is preferable to flying as it helps acclimatisation and gives you time to adjust to the higher altitudes.

The train consists of four different classes standing, hard seat, hard sleeper or soft sleeper. Standing was definitely out, and the hard sleeper sounded a little bit too tough for me, so I chose the soft sleeper and got to share a cabin with three friendly souls who didn't speak a word of English.

The trains are designed to provide a supply of oxygen to each carriage with a doctor on board. Every train has a restaurant car with the kitchen supplying freshly cooked meals. The toilet facilities were not that bad along with washing facilities. Trolleys with snacks, drinks and fresh fruit pass regularly.

Days	Station	Arr. /Dep.Time
1	Xining (2,200 m)	--/12:50
1	Delingha (2,982m)	16:37/16:43
1	Golmud (2,780 m)	18:58/19:23
2	Nagchu (4,500 m)	06:15/06:21
2	Lhasa (3,650 m)	10:20/--

The journey itself takes you right across the Tibetan plateau surrounded by mountains, lakes and industrial conurbations. Sleeping was difficult as we were traveling at the highest altitudes, and I found myself a little short of breath. Nonetheless, the night sky was spectacular as was the final run into Lhasa.



Welcome to Tibet

Tibet, often called 'The Roof of the World,' is a land of awe-inspiring beauty and spiritual influence. It is nestled high in the Himalayas and offers breathtaking landscapes alongside a rich cultural heritage and a hugely religious backdrop. The region is deeply intertwined with Tibetan Buddhism, and its monasteries, sacred sites, and traditions offer visitors a profound journey of the mind, body, and soul.

The only drawback with Tibet is the high altitude and the possibility of altitude sickness also known as Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). Located with an average elevation of 14000 feet (or 4380 metres), it is important to make careful preparations to ensure a safe and smooth trip. The main symptoms include headaches, exhaustion, dizziness, nausea and shortage of breath caused by not getting enough oxygen.

It is important to give yourself time to adjust with plenty of rest and plenty of fluids. You might consider getting an oxygen mask or taking medicine such as altitude sickness tablets although ibuprofen and paracetamol can ease the symptoms. If the symptoms persist then it is essential that you see a doctor.

As if altitude sickness is not enough then you also need to understand that you cannot visit Tibet independently and need a Tibet Travel Permitand a Chinese Visa. The Tibet Travel Permit can be only obtained through a licensed local Travel agency with a pre-booked Tibet Tour package.

If all of that has not put you off, then I hope the following gives you a taste of Lhasa and what it has to offer.

Barkhor Street

Lhasa is the capital and spiritual heart of the Tibet Autonomous Region as it is called or Tibet as it is known. The word Lhasa means 'Land of the Gods' or 'Holy Place' and it certainly lives up to its name. Lhasa is situated at an altitude of 12,000 feet or 3650 metres for those who have fully converted to metric.

Barkhor Street is an ancient street circling the famous Jokhang Temple in the centre of old Lhasa. The Jokhang Temple is considered to be the 'Mecca' of Tibet and Tibetans can be seen regularly circling the temple in a clockwise manner around Barkhor Street by way of a pilgrimage to Buddha.

The street which is situated in the old part of Lhasa is also a bustling bazaar and a must-see place for visitors accommodating thousands of tourists every day with a variety of shops offering religious items, traditional clothes, souvenirs and prayer wheels. I even managed to find a Pizza Hut and a KFC.





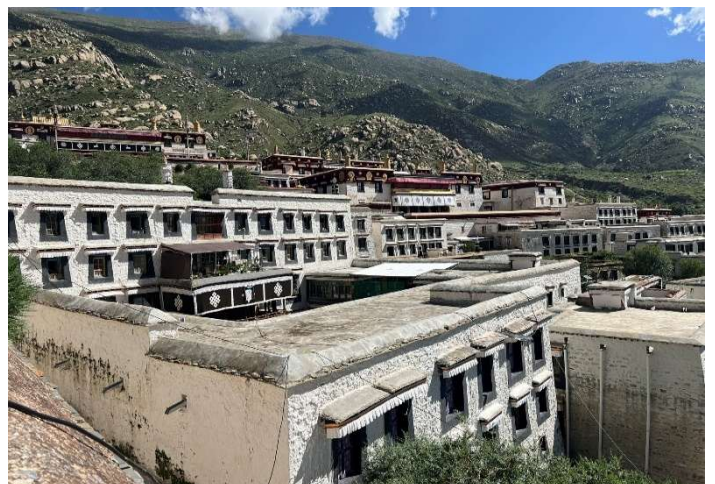
Jokhang Temple

The Jokhang Temple can be found on Barkhor Street in the centre of old Lhasa. The temple dates back to 640AD and houses numerous chapels, shrines and assembly halls as well as a Buddhist temple and a Buddhist school. The temple covers 30000 square yards (25000 square metres) and the main building is four floors high as all buildings are restricted to four floors so the golden temple roof can be seen. The complex is recognised as a World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Photography is forbidden inside buildings so no internal pictures included here.



Drepung Monastery

Drepung Monastery is the largest monastery in Tibet. The monastery was built in 1416 and was home to the second, third and fourth Dalai Lama's. In its heyday, the monastery housed 10000 monks across four colleges but nowadays its capacity is limited to 600 with most of the work to preserve and promote the knowledge of Buddhist culture and philosophy reestablished in south India. Photography is forbidden inside.





Sera Monastery

The Sera Monastery is the second largest monastery in Tibet and was founded in 1419. During its early years, the monastery grew rapidly and became one of the most influential monasteries in the region. At its peak it housed more than 5000 monks and was home to many well-known scholars and teachers as well as the fifth Dalai Lama. Nowadays, the monastery is famous for its debates and every day at 3 o'clock, the monks gather to debate Buddhist doctrines. Photography is forbidden inside buildings so there are no internal pictures included here.



Dentists

Just around the corner from me and more dentists than you can shake a stick at. I counted at least 12 in one particular street and all of them completely open to the outside. In the circumstances, I think I will take a chance on getting an appointment in the UK within the next 20 weeks!!!



Dressing up

The tourists here just love to dress up and there's nothing better than spending a night out getting a full makeover, wearing somebody else's clothes and being photographed at every corner by your very own professional photographer. Seems like a good excuse for a night out, I guess.



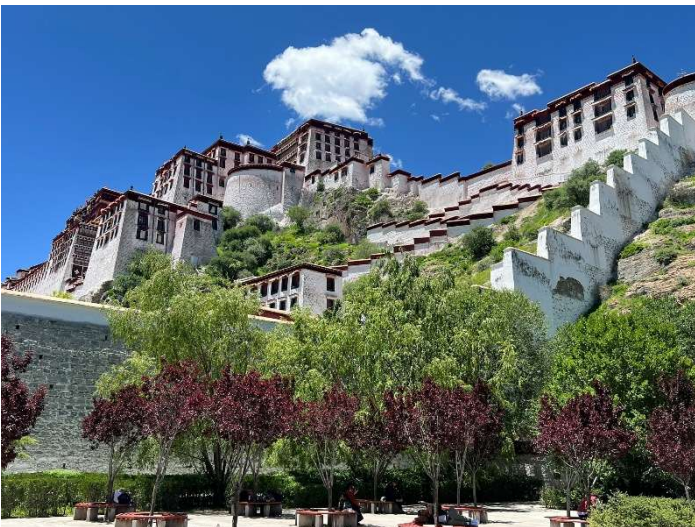


Potala Palace by day

The Potala Palace is one of several iconic and cultural landmarks in Tibet known for its amazing architecture and spiritual significance. The palace is 13 storeys high and is reckoned to be one of the tallest palaces in the world. The present palace was built in the 17th century by the fifth Dalai Lama and was the winter palace of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 to 1959. Afterwards the palace took on the role of a museum and was awarded World Heritage Site status in 1994.



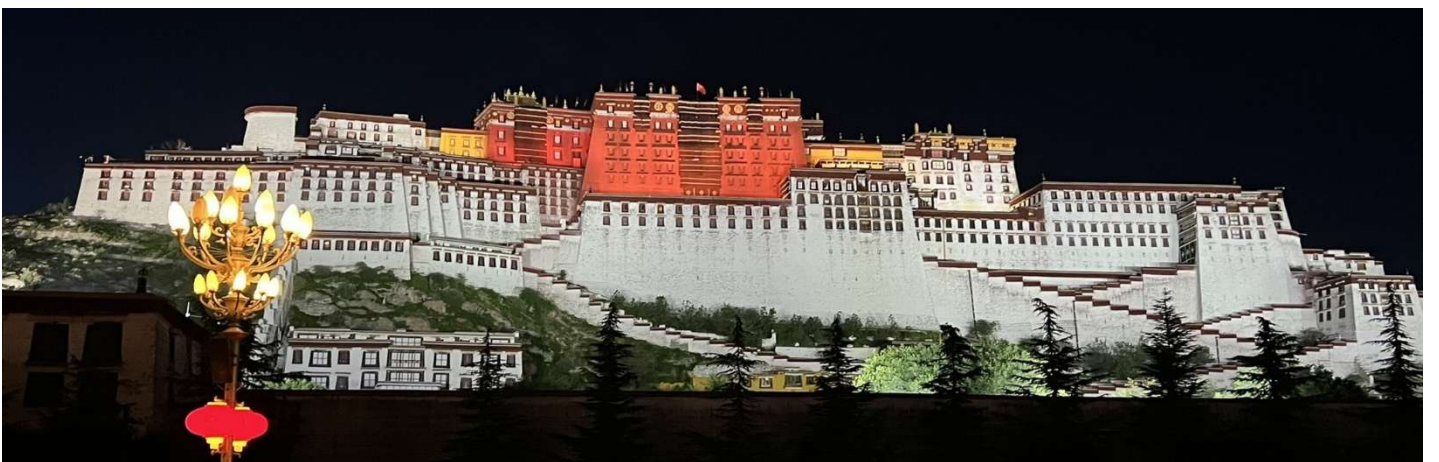
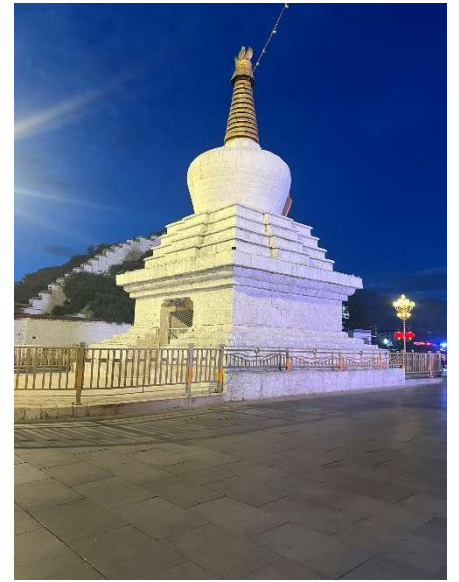
The palace is divided into two sections, the Potrang Karpo (White Palace) and the Potrang Marpo (Red Palace). The White Palace is the lower section and serves as the administrative section while the Red Palace is the upper section used for ceremonies, meditation, and spiritual practices. The only way to get to the top is to walk upstairs no escalators and no lifts. The picture should give you an idea of exactly what that means for my poor knees. Again, no internal pictures included here.



Potala Palace by night

It's my last night in Lhasa and I am wondering what to do to round off my Tibet experience. Someone suggested that the Potala Palace was lit up at night and well worth a visit. I arrived just after 8 o'clock to find that the park had been closed, but that there was plenty of excitement on the other side of the road if only I could work out how to cross it.

Next thing I am in Potala Square along with what seemed like the entire population of Tibet. These people certainly know how to enjoy themselves taking pictures, enjoying picnics, eating ice creams and watching the amazing musical fountain which gives Dubai a good run for its money especially given the height which the water reaches before crashing down and giving anyone too close a good soaking....well the young children enjoyed it. Hope the following pictures give you a decent flavour of my last night.



Chapter 3: Nepal

Introduction



Those of you who know me well will appreciate that I would always rather arrive 30 minutes early than five minutes late. This was the reason why I was sitting outside the international departure building of Lhasa Gonggar Airport four hours before my expected departure time. Unfortunately, at 9 o'clock in the morning, the departure building is still closed, and I have another hour to wait before I'm even allowed inside.



This is not the least of my concerns as I approach the Himalaya Airlines desk and hand over my passport and my ticket. After some considerable time, the member of staff tells me that I am not on the system despite all the evidence provided including my receipt, my ticket, my reservation and a personal confirmation that my flight awaits. Two hours later, the staff are convinced but unfortunately, I am not on the system.



With 30 minutes to go before my flight departs, two other international travellers turn up with tickets, but they're not on the system either. A senior official is called and, given the evidence provided, overrides the system and gets us added to the flight manifest with 15 minutes to go before departure time. As I look around the departure hall, I wonder if I am in the right place as I can only count seven people (including myself) booked on the flight.

Eventually, we are called to embark but of course I have no idea because the various announcements are not provided in English. I noticed a quick rush to the departure gate, and I decided that I best follow and hope for the best. To appease for my considerable inconvenience, I am subsequently upgraded to business class which just means that I sit nearer the front, and I don't have to pay for the coffee.

Next stop, Nepal.....



Welcome to Nepal

Nepal, officially the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, is a landlocked country situated in the Himalayas between India and China. It is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, although around 80% of the population follows Hinduism. The country is home to eight of the world's ten highest mountains, including Mount Everest, which straddles the border between Nepal and Tibet.

Nepal is the only country in the world with a triangular flag consisting of two triangles, reminiscent of the Himalayas, depicting the sun and moon symbolising longevity and permanence. The capital city has seven UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Sites and Nepal has four UNESCO recognised World Heritage Sites which, given the size of the country, is considered to be the greatest concentration of worldwide heritage.

Nepal boasts a rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and traditions. Kathmandu, the capital, is a vibrant cultural hub filled with ancient temples, stupas, and palaces. Nepal is one of the world's most significant spiritual destinations with a blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other indigenous traditions. Steeped in history, the city is a UNESCO World Heritage site, home to ancient temples, stupas, and bustling markets.

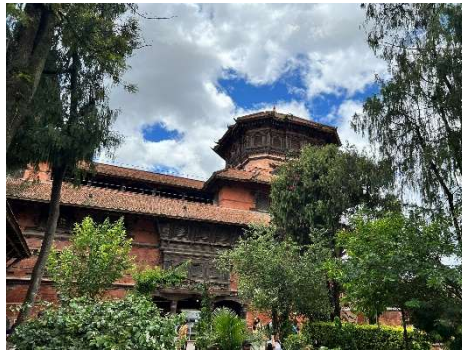
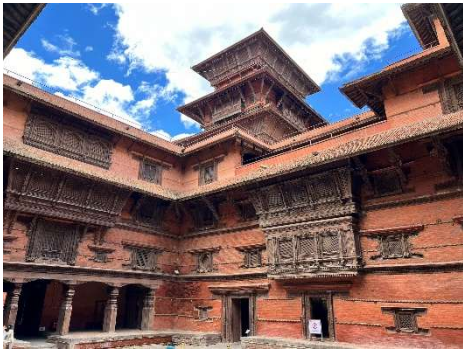
With its rich cultural heritage, stunning natural beauty and truly welcoming people, Nepal offers something for everyone. I hope the following encourages you to go to Nepal and, whether you're seeking adventure, spirituality or a peaceful getaway, then Nepal will not disappoint. This is much more than just a destination but an experience that will stay with you long after your trip ends.



Kathmandu Durbar Square

First stop is the famous Kathmandu Durbar Square which is just a short walk from my hotel. Durbar means royal palace, and this is where the city's kings were once crowned and ruled. Confusingly, there are three Durbar Squares in Kathmandu belonging to the three kingdoms existing before unification: Kathmandu Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square and Bhaktapur Durbar Square. All three squares are UNESCO listed World Heritage Sites and this one dates back to the 15th century, offering a glimpse into the country's cultural and architectural heritage.

The square is also known as the Museum of Temples, as it houses over 50 temples along with several palaces and courtyards.



Lord Kaal Bhairava

There are many things of interest in Durbar Square, but this particular statue caught my eye and was a particular favourite of the people in the square. Lord Kaal Bhairava is a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva and the Hindu god of time and death. Kaal Bhairav is also known as the "Lord of Time" or "Lord of Death". The stone idol here was carved in the 5th or 6th century and rediscovered in the 17th century. It is said that the idol in Kathmandu is unusual because he is shown smiling, which is not traditional. It is said that you will be struck down if you stand before Kaal Bhairava and have told a lie.....and I am still standing!!!



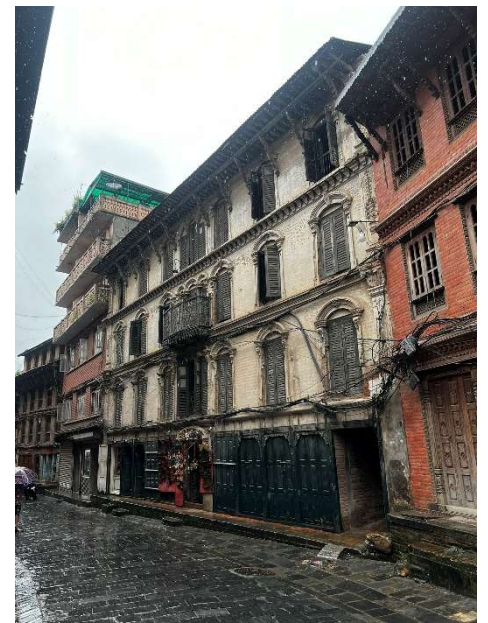
Bhaktapur Durbar Square



My next stop was Bhaktapur Durbar Square but today there was no avoiding the torrential rain which had held off long enough to allow me to see the Himalayas. Bhaktapur Durbar Square is a former royal palace complex located in Bhaktapur and is another UNESCO listed World Heritage Site which is undergoing extensive restoration work due to the earthquakes in 1833, 1934 and, more recently, 2015.

The area was the home of the Malla kings of Nepal from the 14th to 15th century and the kings of the Kingdom of Bhaktapur from the 15th to late 18th century. The complex consists of four distinct squares with temples, pagodas, courtyards and the magnificent Palace of Fifty-Five Windows featuring, not surprisingly, fifty-five windows. The area is vast and the architecture simply delightful.

Apologies for the quantity of the photographs here but it was belting down with rain, and it is difficult trying to hold a camera and an umbrella at the same time.





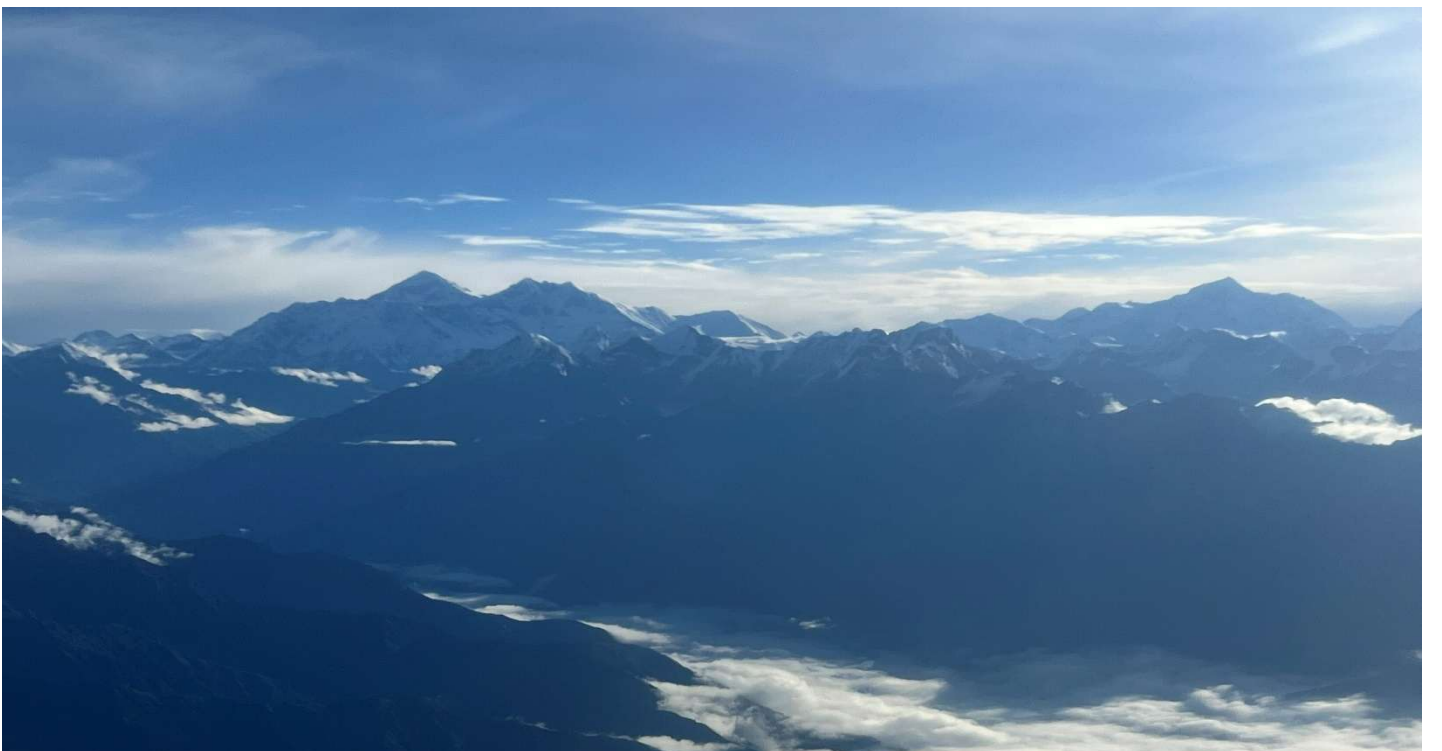
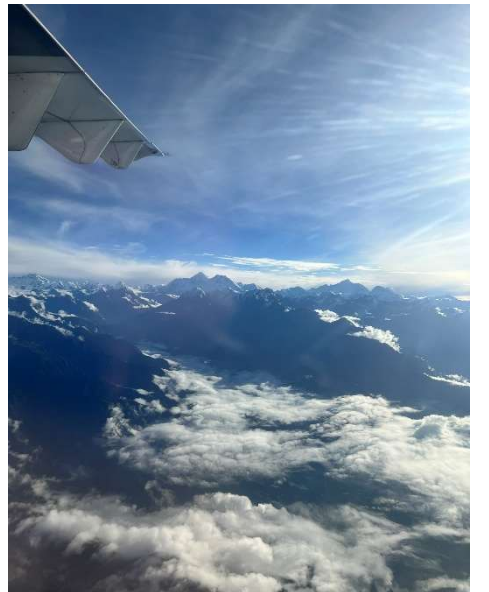
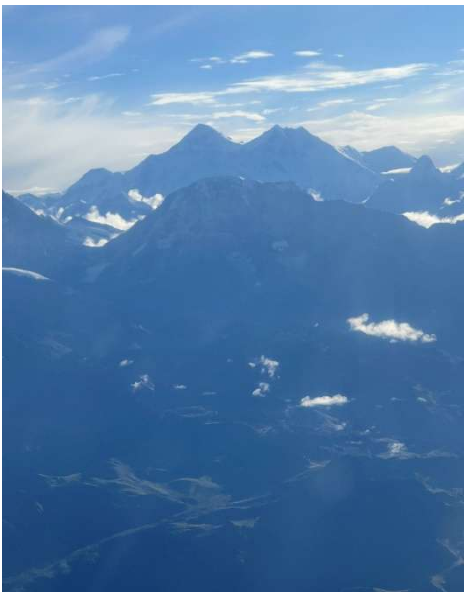
Mount Everest

It is some ridiculous early hour of the morning and I am on my way to the airport to catch my flight with Buddha Airways (I decided to play it safe) from KTM to MTN. MTN is not actually an airport but a designation for the sightseeing flight across the Himalayas. After the usual safety demonstration, the 6.15am flight takes off on time with only the window seats occupied.

The Himalayas is the highest mountain range in the world and crosses five countries including Bhutan, China, India, Pakistan and Nepal. The Nepal Himalayas are in the east-central section and highest part of the Himalayan Mountain range. In fact, Nepal contains most of the Himalayas as well as eight of the world's ten highest peaks including Mount Everest which lies on the border of Nepal and Tibet. The peak is shared between Nepal and Tibet and is seen as a symbol of the relationship between the two countries.

Although I cannot claim to be able to name the other seven mountains, it is Mount Everest that I am here to see. This is the highest mountain in the world at 29035 feet or 8,850 metres (actually 8848.86 metres is the recognised height) you can choose your own measurement, but 29,035 feet does sound more impressive. The fact that this was the tallest mountain in the world was not recognised until 1852 and in 1865 the mountain, previously referred to as Peak XV, was renamed after Sir George Everest who was the British surveyor general of India from 1830 to 1843 those are years not times!!!!

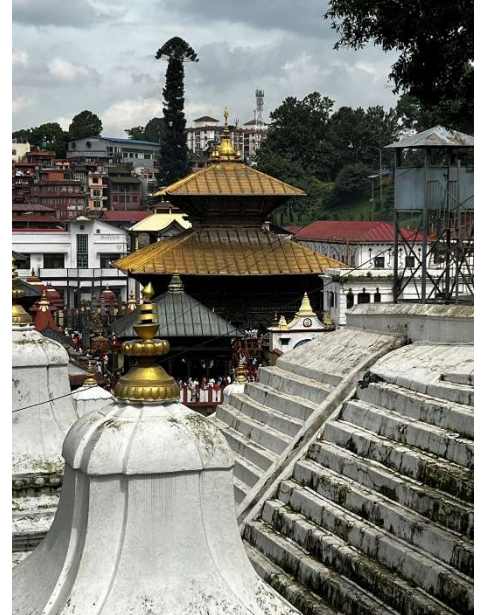
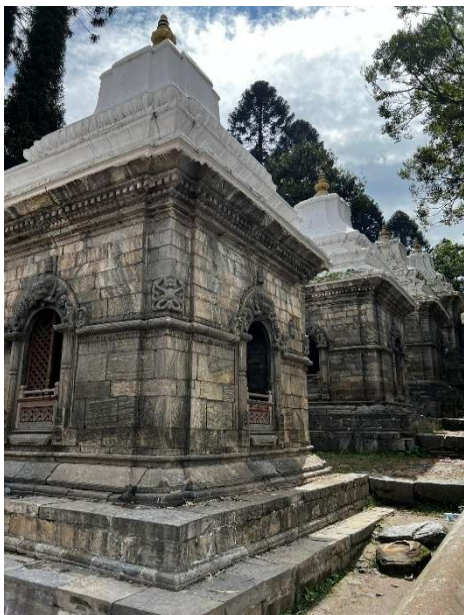
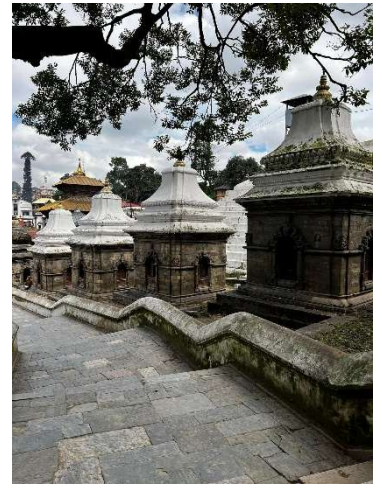
Sir George Everest, who had never even set eyes on the mountain, objected to it being named after him and believed that it was important to use local names. The Tibetan name for the mountain was Chomolungma, meaning 'Mother Goddess of the World' and the Nepalese name was Sagarmatha, which translates to 'Forehead of the Sky.' The problem was that there was no commonly used local name, and no one wished to upset either of the countries involved so the name Everest prevailed.



Pashupatinath Temple

The Pashupatinath Temple is situated on the banks of the holy River Bagmati and is considered one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites for Hindus. The temple is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva in his form as Pashupati, protector of animals.....the name derives from the Sanskrit words 'Pashu' meaning "animals", and 'Pati' meaning "the protector".

The site dates back to the 5th century although the original, mainly wooden, buildings were eaten by termites and subsequently replaced by the current stone and metal structures in the 15th century. The site includes a two-story gilt-roofed pagoda, various cremation sites bordering the river and over 500 assorted temples, ashrams and shrines. The temple was classified as a World Heritage Site in 1979.



Boudhanath Stupa

The Boudhanath Stupa is another UNESCO recognized site and is considered to be the centre of Himalayan Buddhism and a key religious site for Tibetan Buddhists. Stupas were originally built to house holy relics and some claim that Boudhanath contains the relics of the past Buddha, Kashyapa, while others say it contains a piece of bone from the skeleton of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha.

The highly symbolic construction serves as a three-dimensional reminder of the Buddha's path towards enlightenment. The plinth represents earth, the kumbha (dome) is water, the harmika (square tower) is fire, the spire is air and the umbrella at the top is the void or ether beyond space. The 13 levels of the spire represent the stages that a human being must pass through to achieve nirvana.



Swayambhunath Temple

Swayambhunath Temple is an ancient religious complex to the west of the city situated at the top of a steep hill in the Kathmandu Valley. The Tibetan and Sanskrit name for the site means 'self arising' or 'self created'. Elsewhere the complex is known locally as the 'Monkey Temple' because of the significant numbers of monkeys who have resided there for centuries.

The complex consists of a stupa, a variety of shrines and temples as well as shops, restaurants and lodging accommodation. The Tibetan monastery, museum and library are more recent additions. The exceedingly steep stone steps that lead up to the top are quite a challenge but the exceptional view from the top probably makes it all worthwhile.



Garden of Dreams

There comes a point in any such holiday that you suddenly feel that you cannot possibly visit any more religious attractions no matter what their history, religious significance, height above sea level or guidebook write up. Today I decided to visit the Garden of Dreams which I had first noticed on my arrival into the city. The garden is an island of calm in a sea of noise, hustle and bustle.

The garden was created by Field Marshal Kaiser Sumsher Rana (1892-1964) in the early 1920s. After completion, it was considered as one of the most sophisticated private gardens in existence. On his death, it was handed over to the government but was not properly managed. A renovation project has now become revived the garden as per the original concept of 'an 'oasis of peace and tranquillity.'



Chandragiri Hills



It is my last day in Kathmandu, and I still have one more place to visit and take the cable car to the top of the Chandragiri Hills. The cable car ride is 2.4 kilometres (or 9095 feet) long and takes you from an altitude of 1550 metres to 2550 meters in just under 10 minutes.

The website proclaims, 'As you embark on your journey to the hilltop, the Chandragiri Hills cable car gently carries you above the verdant pine forests, opening awe-inspiring panoramic views of the valley below, the lush hills surrounding it, and the majestic Himalayan range.'

Unfortunately, the website makes no mention of the fact that all of this is weather permitting and by the time I am halfway up that hillside, I couldn't see a damn thing!!!



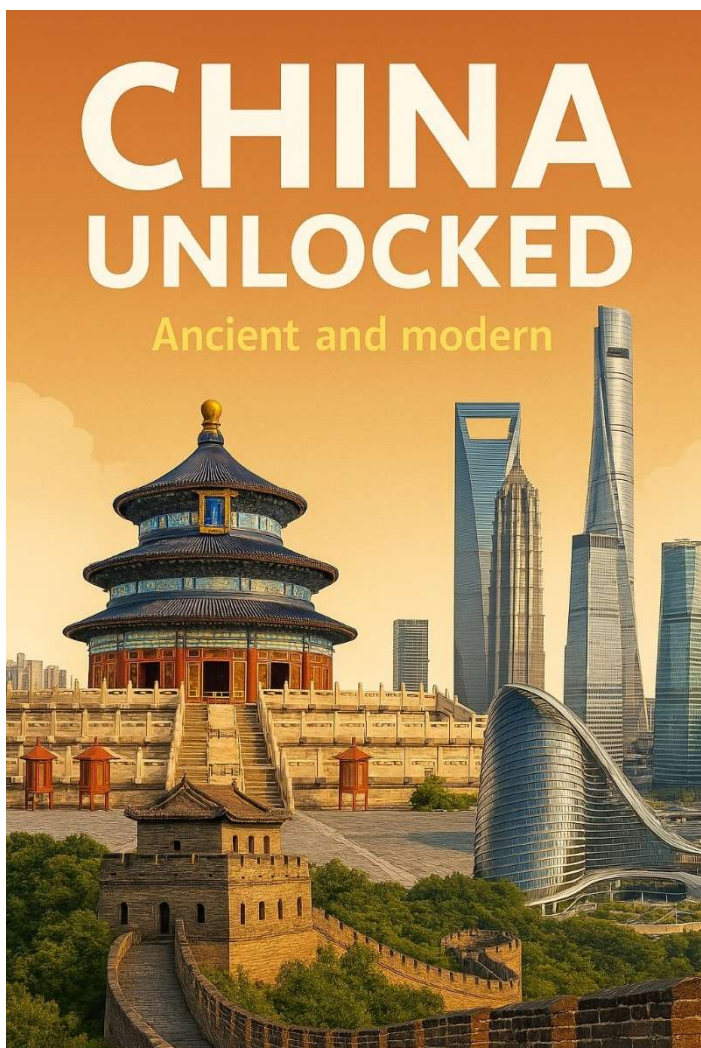
Chapter 4: Summary

I appreciate that Tibet and Nepal are much more than their capital cities and understand that my trip to Lhasa and Kathmandu is just scraping at the surface of what these two diverse countries have to offer. While Lhasa pulses with high-altitude serenity supported by its Tibetan Buddhist traditions, Kathmandu offers spiritual energy blending Hindu and Buddhist heritage. In many ways they are the same and many ways they are different so perhaps it is good to experience them together,

Lhasa reminds me of pilgrims circling the ancient Jokhang Temple, spinning prayer wheels along Barkhor Street, while the towering Potala Palace symbolises spiritual and political power. Lhasa feels quiet and introspective with spirituality woven into daily life while its thin air demands acclimatisation and its access requires considerable efforts in obtaining permits.

Meanwhile, Kathmandu bursts with energy and reverberates to the sound of honking scooters and temple bells. Durbar Square dazzles with ornate palaces, while the Pashupatinath Temple hosts Hindu cremations by the Bagmati River. Kathmandu is raw and vibrant, where chaotic markets sit beside serene gardens like the Garden of Dreams.

I have had an amazing time in China, Tibet and Nepal with many fond memories to take away from my trip including visits to Xining and the overnight train from China to Tibet as well as a flight over the wonderful Himalayas. I have visited monasteries, mosques, temples and palaces as well as a range of UNESCO World Heritage sites I have even managed to lose 10kg because of all the walking and all those steps.



On my way home I travelled back through China and visited Guangzhou (which is China's third-largest city with a population about twice the size of the population of London) and Wuhan (a city which boasts 89 universities and a population roughly the same size as London).

You can watch the video and read the documentary travel guide at www.thewheretogo.com

The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



This guide is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where To Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon.....

