

Nepal

Kingdom of mountains and beauty

> Mounir El- Fishawy- Kathmandu

It is natural for those who love tourism and travels to dream about visiting India and China, or Asia generally a continent with a rich history, magnificent civilisations, diversity of cultures and peoples, wonderful scenery high mountains, a mild climate, and technological progress. Thanks to Dr. Rambhakta Thakur the Nepalese ambassador to Cairo we were able to visit a country situated between northern India and southern China, naturally endowed by God with the wonders of nature and amazing tourist potential and attractions. It is the kingdom of mountains and beauty: Nepal.

Nameste Kathmandu

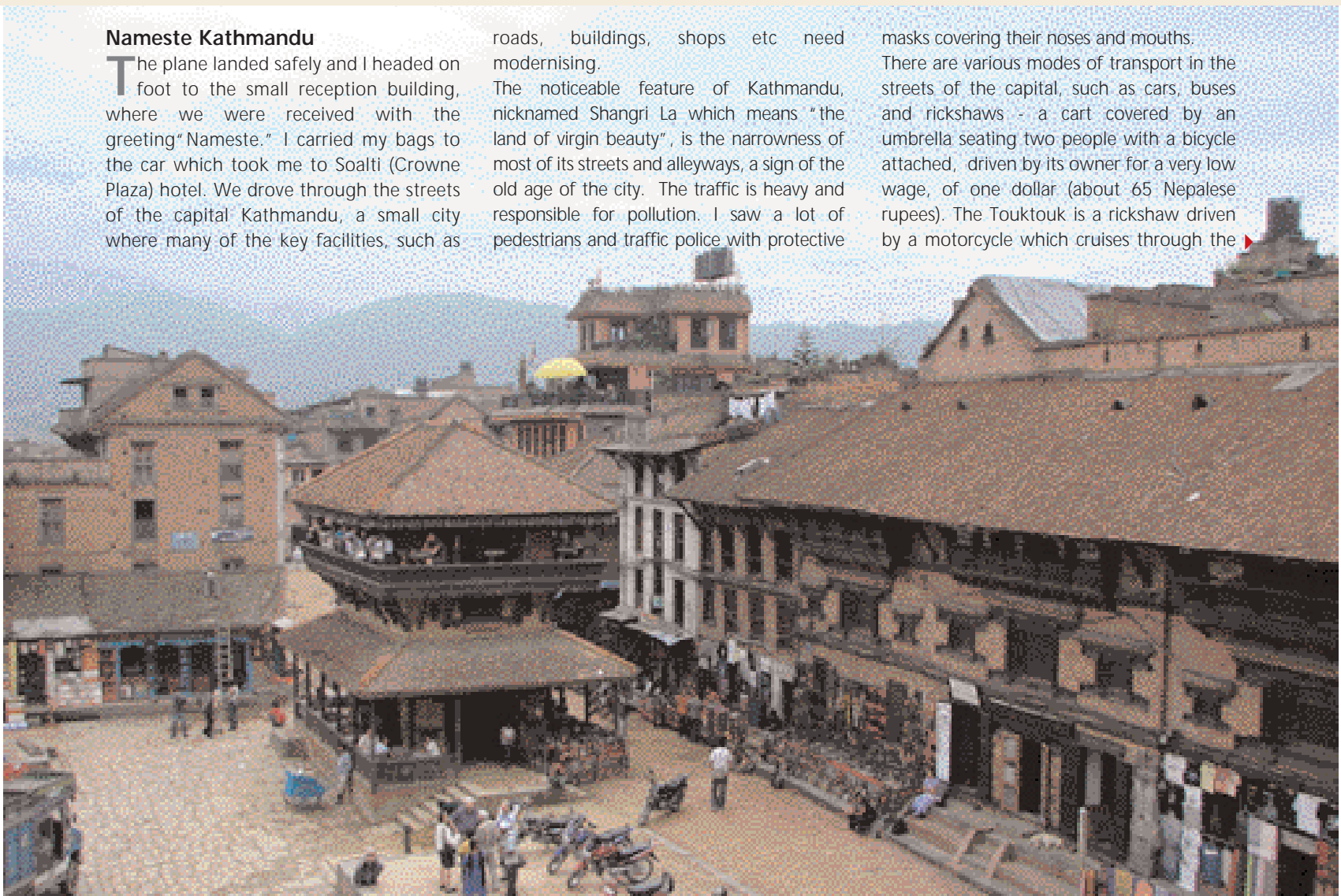
The plane landed safely and I headed on foot to the small reception building, where we were received with the greeting "Nameste." I carried my bags to the car which took me to Soalti (Crowne Plaza) hotel. We drove through the streets of the capital Kathmandu, a small city where many of the key facilities, such as

roads, buildings, shops etc need modernising.

The noticeable feature of Kathmandu, nicknamed Shangri La which means "the land of virgin beauty", is the narrowness of most of its streets and alleyways, a sign of the old age of the city. The traffic is heavy and responsible for pollution. I saw a lot of pedestrians and traffic police with protective

masks covering their noses and mouths.

There are various modes of transport in the streets of the capital, such as cars, buses and rickshaws - a cart covered by an umbrella seating two people with a bicycle attached, driven by its owner for a very low wage, of one dollar (about 65 Nepalese rupees). The Touktouk is a rickshaw driven by a motorcycle which cruises through the



On the way to Bhaktapur

في طريق بهكتابور

streets. If you take a taxi ask the driver to switch the meter on or agree on the fare beforehand. The elite can be seen strolling along the streets of Kathmandu on the back of an elephant.

Shopping areas are spread throughout Kathmandu. Perhaps the most significant are the malls, beside the street vendors and markets, such as Tamel New Road, Lougan, King Palace and Poulchhook. Tourists favour traditional handicrafts such as statues and colourful carved sculptures on stones, wood, metal and clay (terracotta), in addition to paintings on cloth and paper. One of the most popular Nepalese souvenirs is the decorated metal dagger, with covers of animal horns.

The finest and most expensive souvenirs are gold and silver jewellery studded with diamonds and precious and semi-precious stones. There are lots of shops that sell conventional and exotic clothes. Some stores offer products imported from Kashmir among them the "Pashmina" shawl made from the wool of mountain goats.

Aggressive haggling is a must. Prices tend to be expensive initially, but once an agreement is reached between the buyer and the seller it is possible to secure a real bargain.

The most respected living being is the cow, a sacred creature to Hindus and Buddhists. I have seen it moving gracefully in the streets of Kathmandu. Sometimes a cow will sit in a busy road, without being disturbed by anyone. Killing a cow unintentionally incurs a fine of 20 thousand rupees with imprisonment for a term of three years. If the killing is intentional, the killer will regret the day he was born, and his regret will not be enough.

There are many cafes and restaurants in Katmandu, which are moderately priced, as well as some Hindu and Buddhist temples in the squares and suburbs: Kathmandu Durbar and Patan squares and Swayambhunath tower - the largest Buddhist tower in Nepal, built in 250 BC. There is also the Buddhist Boudhanath Stupa tower built in the fifth century AD, and Changu Narayan temple built in the 15th century AD.

Foreign tourists enjoy visiting "Poudey" village a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the primitive village life style is

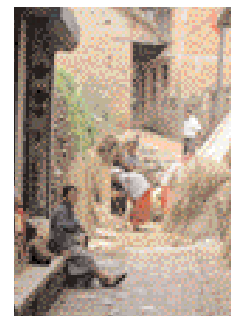


ميدان ااتان
Patan Durbar Square



▶ Tourist in one of the Markets of Kathmandu

سياح يتجولون بأحد أسواق كتمندو



قرية _ودي
Poudey Village



The Kashmiri Mosque المسجد الجامع الكشميري

maintained. I saw its people threshing grain by throwing it upwind in the air, and the artisans engraving by hand. Some people take a shower in the street watched by all.

Mosques in Kathmandu

There are about 500 mosques in Kathmandu located mostly in villages. I was told by Sheikh Mohammad Farooq that Muslims make up between five to ten percent of the population. Preacher Mohammad Arif Al-Thaqafi who is in charge of the Islamic schools in the mountainous region of Nepal said that a city near the famous tourist city of Pokhara, has a Hanafi school which graduates scholars, preachers and imams. We visited the largest two mosques in the capital, which are separated by a short distance of about one hundred meters. I said my Friday prayers in the first, medium size mosque called Nepali Jama Mosque which was full of worshippers.

The second mosque is called Kashmiri Jama Mosque. It is a huge complex which includes the shrines of two Sufis who came



Bungamati

منطقة بونغاماتي

from Kashmir about 600 years ago and built it in the Nepalese capital. It was the first mosque built there. It has adjoining buildings consisting of two floors to accommodate hundreds of worshippers of both sexes.

This complex also includes the grand Islamic schools called School of the Best Blessings (Ahsanu Al-Barakat). It teaches religious and non-religious subjects as well the Koran (Hifiz) as I was told by Sheikh Mohammad Munnadhir, a mosque imam. The library also includes a modest collection and is in need of support to augment its collection.

Nepalese tourism

Before leaving Kathmandu, we were very keen to meet officials from the Nepalese tourist industry to learn about its potential, current situation, future prospects and ways of promoting tourism. In an open dialogue, the Acting Executive Chairman of the Nepal Tourism Board, Mr. Subash Nirola said jokingly: "Despite the fact that Nepal has recently become a secular state the major religions are: Hinduism, Buddhism and Tourism!" He added that "tourism in Nepal is managed through a number of institutions, under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. The Nepal Tourism Board is the

mother institution supervising the 15 bodies dealing with tourism in the country. The board facilitates their work and participates with them in promoting tourism in Nepal. It is assisted by the country's diplomatic missions abroad.

We then discussed attracting Arab and Gulf tourists to Nepal. Nandini Lahe Thapa, director general of promotion and marketing at the board said: "The Middle East market is very important for us because we are aware of spending levels by Arab tourists, which are much higher than those of Europeans. But the problem here lies in the fact that most of the Arabs want to be accommodated in grand palaces but we do not have enough of them.

"They are compensated by the uniqueness of Nepalese tourism will bring them maximum enjoyment, such as adventure tourism, a rich cultural heritage, natural landscape, green mountains with snow-covered summits and excellent weather with varying amounts of rain, in addition to excellent hotel and tourism services. This is adequate compensation pending the completion of the appropriate infrastructure. We hope that Nepal will attract the number of tourists it deserves whether from the Middle East or from other parts of the world." ▶

The Nepalese Foreign Minister, Mrs. Sahana Pradhan, gave us a warm reception. She pointed out that because Nepal does not have goods to export or natural resources to exploit, tourism is the answer. "We have a lot of wonderful attractions for tourists and look forward to welcoming Arab tourists to Nepal".

We concluded our meeting with the Foreign Minister by asking about the most beautiful tourist sites in Nepal and she replied: "Lake Rara." The minister described her love of this beautiful lake and the surrounding area, and then she asked me: "Did you visit it?" I said: "No". She said: "It is essential that you visit it". Then added: "I promise you when I will see it and observe the splendour of the lake and its beauty, I will remember you". Everyone laughed.

Charming landscape

When one mentions the name of "Nepal", he should remember the words "mountains and beauty". Beauty is a general description for this wonderful country. God has given it thrilling nature and covered it with greenery, interrupted only by buildings and roads. The high mountains and hills are

characteristic of the topography of this small state which does not exceed a total area of 147,181 square kilometres.

Despite the small area it includes wonderful diverse topography characterized by a diversity of climatic regions, and all forms of plant and animal life. The mountainous terrain is permeated by hundreds of rivers, frozen lakes and streams flowing from the high altitude of the Himalayas. The ten highest peaks in the world with fourteen summits in the world are located in Nepal. The most important is the summit of Everest, where thousands of people climb the highest peak in the world. Many have sacrificed their lives to achieve this goal. The first to reach the summit was the New Zealander "Edmond Hillary" and his Nepalese assistant Tenzin Norgay in 1953. The last was a young Egyptian Adventurer "Omar Samra", the first Egyptian, Arab and African to achieve this glory in May 2007. It was fortunate that this coincided with our visit to Nepal, where we met him and he told us about his historic achievement. We left Kathmandu heading towards the city of "Nagarkot" through the city of

"Bhaktapur", which is about 10 km from the capital. The city is also famous for its palace with 55 windows.

Leave or adventure?!

Leaving Bhaktapur city, the car made its way to the top of a mountain to the city of Nagarkot. We journeyed there like all visitors to watch the sunset and dawn, in the Himalayas.

During this climb, a combination of fun and terror, we held our breath as we saw masses of clouds below us as if we were in an aeroplane. Sometimes the car plunged into the cloud and we felt the low air pressure which affected our ears.

Upon our arrival we climbed to Club Himalayas, a five-star hotel built on top of the mountain. But there was a surprise waiting for us. We were not lucky, the weather was cloudy and we did not see the sun at dusk. We spent the day relaxed in the hotel savouring the memories on the way up to Nagarkot. Everyone confirmed that the sun rise and sun set we missed will be compensated on our next visit to "Pokhara," which we will report on in a forthcoming issue. Nameste. ■



A temple



The Kashmiri Mosque

المسجد الجامع الكشميري