

Pokhara:

the pearl of Nepalese tourism

> Pokhara - Mounir El-Fishawy

In Nepal there is no other topic of conversation than Pokhara. Whenever you talk about tourism with someone, without fail he will ask: "Have you visited Pokhara?" After that he will be lost for words to describe this beautiful city, which is only 200km west of Kathmandu, the capital. The journey takes six hours by car, because of the difficulty of the mountainous road. The plane ride is only 20 minutes.

Pokhara has an area of 123 square kilometres in the heart of a quiet valley 827 meters above sea level, surrounded by thick forests, a crystal clear lake and dissected by rivers. It has a population of 238,000. Half of its income comes from

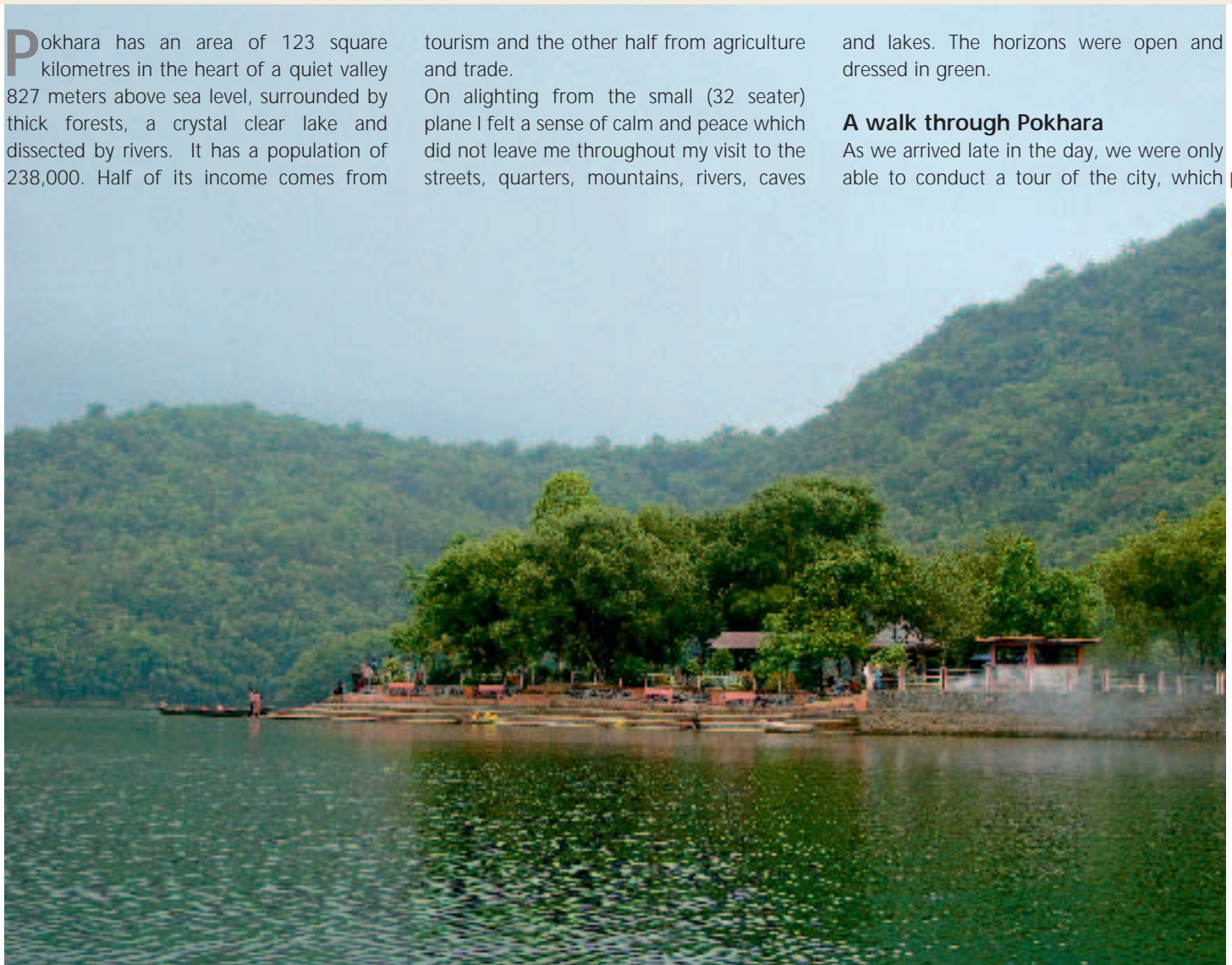
tourism and the other half from agriculture and trade.

On alighting from the small (32 seater) plane I felt a sense of calm and peace which did not leave me throughout my visit to the streets, quarters, mountains, rivers, caves

and lakes. The horizons were open and dressed in green.

A walk through Pokhara

As we arrived late in the day, we were only able to conduct a tour of the city, which



An Island in Phewa Lake

جزيرة وسط بحيرة فيوا



Exhibits at the Mountains Museum جانب من معروضات متحف الجبال



A small temple in Pokhara
معبد صغير بمدينة بوكھارا



A model of Fish Tail Mountain
نموذج لجبل ذيل السمكة

remains awake until 10 at night. Here, the pleasure of those staying up is to be found in Lake Street, a long road by Lake Phewa, with many shops selling embroidered clothes, Nepalese and Kashmiri souvenirs, restaurants, cafes, travel agencies, internet cafes, international communications and exchange bureaux.. Close to this street, one finds many hotels and pensions at reasonable prices and even cheap ones. During our walk through Lake Street we came across a funeral and a wedding. A burial party was on its way to the place of cremation, in accordance with Hindu or Buddhist rituals. Our guide warned us not to follow the motorcade. We were invited to the wedding and to take pictures until the groom became annoyed by the flashes and the hustle and commanded us to leave. We left smiling after seizing the opportunity to photograph the bride and groom when they signed the marriage certificate.

A wet day

The second day after our arrival was, indeed, a 'water' day – I feared the papers on which I am writing this article would get soaked. First came the tour of Lake Phewa, then our visit to Devi fall, our descent to 100 meters below ground to the Gupteshwar Madav Cave to see the place where the water from the fall lands, and finally Seti Gorj River. We went on foot, crossing a few hundred meters from the hotel onto small harbor

boats. This lake is the second largest after Lake Rara in the south of the country. Lake Phewa is 4.4 square kilometers and its depth varies between 8.6 and 19 meters. The river Harpon Khola pours its waters into the western side of the lake. To the south there is a hill crowned by a Buddhist temple called 'World Peace Stupa'.

During our tour of the lake, which is surrounded by a splendid green reflected in its enchanting water, we went to a small island in the centre with a temple called Barahi, consisting of two floors in the form of a pagoda. We attended the rituals performed by local visitors and continued our river excursion.

After getting off the boat, we went to Devi Fall, named after a Swiss tourist, who came to Nepal in 1961 and swam near the fall. The flow dragged him across rocks to the site where the water falls, and he drowned in the 100 meter deep water.

As soon as we finished visiting the waterfall, we walked a few hundred meters to the entrance of Gupteshwar Cave. There, we had to take off our shoes and walk barefoot for about 46 meters, to a Hindu temple that was erected immediately after the discovery of the cave in 1992. Inside the temple is a statue of the God Shiva. Photography is strictly forbidden.

The second level of the cave is about 54 meters deep. It has many different spectacular stalactites and stalagmites. We needed to walk very carefully, because of the hardness of the soil, the narrowness of

the corridor and low roof. At the end of the cave is the point from which water flows into Devi Falls. They can be seen from a long opening in the rock. It is a fantastic landscape, with a green background, illuminated by sunlight.

After emerging from the cave we went by car to the course of Seti Gorj River. From a small bridge, we saw how the water ran to a depth of 56 meters. Our guide told us that in some places in Pokhara the river narrows to only a meter, but outside the city, there are places where the width reaches a kilometre.

A mountainous day

The next day, we left the hotel at 4:30 am to a location at a height of 1440 meters on the outskirts of the city of Sarangkot. We saw the sun rise at 5:17 am and, along with dozens of other tourists, looked carefully towards 10 peaks of the Himalayas in this magnificent landscape, including the seventh highest mountain in the world Dhaulagiri (8167 meters), the eighth highest Manaslu (8063 meters) and the Annapurna (the tenth highest - 8091 meters). The most famous peak is Manaslu (or Fish Tail) (6997 m), which does in fact resemble the tail of fish. The sun emerges and after a few minutes the red light spreads over the peak, announcing its arrival.

A museum in the mountains

The International Mountains Museum in Pokhara creates a penetrating flash of insight into Nepalese life because it describes the most important features of the kingdom. It is a two-story building on a large area surrounded by a large garden, artistically cared for, with flowers and trees of all shapes and colours, as well as a model of Mount Fish Tail, nearby. Some visitors love to get on this large model to take photos.

The museum exhibits photographs of the most famous mountaineers, their climbing gear and some personal belongings. There are photographs of the mountains themselves, with texts that explain their main features, and describe the inhabitants who continue to live in primitive places of high altitude, sometimes more than 5000 meters. Embalmed mountain animals such as birds, insects and reptiles have also been photographed.

There is a library and a large room designed ▶

internally in the form of a Tibetan temple. Indeed, we came across a Tibetan temple when we visited the 'Chinese Village' - a village for Tibetan refugees who arrived in the 60s as a result of a disagreement between Tibet's spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, and the Chinese government. The village is simple, with small houses. One photo shows carpets and magnificent statues, with the Dalai Lama in the foreground.

The flying 'bat'

The highlight of our trip took place in the 'bat' or "ultra light" - a small airplane or glider with a propeller at the back, and room for only a pilot and tourists. There are no doors or windows. When I wanted to board, I was given a thick jacket, a helmet and a motorcyclist belt which is called a life belt. If you fall, apart from God, this is the only thing that will save you.

The 'bat' began circling above Pokhara, the tops of the mountains, Phewa Lake and the whole area. At first I was overtaken by a true fear of flying in an airplane without closed doors. It was my first such



Himalayas peaks at sunrise

قمم الهيمالايا لحظة شروق الشمس

experience. But the apprehension disappeared when witnessing a succession of superb natural landscapes, created by almighty God. This land can best be

described as God's paradise on earth. Pokhara is certainly a pearl of Nepalese tourism, the last stop on my tour of the beautiful, mountain kingdom. ■



Himalayas peaks near Pokhara

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