Buddhist pilgrimage sites: Nepal

As the birthplace of the historical Buddha, Nepal is one of the main centres of Mahayana Buddhism. Over a long period of time it has been a meeting place for Buddhist teachers and scholars. The Emperor Ashoka visited Nepal during the 2nd century BC and later sent missionaries there to spread the teachings of the Buddha. He had a pillar erected at the Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini and constructed several stupas at Patan.

Nepal played an important part in the expansion of Buddhism and in the preservation of various ancient Buddhist traditions and texts. Many manuscripts relating to Buddhist philosophy, sutras, rituals, art and architecture are still kept in National Archives in Kathmandu and various monastic libraries.

Nepal was also renowned for its production of fine quality Buddhist art. Newari craftsmen produced a wide variety of objects, including stone carved architectural elements, wood carving, casting and metalwork incorporating the use of precious metals and gems, painted manuscripts, frescoes and banners and the production of papier mache and textiles.

Patan

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Patan is one of the oldest royal cities in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal and was originally designed in the shape of the Buddhist 'Wheel of the Law' (dharmachakra). According to legend, when Ashoka visited Nepal in 250 BC, he ordered that five stupas be constructed, one in each of the four cardinal directions and another in the centre of the city. Today there are more than 1,000 Buddhist monuments scattered throughout the city and Durbar Square has been listed as a World Heritage Site.

The Mahabuddha temple is dedicated to Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha and is often called the temple of a thousand Buddhas because a Buddha image is engraved on every brick. The temple is modelled on the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya in India.
Mahabodhi Temple, Patan

Mahabodhi Temple, Patan, Nepal.
Photograph by Dey Alexander, 2005
Mahabodhi Temple, Patan

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Mahabodhi Temple, Patan

Mahabodhi Temple, Patan, Nepal. Photograph by Dey Alexander,
Guardian above entrance to shrine, Mahabodhi Temple

Guardian above entrance to shrine, Mahabodhi Temple, Patan, Nepal. Photograph by Dey Alexander, 2005
Entrance to shrine, Mahabodhi Temple

Entrance to shrine, Mahabodhi Temple, Patan, Nepal. Photograph by Dey Alexander, 2005
Buddha image, Mahabodhi Temple

Buddha image, Mahabodhi Temple, Patan, Nepal.
Photograph by Dey Alexander, 2005
Mahabodhi Temple, Patan

Mahabodhi Temple, Patan, Nepal. Photograph © Oriental Architecture

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Swayambhunath

One of the holiest Buddhist sites in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal is marked by the great stupa of Swayambhunath. The name means Self Created or Self Existent and refers to the Nepalese legend telling how the Primordial Buddha manifested himself in the form of light or flame from a resplendent lotus resting on the centre of a lake which once covered the entire valley. The compassionate bodhisattva Manjusri drained this lake with his sword by cutting through the side of the valley so freeing the land for human habitation.

The stupa is believed to mark the place where the deity manifested and to enclose his perpetual flame. The eyes which look out over the valley from each side of its tower are therefore to be regarded as the eyes of the supreme uncreated Buddha. The first stupa was built by the Buddhist king Vrsadeva at the beginning of the 5th century AD. It has been restored many times over the centuries, particularly in the 12th and 14th centuries. The monument is also sacred to Tibetan Buddhists who continue to visit it as pilgrims. The large central stupa is surrounded by temples, guesthouses and tiny votive stupas added over the centuries by devotees.
Swayambhunath stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal. ©John Huntington
Vajra at Swayambhunath stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal. © John Huntington
Swayambhunath stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photograph by Jennifer Tynan, 2001