

WHEN TIME STOOD STILL

Step back in time in Bandipur, a little mountain town in Nepal, where you will find local Newari culture touched by quintessentially European sensibilities.

Text & photographs Ami Bhat

With the attack of the Shah Dynasty of the Gurkha Kingdom in 1769, many of the Newari tradesmen from Bhaktapur in Kathmandu, decided to leave their homes in search of a new one. They travelled along the Indo-Tibetan trade route and found a safe haven in erstwhile Majar. It gave them respite from not just the foes they had fled but also from the ill health and diseases around. Thus, flourished a new town - Bandipur in the modern-day Gandaki Zone of Nepal.

As you cross the winding roads of the Himalayas from Kathmandu towards Pokhara, almost midway, you reach a nondescript hamlet that begs you to leave your car behind and venture in. A few steps into the town will lead you to a charming view of neat row of houses along a cobbled pathway, with a distinct European feel. It feels as if time has stopped and that is when you realise you have arrived in Bandipur.

A charming fusion of cultures

The leisurely pace of the town is a perfect reminder for you to slow down and appreciate the little joys of life. A stroll through Bandipur introduces you to the treasures of the town - intricately carved wooden doors and windows showcase the quintessential Newari art. At the same time, the salon-like swinging doors take you back to the Wild West of America. You almost expect a cowboy riding his steed, down to cobbled pathways, to come up and greet you with a 'howdy'. Adding further allure to the fusion are the colourful Juliet balconies - with blooming bougainvillea and seasonal flowers - very Mediterranean in its appeal.

This spread: Desk setting in the mountain village of Bandipur.



Close-up from above: Typical Newari carvings adorn homes and temples; Locals queuing up at the Khadga Devi Temple during Dashain; The stunning view of the verdant valley from Bandipur.



At the end of the street of the main bazaar, at the crossroads, you are treated to a stunning representation of traditional Newari art by way of a colourful temple. The elaborate artwork on the brackets and the entrance is enough for you to gauge the aptitude of the local craftsmen. Standing opposite the temple is the Bandipur Community Centre, which is yet another example of a typical Newari home.

The legend of the sword

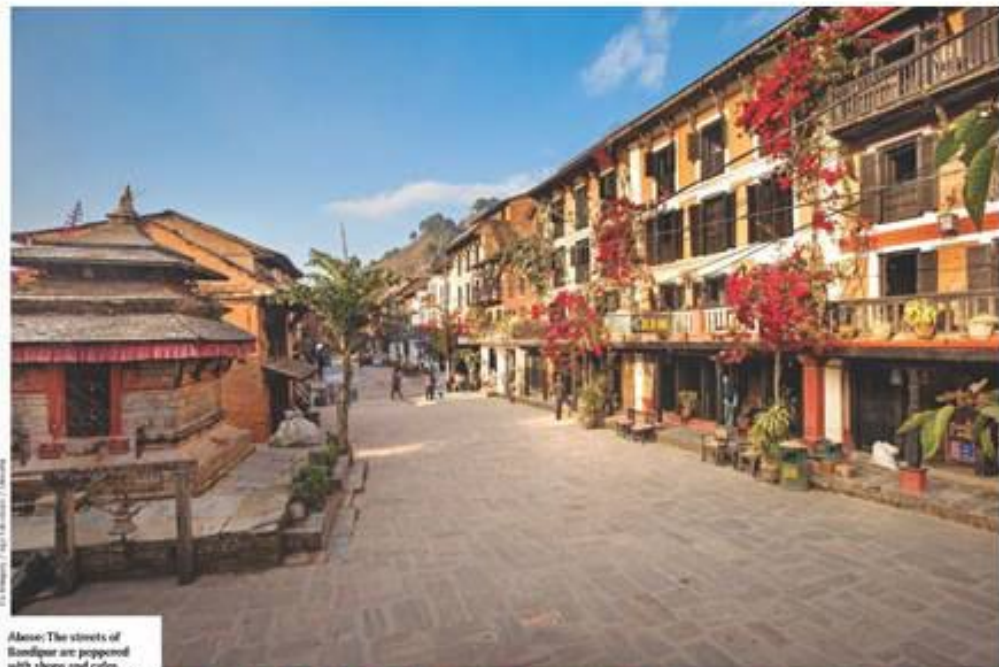
One of the paths from the temple crossroads leads you on a nature trail, complete with verdant flora and delicate butterflies. A few metres ahead, you're at the doorstep of Khadga Devi Temple. You might mistake it for a home, for the temple is nothing like the ornate ones that you are used to. Its simplicity belies its significance in the local culture; within the ordinary walls of the temple lies a secret.

Stored within the temple, away from naked eyes, is a sword called Khadga Devi and is a symbol of the female energy or Shakti. It was presented to King

Mukunde Sena, the 16th-century king of Tansen town in the Palpa district, by Lord Shiva. The sword is said to have divine powers that gives instant death to anyone who looks at it. It is thus, wrapped in layers of cloth and kept in the temple to be worshipped. Once a year, during the Hindu festival of Dashain, or Dusshera in India, it is used for a sacrificial ceremony when devotees come to pay their respects.

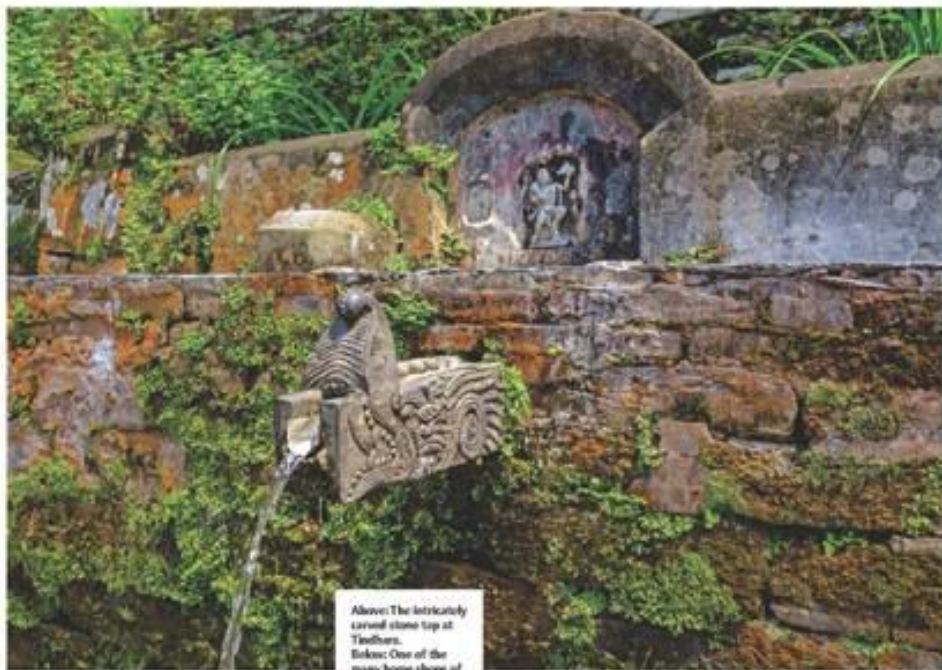
Spectacular valley views

You can choose to turn back after the temple visit or continue along the trails that branch out. One of them leads to the Siddha Gufa – considered to be the largest cave in Nepal – while another to a Buddhist monastery. A third takes you to what used to be a fort but is now an upcoming homestay or resort. A walk through those gates takes you to a tableland. This used to be the lookout point of the fort and if you care to look closer, you will see the remains of the old walls and a moat. However, what you will not have to look hard for are the gorgeous views of the valley beneath.



Above: The streets of Bandipur are peppered with shops and cafes. Below: Young residents of the town peering out of a brightly coloured house.





Above: The intricately carved stone tap at Tindhara.
Below: One of the many home shops of the town.

Another vantage point is the makeshift football field called Tundikhel. This was where traders on the Indo-Tibetan route would conduct their businesses. Later, it became a parade ground for Gurkha soldiers. Today, as you imagine the days bygone, you're treated to exquisite valley views. If you are lucky, on a clear day, you can even see the snow-capped Himalayas.

The ancient taps – Tindhara

Back at the crossroads, explore the third branch with a sign that reads Tindhara, literally, three taps. In this case, they are five historical stone taps that channel natural water from a river to Bandipur town. The taps are beautiful with their intricate carvings and sculpted stone figurines of local kings and deities. The place is still used by locals for washing purposes.

It is the walk to Tindhara that you are likely to find more interesting as you witness life in Bandipur. There is a certain charm as children play while their parents keep a watchful eye from their colourful porches or tend to their home shops. Ever smiling faces welcome you to their town while they continue with their chores. The scene reinforces the carefree spirit of the place.



There's something for all Bandipur, though laid-back, has enough for you to do, if you choose to. Trekking is one of the most popular activities here, as is paragliding over the valleys from Ramkot village. The timeless town has many ancient temples and homes to indulge history lovers and if you are one, there is no missing the Padma Library with its



Above: A quaint local inn.

18th-century architecture seated at the heart of bazaar. The town has several silk farms around it, which make for a great outing. For nature lovers, the exotic orchid trails would be an absolute delight, while the birders would be pleased with the winged beauties visiting the town.

Bandipur is slow and offbeat, perfect for those who like it different. ■



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Kathmandu from Mumbai and New Delhi. Bandipur is 145 km from here.

Fact File

Currency

1 Indian rupee = 1.60 Nepalese rupee (approx.)

Upcoming events

- April 30 is Buddha Purnima, which is celebrated as Chandi Purnima in Bandipur. Unmarried girls of the local Magar community perform Ghatu dance to songs sung by married women
- Celebrate the festival of Dashain, October 5-10, to mark the victory of good over evil, whether it is of Lord Rama over Ravana or Goddess Durga over Mahinshura

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