

Photography Tour at the Top of the World

Photography in Nepal is full of diverse riches, from the Newari villages of Kathmandu Valley, the colours of Hinduism and the wilds of lowland jungles in the south of the country. But the Himalayas are what makes Nepal truly unique, with or without the camera.



There's a new road that takes travellers into the high reaches of the Annapurna Ranges, one of Nepal's most scenic regions. Dirt track is perhaps a more suitable expression than 'road', and the only vehicles that can get up and down are Indian built 4WDs that rattle and shake as rocks and dust slip about beneath the tyres. The drivers are cowboys, young guns with hip-hop Hindi music blaring and their hair tied back with a bandanna.

Travel photography demands you get off the beaten track at every opportunity, and that sometimes means trading comfort for adventure. It's a bumpy ride in the 4WDs to reach towns like Kagbeni, but once you've arrived the camera is entertained with snow-capped peaks, goat herds and the charms of Tibetan people. This is the lower edge of the Upper Mustang, where Nepal meets Tibet.

Getting to Kagbeni requires some careful planning and I tailor the tours with a slow transition through the altitude, adjusting to the thinner air and getting in a few early starts to watch the sunrise. It's icy cold in the Spring mornings, the preferred time of year for clear skies and quiet villages. One of my highlights along this journey has been watching the first light on the peaks of Nilgiri and knowing we are the only people in town who've noticed.

Further up the road we reach Muktinath, a holy destination of immense significance to the Hindus. Pilgrims walk from Northern India just to dip their head in the holy waters of this temple. Buddhists also have a connection here, and the hillsides around the complex are layered with prayer flags in all directions. Chorten make silhouettes against the sky and prayer flags flutter in the wind.



This is our highest point on the tour, and high enough to feel the effects of altitude sickness if you didn't take it slowly. Go slow is one of the core philosophies for my photographic adventures. Slow is good, slow leads to better photos. When you rush about trying to shoot everything there is a danger of capturing nothing. Going slow means taking a moment to reflect on your inspiration, having a chance to connect with local people and cultivating your own expression with your photography.

To me the camera is like a paint brush, and in the hands of different people it will tell different stories. Every act of photography is an act of expression, and I try to help our travellers find better ways to express themselves. This is why small groups matter so much, so I have the time to share my time with everyone who travels in my group. Too many photographers in one place is also a problem, frightening off the subject matter and creating competition between cameras.

My definition of a small group is just 8. Small is good.

Sharing two weeks with a group of like-minded people, and sharing my experience and ideas is one of the most rewarding ways to travel. For two weeks all we talk about is photography, debating philosophies and discovering new perspectives. Coming to grips with the power of wide-angle photography, discovering new ways to compose images with a shallow depth of field or just gaining some confidence when approaching strangers are all opportunities to expand your camera skills.



Muktinath is our turning point for the Nepal tour, and sitting above the temples with prayer flags around me I am mindful that we begin heading back to Kathmandu from here on. It's always a little sad when journeys come to an end, sad to be closer to saying goodbye to new friends and sad to return to the real world that waits for us at home. Travel can be bitter-sweet, and the better the travel the more reluctant we are for the journey to end.

Fortunately our moments will live on in the photos. Every image will take on a new life as we share them online, print them in books or publish them in magazines. Being on a photography tour is an experience that lasts a lifetime.

Get Packing

Ewen Bell's Nepal Photography Tour is a 16-day adventure taking place in February each year and costs \$4300 per person with all meals and internal flights included. Visit www.ewenbell.com for details. Other itineraries include China, Bhutan, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Australia.

By Ewen Bell

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