

# Rickshaw – A Journey through the Streets of Kathmandu

The sun goes down over streets crowded with house wives shopping for vegetables for the evening meal. Motor bikes weave in and out of the hustle and bustle. The cobbled alleyways are slippery from the last night's rains; old men watch the world go by in intricately carved Newari style windows. There's a smell of mingled fresh and rotting vegetables in the air and the hum of conversations reaches my ears.



My driver, his bone thin body hunched over the handles bars of the ancient Indian style frame, his wiry legs causally pump the wooden block like peddles and sweat trickles down his brow as he navigates the squeaky rickshaw through the crowd. From where I sit, in my Nepalese style rickshaw from my well padded seat I see clearly the scene before me. No one bumps me, no one hassles me to buy anything, in fact I slip by unnoticed in the local throng, allowed at my own leisure to view the sights and snap and shoot my camera as I like at the endless sights and scenes that Kathmandu has to offer.

The cycle rickshaw is common through Asia as a means of local transport. Nepal has its own unique style of rickshaw which resembles a kind of Jinka attached to the back of a sturdy framed India bicycle. These two seated contraptions are all adored with a colourful canopy, images of the various Hindu gods, loud comical sounding horns, normally made from plastic bottles and propelled along by the skinny, yet deceivingly powerful legs of a Nepalese Driver.

The drivers vary in age from the seemingly ancient to those too young to even reach the peddles properly! All are poor and earn a meager living from their daily toil of hauling locals to the market, porting luggage, slabs of meat and water to and fro and occasionally the lucky ones pickup the well paying cargo of a foreign tourist!

Each driver is an individual character and they all have their own stories to tell from Baji (Old Man) that started out hauling buffalo carcasses from the slaughter house to the butcher shop and now spends his days in the more lucrative trade of taking around tourists from the four star hotels, to Babu (Small Boy) who grew up on the streets when his parents died, he picked rags to save money to buy a rickshaw and now he peddles upper-class ladies to market...and the thousand Indra's, Keshaps, Deepkas and Biksahe in-between. As varied as their stories are, they all have something in common, they all know

this city intimately and they will all greet you with a welcoming smile and enjoy nothing better than showing off their Kathmandu to you!



My rickshaw clears the crowded market place in Asan and we pull into Indra Chowk where the Lassie Whalla pours ice cold lassies, freshly made from local curd into two glasses and passes one to the driver and to me. My driver introduced me to this place along with many other local favorites where to buy the cheapest & juiciest mangoes, where to eat the tastiest Momo (meat filled dumpling) the sweetest tea and the most mouth-watering sekwa (BBQ Meat Skewers) in the city.

Our next stop are the ancient buildings in Kathmandu Durba Square, we whiz by Kumari Ko Ghar (house of the living Goddess), he calls to her in his soft voice and the living goddess briefly smiles down on us from her window where she will spend the most of her young life. We pass Kasmandap, the original building here, the name means "Kathmandu House" and this giant structure is said to have been built from the wood of one Sal Tree some 800 years ago.

Skirting the whitewashed walls of the royal palace we come to a halt at the Kaju Deval, a seven tiered temple like building. The driver relaxes while I climb the steep stairs in time to watch the sun kiss the horizon behind Swayambunath (Monkey Temple) perched on the hill, the Himalaya turns orange, then pink, then fades away with the darkness. The Square below is now emptying out as the locals head home for Dhal Bhart (the evening meal of rice and lentils).



Back in the rickshaw we head up a newly paved boulevard, shops are pulling down their shutters for the night and local Sekwa and Tass house crowds are shifting from middle age men having a shot of local Raski (Rice Wine) on their way back home to young stylishly dressed youths heading for a cheap drink with their friends. Children are replaced by street dogs and homeless boys hover in the darkening corners inhaling glue from old milk bags. Turning a corner the street lights up again and the haunting tone of a conch shells plays over the night sound of Kathmandu.

The Buddhist area emits a sense of calm and safety. Monks gracefully trace steps around the stupa

chanting prayers and spinning Mani Wheels. The scent of butter candles and their soft light invite us into the Monastery. More monks sit chanting and the soft glow brings to life the golden figure of Buddha at the altar. We sip salty butter tea and feel our minds and souls relax. Many things divide us, skin color, wealth, cultural background and upbringing, but Dipu and I are not so different, we are touched by the same things except he drives the rickshaw and I sit in the back.

The monks stand up and leave and so do we, the rickshaw whirls through the silent streets, back to my hotel. The day is nearly gone, but not the memories, never will they fade. I thank Dipu for unearthing the wonders of Kathmandu to me and slip him some money, at which he doesn't even look, it slides into his pocket and without a backward glance he peddles up the alleyway and fades back into the streets of Kathmandu.....Me, just another tourist to him.

**By Jenny Lama**

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