

Earthbound Expeditions

Holi & Festival Cultural Tour

6 days, from US$497 per person

Duration
6 days

Grade
Easy

Max altitude
2,175 m

Start and end
Kathmandu

On foot
Sightseeing

Best season
March

Accommodation
Hotel and yoga retreat

Meals
Breakfast daily

Group size
No maximum

Getting there
Private vehicle

Holi & Festival Cultural Tour Overview

Celebrate the festival of colours in the historic cities of the Kathmandu Valley, with visits to temples and palaces and traditional local food.

Tour overview

This six-day trip is planned around the Holi festival. Holi is the Hindu festival of colours. It marks the end of winter and the victory of good over evil. In Kathmandu, the whole city comes out into the streets and throws coloured powder and water at everyone, including strangers, for about six hours. The rest of the itinerary is arranged around the festival: two days visiting the temples of the valley beforehand, and two days of fresh air in the hills at a yoga retreat afterwards, which is a welcome rest after Holi.

The festival day

Holi is loud, wet and chaotic, and one of the most joyful public celebrations in the world. It starts in mid-morning and builds through the day. Water balloons are thrown from rooftops, colour comes from every direction, and local people who would normally be reserved with foreigners approach you freely. The largest crowds and most of the music are in Basantapur, the old Durbar Square. By 2 pm you will be covered in colour, and many people will have hugged you.

Who this trip is for

This trip suits travellers who want to experience one remarkable day rather than two weeks of scenery, and who are comfortable in a large, boisterous crowd. It is a short, inexpensive trip that works as a week on its own or before a trek. It does not suit anyone who wants personal space on day 3, and we will tell you so before you book.

Festival dates

Holi falls on Falgun Purnima, the full moon of the Nepali month of Falgun, so its date in the Western calendar changes each year. It also falls on different days in different parts of Nepal: Kathmandu and the hills celebrate on the day of the full moon, and the Terai, the southern plains, one day later. This itinerary is planned around the Kathmandu date, which is the one fixed point of the trip.

Key highlights of the Holi & Festival Cultural Tour

- Play Holi with local families
- UNESCO Durbar Squares tour
- Boudhanath & Pashupatinath temples
- Newari cuisine & cultural evenings

Itinerary

Day	Route	Hours	Distance	Altitude
1	Arrive Kathmandu	-	-	1,400 m
2	Swayambhunath, Pashupatinath, Boudhanath and Patan	-	-	1,400 m
3	Holi, in the streets	-	-	1,400 m

4	Nagarkot sunrise, then downhill to the retreat	3 hrs	-	2,175 m
5	Yoga, meditation and the organic farms	-	-	1,500 m
6	Back to Kathmandu, and home	-	-	1,400 m

Day 1

Arrive in Kathmandu

We meet you at Tribhuvan International Airport and take you to your hotel. A trip briefing is held on the day you arrive or the following day, depending on your arrival time.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, arrival day Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: None

Day 2

Kathmandu Valley sightseeing

After breakfast, visit the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Swayambhunath (the Monkey Temple) and Pashupatinath, an important Hindu pilgrimage site where cremations take place. Continue to Boudhanath, the largest Buddhist stupa in the world, and Patan Durbar Square, known for its medieval architecture and stonework.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: Easy walking, 3–4 hrs Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast

Day 3

Holi festival

Celebrate Holi by playing with colours in the local streets and greeting local people with "Happy Holi". Watch the celebrations in the city's main square and take part in the festival.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: Easy walking, 2–3 hrs Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast

Day 4

Nagarkot sunrise and walk to the yoga retreat

Leave early for Nagarkot to see the sunrise over the Himalaya. After breakfast, walk downhill for three hours to a quiet yoga retreat in the foothills.

Altitude: 1,500 m On foot: 3 hrs Night: Yoga retreat, below Nagarkot Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5

Day at the yoga retreat

Spend the day practising yoga and meditation at the retreat centre. You can also walk in the surrounding countryside and visit nearby organic farms.

Altitude: 1,500 m On foot: Optional 2–3 hrs Night: Yoga retreat, below Nagarkot Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6

Departure

Return to Kathmandu for your onward departure.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, departure day Night: No overnight Meals: Breakfast

What's included

- Airport transfers & ground transport
- Licensed English-speaking guide
- Accommodation throughout the trip
- All permits & national park fees
- Meals as per the itinerary

Not included

- International flights
- Travel & rescue insurance
- Personal trekking gear
- Tips & personal expenses
- Nepal entry visa (on arrival)

Permits and other costs

Permit	Fee	Issued by
Nepal tourist visa. Paid in cash at a bank counter, in clean notes. Indian nationals do not need a visa. Buy a 15-day visa rather than a 30-day visa unless you are staying on for a trek.	$30 for 15 days	On arrival at Kathmandu airport
Trekking permits. This itinerary does not enter any national park or conservation area. The walk from Nagarkot on day 4 follows public paths through farmland.	Not required	-
Licensed guide. A guide is not a legal requirement on this trip, unlike on our treks. We include a guide on day 2 because the religious art and symbols of the valley need explaining.	Inside the trip price	-

Other cost	Amount	Note
Nepal visa on arrival, 15 days	$30	Cash at the airport bank counter
Kathmandu hotel	$45–90 a night	Three-star hotel, three nights. Holi week is the most expensive week of the spring
Yoga retreat, full board	$55–80 a night	Two nights, including the classes and the meals
Private vehicle and driver	$60–90 a day	Valley sightseeing, Nagarkot and the transfers
Cultural guide	$25–40 a day	For day 2. The valley sites are difficult to understand without a guide

Monument entry fees	$45–60	Swayambhunath, Pashupatinath, Boudhanath and Patan. Patan is the most expensive
Colours and water pistols	$3–6	Bought on the morning of Holi. Choose powder rather than paste
Meals not included	$8–20 a day	You pay for lunches and dinners in Kathmandu, which are inexpensive
Travel insurance	$40–80	Standard travel insurance. No trekking or helicopter cover is needed for this trip
Tips, guide and driver	$40–70	Per traveller, at the end

Packing list

Clothing for Holi

- Clothes you are willing to throw away. A white T-shirt is traditional and shows the colours best
- An old pair of trainers. Do not wear sandals, as the crowd is dense and your feet may be trodden on
- Sunglasses, which are the best way to keep powder out of your eyes
- Most travellers buy an inexpensive set of clothes in Thamel on day 2 for a few dollars

Protection from the colour

- Coconut oil or any other oil, rubbed into your hair and skin before you go out. Local people do this, and it makes the colour much easier to remove
- A waterproof phone pouch on a lanyard, bought before you travel. This is the most useful item on this list
- An old cap or bandana, as otherwise your hair may stay coloured for a week
- Micellar water or baby oil for afterwards, which removes colour that soap does not

Cameras

- Bring only an action camera or a phone in a waterproof pouch. Powder and water will damage a normal camera, and you will be soaked within ten minutes
- If you bring a larger camera, bring a rain cover and put the camera away by 11 am
- Ask before photographing people. On Holi, almost everyone will agree

The rest of the trip

- Long trousers and tops with sleeves for the temples on day 2, and slip-on shoes, as you will take them off often
- Comfortable shoes for the day 4 walk, which is three hours downhill on farm paths
- A light layer for the sunrise at Nagarkot, which is at 2,175 m and cold before dawn
- A passport valid for six months, US dollars in clean notes for the visa, and two passport photographs

Getting there and the festival date

This trip does not depend on any mountain flights. It does depend on the date of Holi, which changes every year and is not the same across Nepal.

Arrive at least a day early

This trip is built around one fixed date and has no spare time. Day 1 is the arrival day and day 3 is the festival, so a 24-hour flight delay would mean missing the festival. Book a flight that lands on day 1 or earlier. If your connections are tight, we can book your room from the night before.

Different dates across Nepal

Kathmandu and the hills celebrate Holi on Falgun Purnima, and the Terai in the south celebrates on the following day. Our itinerary is planned around the Kathmandu date. If you are combining this trip with Chitwan or Lumbini, the southern date applies there, so please decide which celebration you would like to attend.

Closures on the day

Holi is a public holiday. Shops, offices and most restaurants are closed, and taxis are hard to find and expensive from mid-morning. Our vehicle is reserved for the group all day and the hotel serves lunch. Both are important on a day when nothing else is open.

Transport

All travel on this itinerary is by private vehicle, within about an hour of Kathmandu. Nagarkot is a 90-minute drive up to the rim of the valley. The retreat is reached on foot from Nagarkot, which is why day 4 is a downhill walk rather than a transfer.

Accommodation

Where	Nights	Type	Room	Bathroom
Kathmandu	3	Three-star hotel, in or near Thamel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Nagarkot	0	Visited at sunrise, not an overnight stop	-	-
Yoga retreat, Dhulikhel foothills	2	Retreat centre with a garden and a farm	Twin or double, simple	Private, hot water

Hot shower
Every night. On day 3 you will probably want two. The colour comes off your skin in one wash and out of your hair over about three washes.

Laundry
Included at the hotel after Holi, and we recommend using it. Some of the clothes you wear on day 3 will not come clean.

Wifi
At the hotel and at the retreat. The retreat deliberately keeps its wifi limited.

Phone signal
Ncell and NTC coverage along the whole itinerary. None of the places on this trip are remote.

Heating
Kathmandu hotels rarely have heating, but March mornings are mild. The retreat has blankets and a wood stove.

Water
Filtered water in the vehicle and at the retreat. Tap water is not drinkable.

Yoga
Two classes a day at the retreat, morning and evening, suitable for beginners. Mats provided.

Single rooms
Available at both stops at a supplement.

Meals

Meal	Time	What it is like
Breakfast	7:30–9:00	Hotel buffet in Kathmandu, and porridge, fruit and eggs at the retreat
Lunch	12:30–14:00	On Holi, at the hotel, because nothing else is open. At the retreat, vegetarian and grown on site
Dinner	19:00–20:30	Newari at least once: bara, chatamari, choila. Dal bhat at the retreat
Tea	constantly	Masala chiya. Herbal tea at the retreat, where the staff will explain its benefits

Diet	How we manage it
Vegetarian	Easy throughout, and the retreat is entirely vegetarian.
Vegan	Easy at the retreat with advance notice, and manageable in Kathmandu, which has a good number of vegan restaurants.
Gluten free	Rice and dal are safe. Momo, chatamari, roti and Tibetan bread are not.
Halal	Available in Kathmandu, and your guide knows where. The retreat is vegetarian, so this is covered there.
Alcohol	Widely available in Kathmandu, but not served at the retreat. Bhang is traditional at Holi and is sold openly. We do not arrange or recommend it.

A typical day

Time	What happens
7:30	Breakfast, at a comfortable time on every day except day 4
9:00	Sightseeing with the guide, or on day 3, the Holi celebrations
12:30	Lunch. On Holi, lunch is at the hotel, after you have washed and changed
14:00	The afternoon site visit, or on day 3, a return to the square if you wish
17:00	Return to the hotel. At the retreat, the evening yoga class
19:00	Dinner, and a briefing from the guide on the next day

21:00	Free time in Thamel, or an early night at the retreat

Difficulty and preparation

Difficulty 1 of 5

This is the easiest trip we offer. It is socially demanding rather than physically demanding.

- Two days of sightseeing in the valley, one festival day, one three-hour downhill walk and a rest day.
- You never sleep above 1,500 m. The highest point is Nagarkot, at 2,175 m, which you visit for the sunrise.
- The day 4 walk is downhill on farm paths and is easy. It is the only walking on the trip.
- Holi itself means six hours on your feet in a dense, lively crowd, which is more tiring than most people expect.
- You need to be comfortable with being touched, shouted at, soaked and covered in colour by strangers.

Getting ready

Before you book: Consider whether this trip suits you
Holi in Kathmandu is a very large crowd in which everyone takes part physically. For several hours, people you have never met will grab, hug, soak and colour you. Most travellers find it the best day of their trip, but some find it overwhelming. Think about this carefully before you book.

2 months before: Book for the festival date
The date of Holi changes each year, and Kathmandu hotels raise their rates and fill up for that week. Booking two months ahead is advisable. This is the one week in spring when two weeks' notice is not enough.

1 week before: Prepare your clothes and camera
Bring or buy clothes you are willing to throw away, as some of them will not come clean. Decide in advance how you will protect your phone and whether you will take a camera. See the packing list below.

Weather by month

Only one month in this table is relevant to this trip, and it is one of the best months of the year in Nepal.

Month	Day in Kathmandu	Night in Kathmandu	Day at Nagarkot	Conditions	Note
January	18°C	2°C	12°C	Good	Cold mornings, bright days, and the clearest mountain views of the year from Nagarkot.
February	20°C	4°C	14°C	Good	Getting warmer, clear and quiet. In some years, Losar falls in this month.
March	25°C	8°C	18°C	Best	The month of Holi and one of the best months of the year in Nepal, with warm days, cool evenings and rhododendrons starting to flower in the hills.
April	28°C	12°C	21°C	Good	Warm and increasingly hazy. Nepali New Year falls in mid-April and is worth seeing.

May	30°C	16°C	24°C	Hard	Hot and hazy in the valley, with pre-monsoon storms building in the afternoons.
June	30°C	19°C	25°C	Hard	The monsoon arrives. Humid and green, with no mountain views from Nagarkot.
July	29°C	20°C	25°C	Hard	Wet, inexpensive and quiet, and the valley is at its greenest.
August	29°C	20°C	25°C	Hard	Similar to July. Gai Jatra and Indra Jatra, the valley's other major street festivals, fall in August or September.
September	28°C	18°C	24°C	Good	The weather clears through the month and is excellent from about the 20th.
October	26°C	13°C	20°C	Best	The clearest month of the year. Dashain, the biggest festival in Nepal, falls in this month.
November	23°C	7°C	17°C	Best	Cool, clear and settled. Tihar, the festival of lights, falls in this month.
December	19°C	3°C	13°C	Good	Cold and clear, with very few visitors.

Averages for the Kathmandu valley, with the Nagarkot rim figure alongside. Only one month on this table matters and it happens to be one of the best in the Nepali year.

Guides and porters

Your guide

A licensed cultural guide accompanies you for the valley sightseeing on day 2, and a driver is with you for the whole trip. On Holi, the guide stays with the group all day. They know which squares to visit, when the celebrations in Basantapur are at their busiest, and when it is time to leave.

Staying together on the day

We ask everyone to stay together for practical reasons. Kathmandu on Holi is very crowded, and phones are kept in pouches and are often not heard. We agree a meeting point and time before we go out, and the guide carries a flag so that the group can find them easily.

Tipping

Tipping is customary but not compulsory. About $40 to $70 per traveller for the guide and driver together, given at the end of the trip, is usual. On Holi, the driver works on a public holiday and keeps the vehicle available all day.

Responsible travel

Use powder, not paste

Traditional Holi colour is a powder and is mostly harmless. Cheap commercial pastes, especially metallic silver, contain industrial dyes and heavy metals. They are hard to wash off and can harm your skin and eyes. Herbal powders are sold throughout Thamel for a few dollars, and your guide will show you where.

Respect and consent

By convention, anyone in the street may be coloured, but this is not permission to colour everyone. Do not throw colour at anyone who is clearly avoiding it, anyone in a wheelchair or with a small child, or anyone who is praying. Women travellers are occasionally groped in the crowd. If this happens, speak up loudly and tell your guide.

Water use

Kathmandu's water supply is under strain, and Holi uses a great deal of water. Water balloons and buckets are part of the day, but we ask you to buy fewer balloons and use powder instead. This is the main environmental consideration on this trip.

Photographing the festival

Ask before taking photographs. On Holi, almost everyone will agree and pose for you. Photographing women in the crowd without asking is not acceptable. This happens often enough that local people are likely to mention it. We suggest you put the camera away for the last hour and take part in the celebrations.

Booking and payment

How to book

Write to us or send a WhatsApp message stating the year you want to travel rather than the month, as the date changes. We will tell you the date of Holi in the Kathmandu Valley and plan the trip around it.

Deposit

A 30% deposit secures your dates, and the balance is paid on arrival in Kathmandu in cash or by card. The deposit is especially important on this trip, because hotel availability during Holi week is limited.

Booking for the festival date

The festival date cannot be changed. Kathmandu hotels raise their rates for Holi week and fill up early, so we recommend booking two months ahead. For most other spring trips, two weeks' notice is enough.

Cancellation

If you cancel more than 30 days before departure, your deposit can be transferred to any other date or trip we run, with no time limit. If you cancel within 30 days, the deposit is kept, because the hotel has been booked and rooms in Holi week cannot be resold at short notice.

Arrive a day early

This is our most important advice for this trip. There is no spare time between day 1 and day 3, and a delayed flight would mean missing the festival. If your connections are tight, we can book your room from the night before at cost.

Optional extras

Everest scenic flight

$220, 1 morning

A one-hour flight along the Himalaya with a guaranteed window seat. It can be added on day 2 or day 6, and it is the closest this trip comes to the mountains.

Chitwan and Holi in the Terai

from $390, +3 days

The southern plains celebrate Holi one day after Kathmandu, so with three extra days you can attend both. You see rhinos and Tharu villages, and spend a second festival day in a very different setting.

Short Annapurna trek from Pokhara

from $387, +3 days

A trek to Ghandruk and back, with views of the Annapurna range. A good way to extend a festival week into a longer trip in Nepal.

Extra nights at the retreat

$70 a night, +1 or 2 days

Two days of yoga after Holi is the shortest worthwhile stay, and three days is better. This is the least expensive option on this list.

Bhaktapur and Changu Narayan

$95, 1 day

Bhaktapur is the best preserved of the valley's medieval cities, and Changu Narayan is the oldest temple in Nepal. Both are near Nagarkot and can easily be added to day 4.

Single room

$110

A room to yourself for all five nights, at the hotel and at the retreat.

Frequently asked questions

Answers to the 18 questions travellers ask us most often. If your question is not here, contact us and we will answer it.

When is Holi?

Holi falls on Falgun Purnima, the full moon of the Nepali month of Falgun, so the date changes each year. In Kathmandu and the hills, it is on 21 March in 2027 and 10 March in 2028. Tell us the year you plan to travel and we will confirm the date before you book anything.

Why are there two different dates for Holi in Nepal?

There are two dates. Kathmandu and the hill districts celebrate on the day of the full moon, and the Terai, the southern plains bordering India, celebrate on the following day. This itinerary is planned around the Kathmandu date. If you add Chitwan, you can see both, and several travellers choose to do this.

Is Nepali Holi the same as Indian Holi?

It is the same festival, but on a different scale and with a different character. In India, Holi is bigger, lasts longer and is much more intense, especially in Mathura and Vrindavan. In Kathmandu, it is a single afternoon across the city that is friendlier and easier for visitors, and it takes place in a valley full of temples. We also run a Holi tour in India if you would like to experience the larger festival.

What happens on the day?

The celebrations build from mid-morning. People throw coloured powder and water at everyone in the street, water balloons are thrown from rooftops, and music plays in every square. By early afternoon, everyone is covered in colour. The largest crowds and most of the music are in Basantapur, the old Durbar Square. The celebrations end at about 4 pm.

Is it safe?

Generally yes, but the crowd is very dense. Pickpocketing increases, so leave all valuables at the hotel. Women travellers are occasionally groped in the crowd. This does not happen to everyone, but it does happen. Stay with the group, speak up loudly if it happens, and tell your guide.

Can I choose not to take part?

Yes. Some travellers watch from a rooftop restaurant instead, which is a good way to see the festival without taking part. However, you cannot walk through Kathmandu on Holi without being covered in colour. If you would not be comfortable being touched and soaked by strangers, please take this into account before you book.

What is bhang?

Bhang is a cannabis preparation that is traditional at Holi and is sold openly in sweets and drinks. We do not arrange it. It is much stronger than most visitors expect, and it cannot be detected in a lassi. Be aware that a drink offered to you in the street may contain it.

What should I wear?

Wear clothes you are willing to throw away, and old trainers rather than sandals, because the crowd is dense and your feet may be trodden on. A white T-shirt is traditional and shows the colours best. Most travellers buy an inexpensive set of clothes in Thamel on day 2 for a few dollars, and we recommend this.

How do I remove the colour?

Put oil on your hair and skin before you go out. Local people do this, and it makes the colour much easier to remove. Coconut oil or any other oil will work. Afterwards, the colour comes off your skin in one wash and out of your hair over about three days. Micellar water or baby oil removes what soap does not.

Are the colours safe?

The powders are mostly harmless. Cheap commercial pastes, especially metallic silver, contain industrial dyes and heavy metals. They are hard to remove and can harm your skin and eyes. Buy herbal powder, which is sold throughout Thamel, and your guide will show you where.

Can I take a camera?

Take only an action camera or a phone in a waterproof pouch on a lanyard. Powder and water will damage a normal camera, and you will be soaked within ten minutes. A waterproof pouch is the most useful thing to buy before you travel.

Why does the trip include a yoga retreat?

Two days of fresh air and quiet in the hills after Holi make for a better trip than four days in Kathmandu. The retreat is in the foothills near Dhulikhel. The food is vegetarian and grown on site, and there are two classes a day suitable for complete beginners. None of the activities are compulsory.

How hard is the day 4 walk?

It is a three-hour downhill walk on farm paths from Nagarkot to the retreat. It is the only walking on the trip and it is easy. The early start for the sunrise at Nagarkot is more demanding than the walk itself.

Will I see the Himalaya?

Yes, from Nagarkot at sunrise on day 4, weather permitting. In March, the weather is usually clear. On a clear morning, the view extends from Annapurna to Everest along the northern horizon. This is a viewpoint, not a trek.

How far ahead should I book?

Book two months ahead. Kathmandu hotels raise their rates for Holi week and fill up early, and there is no alternative date. For most spring trips in Nepal, two weeks' notice is enough, but not for this one.

Should I arrive early?

Yes, and this is our most important advice for this trip. There is no spare time between day 1 and day 3, so a 24-hour flight delay would mean missing the festival. We can book your room from the night before at cost.

Can I add a trek?

Yes, and most travellers do. Six days is a short trip, and Holi falls in the best trekking month of the spring. The short Annapurna trek from Pokhara adds three days. Annapurna Base Camp or Everest Base Camp make it a longer Nepal trip.

Is there a group size limit?

No. This is the only trip we offer without a group size limit. Holi is a street festival, and a larger group adds to the enjoyment. We do keep the day 2 sightseeing groups small, as a guide can only speak effectively to about twelve people at a time.

Photos, videos and reviews of this trip:
earthbound.rajansimkhada.com/festival-of-colors-tour-holi-celebration-in-nepal