



# RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY

Two years after the earthquake, the traditional artisans of the Kathmandu Valley are rebuilding their ancient temples the same way their ancestors once did, one brick at a time

By Delle Chan  
Photography by Jino Lee

I

t's my first morning in Nepal, and I'm already entranced. Suffused with the dusty glow of the morning sun, the ancient city of Bhaktapur is alive with light and colour. Shopkeepers proudly display their wares – from sacks of vivid saffron to finely wrought copper bowls – behind brightly painted

storefronts, while plump chickens and rangy mongrels roam the warren of red-brick streets. An enormous white goat slumbers beneath a wooden pavilion, its legs splayed in careless abandon. Here, you get the sense that life goes on as it has for centuries.

Ambling along in wide-eyed wonder, I soon find myself drawn to a shop festooned with artworks in multifarious hues. Curious, I peek in to find its owner absorbed in his craft, dabbing at his canvas in quiet concentration. He's creating a *thangka*, a traditional Buddhist painting usually rendered on fabric. "I've been working on this for several weeks now," he says in his native Newari, gesturing to his unfinished masterpiece – a sky-blue *mandala*, or map of the universe, veined with streaks of white and gold.

This dedication to craftsmanship is played out on every corner of the streets of Bhaktapur. Just 13km from the capital of Kathmandu, the UNESCO-listed city was one of the hardest-hit during the calamitous April 2015 earthquake, which topped a magnitude of 7.8 and claimed almost 9,000 lives. The tragedy devastated numerous religious sites across the Kathmandu Valley, from the iconic Swayambhunath complex in the capital to the 16th-century Jagat Narayan temple in neighbouring Patan. In Bhaktapur alone, over 116 historic structures were reduced to rubble.

Two years on, the medieval city is slowly but surely getting back onto its feet. "It took almost one and a half years for restoration works to begin, while the

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:** A SHOP FESTOONED WITH COLOURFUL THANGKAS; PIGEONS TAKE FLIGHT OVER BHAKTAPUR DURBAR SQUARE; CROWDS PASSING IN FRONT OF BOUDHANATH STUPA



government deliberated over the best approach," explains my guide, Sunit Rizal. His company, Social Tours, is a local operator specialising in community-based tourism. Like many here, Sunit is quite the character: an eloquent man with several tattoos, a missing front tooth and a master's degree in engineering to boot. "They had to choose – should they rebuild these sites using traditional methods, or utilise modern techniques?"

Sunit is immensely proud of Newari culture; so much so that it drew him back to Nepal after more than two decades studying and working in the USA and Thailand. "My roots and the beauty and simplicity of my people brought me home," he confesses. As such, he's pleased that the government has decided to rebuild Bhaktapur according to the history books. This mammoth task has now fallen to a small community of traditional carpenters and stonemasons, many of whom learnt their trade from their fathers and grandfathers.

“These heritage sites are still very much an integral part of daily life”



Photos by DELLE CHAN (Bird seed-seller and Thamel street)

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A SHOPKEEPER IN KATHMANDU'S THAMEL PATIENTLY WAITS FOR HIS NEXT CUSTOMER; A WOMAN SELLS DRY CORN TO FEED THE PIGEONS; VEGETABLE SELLERS HAWK THEIR FRESH PRODUCE ON THE STREETS; A MAN CATCHES UP WITH THE MORNING NEWS; THE COLOURFUL LANES OF THAMEL



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** DEVOTEES PAY THEIR RESPECTS AT BOUDHANATH STUPA; 74-YEAR-OLD KANCHA HAS BEEN HONING HIS CARPENTRY AND MASONRY SKILLS FOR DECADES; THE INTRICATE WOOD CARVINGS OF SUNDARI CHOWK

“These artisans eschew modern materials. Instead, they continue to use clay, mud and sand, building everything by hand,” says Sunit. “It’s a blessing that these traditional skills are still being kept alive.”

One such craftsman is 74-year-old Kancha Ranjitkar, who has been plying his trade for the past 60 years. When I meet him, he’s sitting cross-legged in the sun and patiently chiselling slabs of stone, which will eventually be used to reconstruct the ornate lintels of the Vatsala Durga temple. His bare feet are caked with chalky white dust, and his tanned face beneath his *dhakatopi* (a traditional cloth hat) is crinkled in concentration. “I used to specialise in carpentry, but I switched to masonry when I got too old to climb up to fix pillars and ceilings,” he explains. “I’m proud to be conserving my heritage.”

Reconstruction efforts are also gaining momentum elsewhere in the valley. In Kathmandu, Boudhanath Stupa – the largest Buddhist temple in Nepal – suffered extensive damage to its golden spire during the earthquake. Fortunately, a local-level initiative took off just weeks after the disaster, with private Buddhist groups channelling substantial funds to the cause, and volunteers providing free labour. The project was completed within 18 months, making Boudhanath the first major monument in the country to be fully

restored since the disaster. When I visit the stupa late one afternoon, I find its gilded crown gleaming like a beacon of hope in the setting sun.

Across the Bagmati River, restoration works in the city of Patan have also been a communal effort. “After the earthquake, over 300 local policemen and volunteers rallied together to help recover artefacts and building materials from the debris,” recalls Rohit Ranjitkar, a slight, well-dressed man with salt-and-pepper hair. He’s the director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT), an independent organisation working to protect heritage monuments in the valley. “We salvaged even the smallest pieces, as we wanted to preserve the structures’ original elements as much as possible.”

Under the guidance of the KVPT, a dedicated team of master artisans works seven hours a day, six days a week, to rebuild heritage sites such as the royal courtyard of Sundari Chowk and Jagat Narayan (a temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu) in Patan Durbar Square. In their outdoor workshop, they painstakingly hew, whittle and carve fresh beams of sal wood, piecing them together with fragments from the original edifices. As Rohit observes, it’s like solving a giant jigsaw puzzle.

The rebuild has not been without its challenges. “We’ve had to reconstruct certain pieces from scratch,



especially when the damage was too great, or when traditional materials weren't available," Rohit concedes. This was the case for the triple bay windows above the entrance of Sundari Chowk. The original arched structures were built by Malla kings during the 17th century and fashioned from ivory. Due to modern restrictions, these have since been restored with white marble and bone dust.

Unlike some of the artisans of Bhaktapur, Rohit and his team are more receptive to the idea of blending traditional methods and modern innovations. For instance, they have employed new brick bonding techniques to better reinforce the monuments. "People tell us that we're compromising cultural standards by doing so, but human safety is on the line here," he insists. "Besides, our ancestors used the best technology available to them. Why shouldn't we do the same?"

There has also been widespread criticism that the rebuilding process is moving too slowly. Sunit can empathise. "In Nepal, these heritage sites are more than mere tourist attractions. They're still an integral part of daily life, where whole communities gather to celebrate and pray," he muses. "Understandably, the locals are impatient to get things done."

But as I watch the artisans at work, I find that it's easy to understand the importance of time and care. Their craft is a labour of love; each eave, pillar and frame that they meticulously restore becomes its own work of art. And as with their ancestors, the intricate patterns they etch into wood and stone tell age-old stories that will resonate with their people for centuries to come. ✈

**ABOVE:** THAMEL BUSTLES WITH ACTIVITY, EVEN AT NIGHT; 1905 SUITES AND RESTAURANT IS SET IN A BEAUTIFUL NEOCLASSICAL BUILDING



## PLAN YOUR TRIP

### EAT

Bhumi Restaurant dishes up excellent Newari and Indian cuisine in a homely setting. Try the *samay baji* set, which includes a black lentil patty, dried fish, and potato and bamboo shoot curry, served up on a single plate.

**bhumi**  
[restaurant.com](http://restaurant.com)

### DO

Social Tours organises socially responsible experiences around Nepal. Its "Rise of the Artisans" day tour takes participants to Bhaktapur and Boudhanath to learn more about the restoration efforts at these heritage sites.

**socialtours.com**

### STAY

1905 Suites and Restaurant is housed in a neoclassical building that functioned as an artistic hub in the early 1900s. Today, it has been converted into a boutique hotel with four elegant rooms and a garden restaurant.

**1905suites.com**



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