

FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

JULY 2 2016





CENTRED SAGE



A year on from the disaster that engulfed the country, everyone I meet in Nepal has an earthquake story. My trekking guide in the terraced, pine-forested hills above Dhulikhel on the Kathmandu Valley's eastern rim points to a village house that collapsed in front of his eyes. He and the guests he was accompanying that morning rushed to help, but were pinned to the ground by the buckling earth. Twelve months on, the property is still a pile of bricks.



GET THE

the property is still a pile of bricks.

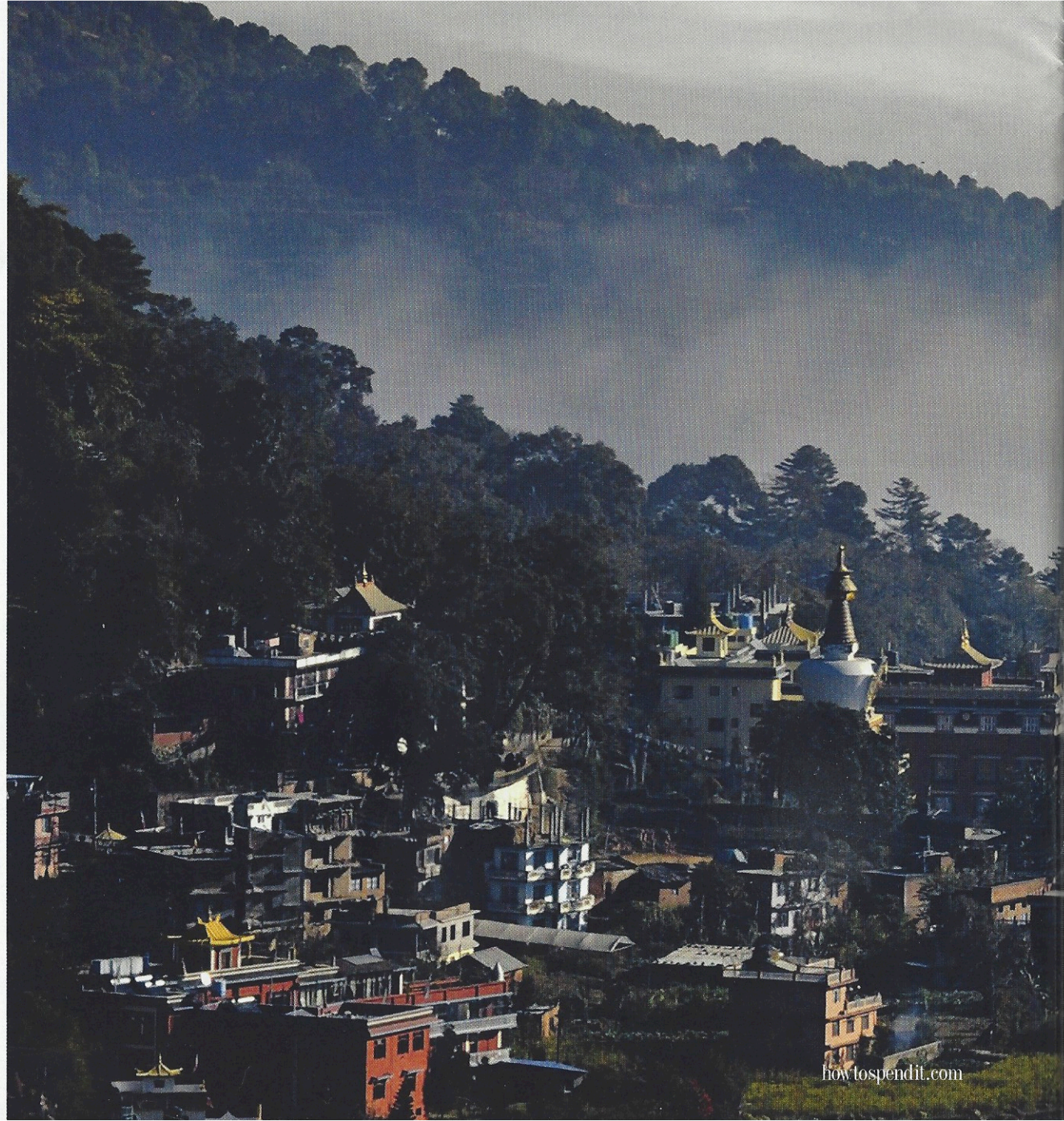
It's a similar story in Kathmandu's historic Durbar Square. When I was last here in 2013, I climbed the steps of one of the many tall, stacked temples that occupy this ancient square adjoining the royal palace to sit and watch the jetsam of a Kathmandu afternoon: mooching shoals of tourists in hiking boots and quick-dry wicking jackets, pigeons chased by children in flip-flops, painted holy men offering photos for money, stalls selling T-shirts embroidered with the words "yak yak yak". In other words, the heady mix of ancient magic and thriving modernity that gives this city, a place of living goddesses and traffic jams, and the surrounding country – Himalayan peaks to the north, tiger jungles to the south – its extraordinary allure.

Three years on and the temple is now rubble. The children in flip-flops leap from piles of antique bricks that have been abandoned to an increasingly distant hope of restoration, as the government stalls in its \$4bn-funded efforts to repair the country and its treasures. (The exception being the enormous Buddhist stupa of Boudhanath, where labours are advanced: bamboo scaffolding covers the stupa's curved surface as workers, tiny as ants, rebuild the structure's dramatic spire.)

It's not just the heritage sites that are in a state of crisis. Tourism has taken a considerable hit (a situation further hindered by a fuel blockade that was imposed on Nepal by India last year). It is April when I visit, a fairly busy time for tourists, but Thamel, an area popular with foreigners where one can eat a yak burger and drink Everest beers from breezy rooftop restaurants, is noticeably quiet. As Sangita Shrestha, the owner of the sublime, hilltop wellness retreat Dwarika's Resort Dhulikhel, says, "It's good that you're here. Nepal is bleeding."

The arrival, then, of a major hotel brand here, where luxury travel is still in its infancy, is a boon for the

Right: the Langtang mountain range towers over Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Above: an elephant carries guests of Taj Safaris Meghauli Serai on a game "drive" into Chitwan National Park





NEPAL ROLLING

A new lodge in Nepal – where luxury travel is in its infancy and tourism still recovering from last year's devastating earthquake – is marrying superlative style with an exceptional wilderness experience. **Charlotte Sinclair** takes an exclusive first look



Clockwise from right:
Dhulikhel in Nepal's Kavre district. Mustard fields in Chitwan National Park, the former hunting ground of Nepal's royal family and now home to Taj Safaris Meghauli Serai. The lobby at Taj Safaris Meghauli Serai



country. The opening in April of Taj Safaris Meghauli Serai, a safari lodge located in Chitwan National Park, was not only a vote of confidence but a persuasive proposition for a new way to travel in Nepal. Formerly the hunting grounds of the country's royal family, and bordering India at its southern edge, Chitwan was established as a national park in 1973. In the intervening years, it has become home to thriving numbers of greater one-horned rhino and royal Bengal tiger, as well as less exclamatory but no less valuable creatures, among them a vibrant bird population.

Running along the track to reach the lodge



among them a vibrant bird population.

Bumping along the track to reach the lodge, I pass the mudhouses and carefully tended fields of the Tharu people who populate this section of the Terai, a fertile, agrarian region that connects the lowlands of Nepal and India. The Tharu are highly dependent upon and committed to their environment; part of the national park is delineated community property, and they pride themselves on the protection and upkeep of these vast acreages of riverine forest, grasslands and rocky hills.

The lodge itself sets a new bar for style. There's an infinity pool; lantern-lit, low-slung outdoor seating areas; an airy, elegant, thatched restaurant serving thali curries of chicken, spinach and mutton; and an alfresco dining area, built after a traditional Tharu village courtyard. Sixteen thatched adobe villas line the grassy bank of the wide, green Rapti river, facing the perimeter of the national park on the opposite shore.

All life gathers to a river. I stand on the villa's sun deck, with its inky blue plunge pool, watching eddies rumpling the Rapti's surface and children fishing its dappled shallows not far from a sunbathing crocodile. An elephant, one of the many that carry guests on game "drives" into the forest, her boulder-like bulk rising from the waterline, is being scrubbed by a mahout, while on the shoreline women are carrying unfeasible loads in baskets strapped to their foreheads, their sarongs making bright brush marks of colour against the green, feathery vegetation. At sunrise that morning, I'm told, a mahout spotted a tiger padding out of the community forest to the west of the lodge. The cat entered the river, swam across to the opposite bank, and, fur dripping, disappeared into the trees.

The buildings here attempt a similar disappearing trick, blending into the watery, grassland scenery.



The exception is a tall building with 12 rooms, echoing, I'm told, the architecture of the original Chitwan safari camp, Tiger Tops. While its intent is worthy – offering accommodation to travellers at a lower price point – it doesn't quite merge with the surroundings yet. "The lodge belongs to the Chaudhary Group [owned by Nepali billionaire Binod Chaudhary]. It was already built when we were brought in to manage it," explains general manager Ritesh Bhatt, a veteran of at least five Taj openings.

Unable to change the architecture, Bhatt goes on to describe how they immediately set about softening it, employing traditional methods of mud plastering and thatching, uprooting exotic planting and altering interiors under the direction of South African safari design firm FTK. A sense of provenance was brought to the villas by way of a restrained colour palette, locally woven textiles in greys and greens – used to upholster benches and cover pillows – elephant grass wall hangings and the commissioning of a



Aside from the park's royal Bengal tiger, there are rhinos, jackals, crocs, honey badgers, civets, sloth bears and a vibrant bird population

Tharu artist to decorate bedroom walls with murals that depicted village scenes.

The Taj takes an equally sensitive approach to wildlife. I receive a lesson in expectation management from my Kerala guide, Dipu Sasi, a keen birder who has worked across the Taj's safari properties in India. "There are around 120 tigers here, but you might not see them," he says. "We encourage guests not to fixate on a single species or else they might miss everything else: rhinos, birds, jackals, crocodiles, honey badgers, civets, even sloth bears." Sasi himself has spotted only a single tiger in several months of living on site.

Which is not to say their presence isn't viscerally felt. On an afternoon drive into the forest, we hear the warning calls of spotted deer. Sasi and Madan Mahato, one of the Taj-trained Tharu park guides, freeze simultaneously. Sasi whispers, "Tiger." We wait, eyes scanning a section of impenetrable bush. Nothing. Later we stop at a silk-cotton tree where Sasi points out claw marks, 8ft high, and the prints of a female and her cubs



From top: the pool at
Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu.
A greater one-horned rhino
at Chitwan National Park



Dwarika's antique carved lintels, sunny courtyards and superb restaurants have made it one of the best on the continent



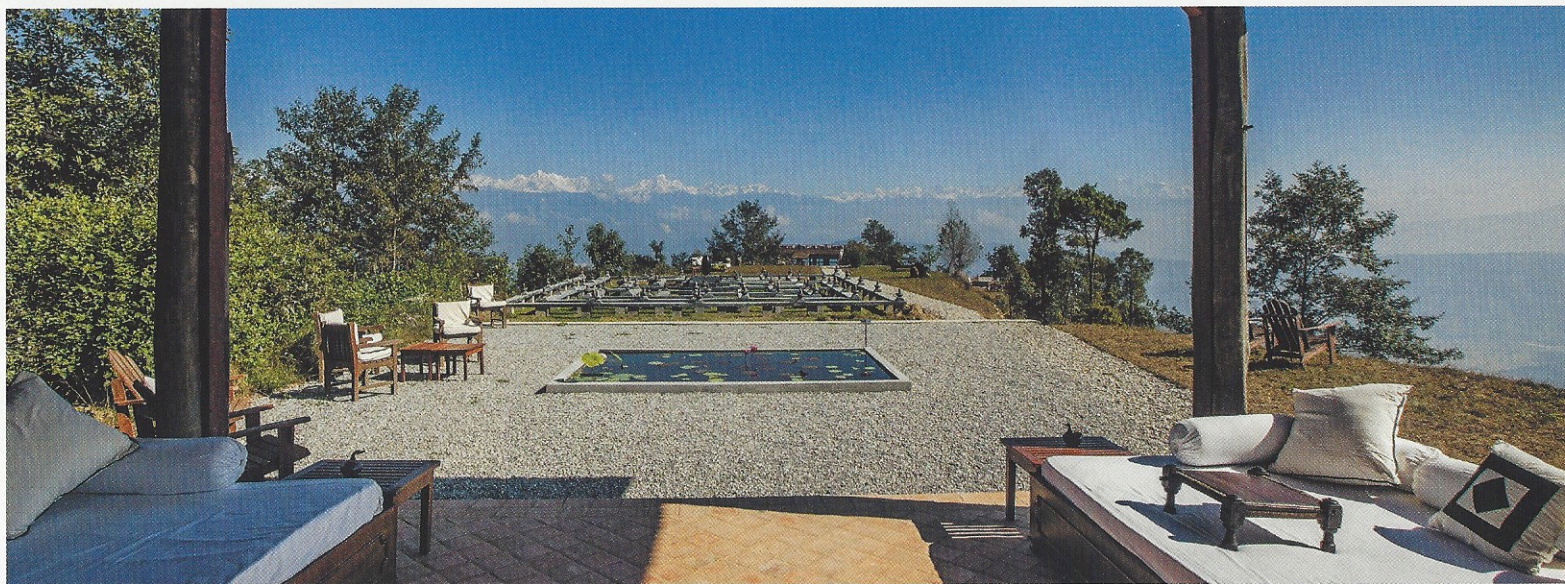
in the dusty track. “They were *just* here,” says Sasi. Still, there’s something to be said for thwarted gratification. Over the next few days I come to consider tigers as a kind of thought experiment, a work of the imagination, their power and mystique conjured from their absence. Searching for them is like waiting for a dream to coalesce: it has the air of an act of faith.

And in any case, there are the equally wondrous – and far more visible – greater one-horned rhino. We watch these hulking, armour-plated beasts, the most belligerent-looking vegetarians imaginable, bathing in water holes and stomping through tall meadows of elephant grass. (In marked contrast to the fate of rhino elsewhere, there has been zero poaching here for two years, the result of army bases positioned throughout the park.) On foot in the forest, Sasi, Mahato and I pass through dense brush, a confetti of butterflies rising at our ankles, and duck beneath vines to where low green-leafed branches struggle to pierce the shade cast by the trees above. Sasi’s enthusiasm for birds is infectious as he identifies emerald doves, jungle fowl, a giant hornbill and a paradise flycatcher, its trailing white tail-feathers inscribing the sky. He humours my anxiety about a potential rhino encounter. “What do we do if one charges?” I ask. “Hide behind a big tree,” he says, casually. Over dinner that evening, Bhatt informs me,

“What’s special about safari here is the freedom. You can walk, canoe down the river, take elephant rides.”

Sensitivity to Nepal’s culture and environment is also a guiding principle at Dwarika’s, a duo of excellent hotels in Kathmandu and Dhulikhel. An outfit of genuine charm and character, the restored Newari brick houses that constitute Dwarika’s in Kathmandu have sheltered prime ministers, presidents and princes, alongside humbler guests, since opening in 1977. Staying here is immensely heartening, a reflection of its founding as the passion project of its late owner, Dwarika Das Shrestha, who through his intent to preserve traditional Nepali craftsmanship became an accidental hotelier. While floors and buildings have been added to the original footprint (rooms now number 86), the hotel’s antique carved lintels and doorways, sunny courtyards, superb restaurants and spruce bedrooms with tiled floors and beamed ceilings have made it one of the best on the continent.

The work of Shrestha’s daughter, Sangita, Dwarika’s newer holistic retreat in Dhulikhel is equally alluring. An hour from the city, the resort occupies a steep hillside, with suites, meditation zones, a Himalayan salt chamber, chakra sound rooms, paths winding ever upwards to reach a pine-fringed infinity pool and a mountain-viewing platform for sunrise and sunset. The views of the snowy Langtang mountain range are staggering – if you can see them. Sadly, during my visit,



Left: the Meditation Maze at Dwarika's Resort, Dhulikhel

From the daybed of my suite's rooftop terrace I look onto the receding hills of the valley floor far below

the peaks are obscured by dense haze (the mountains and tigers are in cahoots, it seems); but it's a mark of how lovely the hotel is that I forget to be disappointed. I still have a view: from the daybed of my suite's rooftop terrace I look onto the receding hills of the valley floor, the farms and terraced fields spreading away far below.

Some people never leave their rooms, and I can understand why. Decorated in earth tones and constructed from natural materials – stone, wood, brick and glass – everything has been built with relaxation in

mind, from the sunken tubs in the vast bathrooms, to the cushion-stacked daybed and the huge picture window set with armchairs. This is luxury without a hint of flash. It's true of the resort too, which offers comfort and care in ways both ephemeral and concrete – from meditation and yoga, pottery and cooking classes, to delicious, healthy meals of garden salad and chicken curry, with ingredients primarily obtained from the hotel's organic farm. The emphasis is on reconnection with nature, space and peace, commodities in abundance here where the

sunlight is leaf-sifted, and the sound is of wood pigeons and cuckoos. Commodities, too, that prevail in Nepal itself, where a new way to travel promises to connect the country's past to a new, brighter future. ♦

RAISING THE ROOF

Charlotte Sinclair travelled as a guest of **Greaves** (020-7487 9111; www.greavesindia.com), which offers a seven-night trip, with three nights at Taj Safaris Meghauli Serai, and two nights each at Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu, and Dwarika's Resort, Dhulikhel, plus international flights and all private transfers, sightseeing and excursions, from £2,650 per person. **Taj Safaris Meghauli Serai**, www.taj.tajhotels.com, from \$190. **Dwarika's Hotel, Kathmandu**, www.dwarikas.com, from \$285. **Dwarika's Resort, Dhulikhel**, www.dwarikas.com, from \$390. **Qatar Airways** (www.qatarairways.com) flies twice daily from London Heathrow to Kathmandu via Doha from £720 return.