SINGAPOREAN ABROAD
IN KATHMANDU WITH,

Foo Chee Chang
Age: 24
Occupation: Undergraduate
Length of stay: Five months

You can see the peaks of Mount Everest from Kathmandu Valley, a city of peace and unspoilt beauty

Eunice Quek

Based in Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, undergraduate Foo Chee Chang has not been disappointed by his time in the capital.

The Nanyang Technological University student has enjoyed his journalism internship with weekly newspaper Nepali Times as it lets him interact with the locals and meet interesting people.

What particularly excites him in this picturesque city are the sites and monuments with deep religious and cultural significance, seven of which are Unesco World Heritage sites.

“It is awe-inspiring and breathtaking to experience the grandeur and the intricacy of the ancient structures. Being scrawling like sandstone in a car, with as many as 20 commuters packed inside, is quite an experience.”

THE BEST WAY TO GET AROUND

On foot, but do wear a face mask to walk the narrow cobble-streets of historical districts such as Kathmandu Durbar Square and Patan Durbar Square as the air can be quite polluted.

Motorcycles zip haphazardly along these tight lanes, so be alert and keep to the side.

The best time to visit the place is...

End February to early May, during which time the weather is cool and it is just before the monsoon season from June to August.

Daytime temperatures seldom go beyond 15 deg C, towards the end of February, but it will start to get warmer towards May, averaging about 28 deg C in that month.

In winter, from November to January, the temperature seldom falls below 0 deg C in Kathmandu, even at night.

Most Must know the language to get around!

No. Most of the service staff in tourist districts such as Thamel are fluent in English. But as you start to move away from the city centre, a basic grasp of Nepali will help. Getting hold of simple phrase books will suffice.

The greeting ‘Namaste’, meaning ‘I bow to you’, is often more than enough to initiate interaction with the locals.

CULTURE

The entire city has so much to offer, where does one start?

Start at the Patan Museum (www.asianart.com/patan-museum; tel: +977-1-552-6271) in Patan Durbar Square, south-west of Kathmandu Valley, for a comprehensive look at the history and culture of Nepal before heading for the Unesco sites.

One cannot leave without visiting... Pashupatinath, one of the biggest and most sacred Hindu temples in the world, which was built in the 2nd century BC. It is on the banks of the Bagmati river in eastern Kathmandu. Witness cremations at the funeral ghats by the side of the Bagmati river, but refrain from taking photographs.

FESTIVAL TOWN

Any key festivals to work into one’s travel plans? Three visually stunning festivals take place in February and March. The Maha Shivaratri, or “Night of Shiva”, is when thousands of Hindu devotees and Sadhus (holy men) converge on Pashupatinath to perform “maha”, which is a ritual that includes offering flowers (flori), milk, fruits and sweets in a carnival-like atmosphere.

Be prepared to get drenched in water and coloured powders if you decide to brave the streets during Holi, which celebrates spring and is more commonly known as the festival of colour. Almost everyone gets a soaking and tourists are also encouraged to join in the festivities.

During Losar, the Tibetan New Year, take a trip to either Boudhanath, 11km from the city centre, or Swayambhunath, which is an ancient religious complex in the west of Kathmandu.

Hole-in-the-wall food finds

From

Locals visit monasteries, stupas and shrines to make donations of food and other offerings to the monks and nuns there.

SHOPPING

The best bargains and richest variety of products are at... the tourist hub of Thamel, which is about a 15-minute walk from Ratna Bus Park in the city centre. Prices are competitive but haggling is incessant. After bargaining, the final price is usually about 60 per cent of the asking price.

You can spend anything from a few rupees to thousands of rupees on souvenirs such as Tibetan “Jumkhi”, which are silver paintings with embroidery, all sizes of khati knives, which are curved blades used by the fearsome Gurkha soldiers, jewellery as well as precious stones and mountain climbing equipment.

FOOD

Do not leave the place without... Trying Newari cuisine, by the indigenous people of Nepal. It is spicy and likely to appeal to Singaporeans. Highlights include sekewa (barbecued chicken or buffalo) ruai, baji, rice pounded with a wooden mallet before cooking and banana (egg and meat pizza).

These can be found at Onscha Restaurant in Patan Durbar Square and at any hole-in-the-wall restaurants in historical districts such as Kathmandu Durbar Square.

There is a question for Onscha Restaurant in the lead-up to Losar, the Tibetan New Year. When done, a lotus pattern will form on the surface.

A worker sprays yellow pigment over the white dome of the stupa at Boudhanath in the lead-up to Losar, the Tibetan new year. When done, a lotus pattern will form on the surface.

The best brunch is at... Cosmopolitan Cafe (tel: +977-1-522-3546), which overlooks Kathmandu Durbar Square. It serves the best chicken sizzlers for about 180 rupees a plate in town.

The best dinner is at... New Orleans Coffee House, which has outlets in Thamel (tel: +977-1-470-0730) and Pololu (tel: +977-1-552-3708). A must-try is the rosybrown chicken, which costs about 350 rupees a plate, served with fresh greens and mashed potatoes tipped with a generous dose of olive oil.

The best drinks are at... Buddha Bar (www.buddhabarakthmandu. info; tel: +977-985-104-3283), which has long been in the Thamel nightlife scene and has an extensive menu of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. A bottle of beer costs 250 to 300 rupees. Cocktails such as White Russian and Screwdriver is about 200 rupees each.

The best one must-try drink in town? Babu, or Newari rice wine, made of fermented rice starch. This homemade local specialty is available at any of the hole-in-the-wall eateries in the historical areas.

What is the best place to chill out in? Himalayan Java (www.himalayana java.com; tel: +977-1-442-2119) at Tridevi Marg. This is the closest thing that Nepal has to a Starbucks, and it serves fantastic local coffee (200 rupees a cup). This is a great place to enjoy watching sports programmes on the large flat-screen TV or relax with friends.

The one place you always take your friends to is... Summit Hotel (Kapanol Heights; www.summit-nepal.com; tel: +977-1-552-8180), a Dutch-founded establishment with a view to die for. The apple pie (220 rupees) served here is also heavenly.

THINGS TO DO

What is there to explore? Other than trekking along the many trails available, such as the Annapurna circuit, you can trek to the Everest Base Camp in Khumbu. Plenty of trekking agencies in Thamel will arrange everything for you. A reliable trekking company is Shambhala Trekking Agency (www.shambhalatrekking. com; tel: +977-1-216-0220).

The Last Resort (www.lastresort.com.np; tel: +977-454-287-789) is an adventure centre located near the Tibetan border in Langtang, three hours’ drive from Kathmandu. You can go rafting for 6500 rupees (for a day trip, bungee-jumping is 1250 for a day trip and mountain-biking is 1250 a person).

At Pokhara, 180km west of Kathmandu, try parasailing, which is like paragliding but with birds of prey guiding gliders to pockets of hot air to keep them in the air longer. A tandem parasailing flight with an instructor costs 800 or 1200 at Parawhawking (www.parawhawking.com; +977-982-664-7617).