

# Rhinos and rafting in Nepal

Think Nepal, and you think lofty peaks and pristine Himalayan ranges. How about some epic wildlife viewing, then? As STEPHEN CUNLIFFE discovered, Nepal is where you need to go to get your fill of iconic Asiatic wildlife when you've had your fill of whitewater rafting

NEPAL has considerably more than world-class trekking to offer to outdoor enthusiasts. A plethora of Himalayan rivers cut through the pristine landscapes of this tiny country, providing adventure aficionados with a great opportunity to appreciate the spectacular surrounding scenery from aboard a raft during an exhilarating river journey. However, it is the country's thriving national parks, preserving an astounding abundance and diversity

of iconic Asiatic wildlife, that are probably Nepal's best kept secret. So, whether you are an avid trekker, whitewater rafting enthusiast or safari connoisseur, Nepal awaits you.

## Whitewater rafting

Nepal is home to a host of superlative Himalayan rivers and a number of local whitewater rafting companies cater to visitors wanting to explore the mountainous wilderness

by raft. The three big rivers — the Karnali, Sun Khosi and Tamur — involve fully catered to, multiple-day whitewater adventures with participants camping on sandy riverside beaches for the duration of the the expedition. The Sun Khosi is the most accessible and, consequently, also the most popular, so I would recommend tackling one of the other Himalayan waterways to ensure that you have the river all to yourself.

My personal favourite is the Karnali in the remote and sparsely populated 'wild west' of Nepal. The Karnali is a classic high volume, pool-drop river with some big — but reasonably straightforward — rapids, making it a relatively safe river; ideal for novice and intermediate rafters alike. It's a hot and dusty two-day overland journey from Kathmandu to the put-in point at Sayuli Bazaar, but the reward is sweet: a chance to sample one of

the finest multi-day river adventures in all of Asia. Whitewater enthusiasts are treated to the quintessential Himalayan river experience as they paddle the 180 km western bend during a weeklong descent of Nepal's longest river.

The whitewater maelstrom peaks on day two at the infamous God's House rapid as the river thunders through a series of deep canyons with 16 rapids crammed into an unrelenting 7 km stretch of near-continuous, high-octane Class III+ whitewater — an entertaining and demanding expanse of raging river. But a Karnali expedition is best classified as an entertaining river sojourn. Tumultuous Class III and adrenalin-pumping Class IV whitewater action gradually gives way to tamer river conditions in the latter stages of the trip and the mel-

low water permits rafters to relax and soak up the stunning Himalayan landscapes and mountain scenery.

On the final day, river runners should keep their eyes peeled as they stand a decent chance of spotting endangered freshwater Gangetic dolphins or fish-eating gharials during the tranquil float into wildlife-rich Royal Bardia National Park.

## Wildlife safaris

Nepal is home to nine national parks, three wildlife reserves, three conservation areas and one hunting reserve, which collectively protect 18 percent of the nation's surface area. Most of these nature preserves protect Nepal's scenic splendour and mountainous beauty, but there are two national parks on the plains of the lowland Terai

Type: **RAFTING & SAFARI**  
Best from: **KATHMANDU/ NEPALGUNJ**  
You need: **10-14 DAYS**

A rafting crew pull hard on their paddles to ensure they have the right line as they enter Sweetness and Light rapid on day two of the Karnali expedition PICS/ STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



A raft threads its way through frothing whitewater in the midst of the infamous Jail House Rock rapid on the Karnali River



There is probably no better place in Asia to view the Indian one-horned rhino in the wild than Royal Chitwan and Royal Bardia National Parks in Nepal



By the time the sun set at the end of day one, we had already seen elephants, rhinos and a young tigress with a kill on our Royal Bardia safari

## TRIP PLANNER

**GETTING AROUND:** The two-day bus transfer to the put-in at Sayuli Bazaar is included in the cost of a rafting package with departures from Kathmandu and/or Pokhara. Alternatively, Tara Air ([www.taraair.com](http://www.taraair.com)) is probably the most reliable domestic carrier with daily flights to Nepalgunj — the closest airport to the Karnali River and Royal Bardia National Park.

**RECOMMENDED OPERATORS:** Three reputable Nepal companies run rafting and kayaking expeditions, including regular Karnali River departures. Check out

Equator Expeditions ([www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com](http://www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com)), Ultimate Descents Nepal ([www.udnepal.com](http://www.udnepal.com)) and Paddle Nepal ([www.paddlenepal.com](http://www.paddlenepal.com)) for trip departure dates and further details.

With concessions inside the national parks, the jungle lodges and luxury tent camps of Tiger Tops ([www.tigertops.com](http://www.tigertops.com)) offer the premier safari accommodation in Nepal. For Bardia National Park, choose between the comfortable Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge ([www.tigmountain.com/kjl/](http://www.tigmountain.com/kjl/)) and the more budget-friendly Rhino Lodge ([www.rhinolodgebardia.com](http://www.rhinolodgebardia.com)).

## TAKE NOTE

**WHAT TO CARRY:** A decent camera and binoculars for wildlife safaris, neutral-coloured clothes for walking safaris. Also, don't forget sunscreen, lip balm, a hat and sunglasses.

**WHEN TO GO:** Nepal has four very distinct seasons. Rafting enthusiasts will find that immediately after the monsoon (from late September to mid-November) is the prime time to visit: rivers are raging, the skies are clear and mountain views are superlative. The second most popular rafting season is from early March to late May and this is also

the optimal time for wildlife-viewing in Nepal's national parks.

**VISAS AND HEALTH:** Indian passport holders do not require a visa to visit Nepal. Inoculations against hepatitis A and typhoid are recommended.

**CAUTION:** Nepal is a safe if somewhat unpredictable place. When planning your itinerary, bear in mind that sudden strikes, fuel shortages and inclement weather can wreak havoc with the most carefully laid travel plans, so try to budget a few 'buffer days' for sightseeing just in case.

that harbour healthy populations of indigenous wildlife and offer excellent opportunities for safari excursions.

And where better to recover from the rigours of your week-long Karnali River paddle than on a relaxing nature safari exploring one of Nepal's premier national parks?

So, after your rafting exertions, head into Bardia (or Chitwan) for some well-deserved rest and recuperation. Both of these reserves offer comfortable safari lodges, superb wildlife-viewing, as well as a host of entertaining activities, such as jeep drives, elephant-back safaris, walking excursions and river cruises.

The vast majority of safari

goers opt to visit the more accessible Chitwan National Park, which boasts the highest density of Indian one-horned rhinos in all of Asia. If it's rhinos you are after, then Chitwan is definitely the place to visit. However, for those in search of wildlife and wilderness, Royal Bardia is the answer. Bardia lies in remote southwestern Nepal and, as a result, the reserve receives only a smattering of adventurous visitors and committed safari-goers each year.

Having conquered the whitewater challenges of the Karnali River, my wife and I wanted to sign off our 'wild west' adventure in style, so we transferred to the nearby Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge. During our

four-day visit, Bardia treated us to incredible wildlife-viewing with fantastic sightings of wild elephants, tigers, rhinos, deer and a wide array of birdlife, as we toured the picturesque park atop our own private elephant in the company of a skilled mahout and knowledgeable nature guide. When we tired of the elephant-back safaris, we disembarked from the large grey behemoth and walked through the reserve under the watchful eye of our escort.

Travelling on foot and stalking up to a crash of four rhinos — including a tiny baby — as they lazed in a waterhole was a definite highlight and the perfect grand finale to an epic 'best of the west' adventure.

**The clock is ticking**

The mesmerising mountains, raging rivers and abundant wildlife of the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal will lure you back time and again. Both Chitwan and Bardia National Parks offer almost guaranteed chances of sighting Indian one-horned rhinos, Asiatic elephants and Bengal tigers in the wild. With rhino-poaching on the increase, you know how much longer Nepal's prolific large mammals will endure in the wild. So, don't delay your visit; it's high time you travelled next door for an adventure holiday to remember.

[snrdml@mid-day.com](mailto:snrdml@mid-day.com)