

Preparation Material for Volunteers  
Nepal in a Nutshell - Festivals

Religious and cultural festivals are a major part of Nepal's calendar and society. Many of them have Hindu or Buddhist backgrounds, but some are also reminders of historical events. A vast majority of them gather in the months after the monsoon in August-September. Many of the festivals coincide with public holidays, school holidays and different working hours of shops, administrative hours, crowded buses etc. Nepal's festivals are principally dated by the lunar calendar, falling on days related to full or new moon. Therefore, holidays and festivals aren't declared more than a year in advance and precise prediction is difficult.

*Side fact: Nepalis have a different calendar system, starting with the New Year on 14 April, the month of Baisakh, and is 57 years ahead of the Georgian calendar used in the West. The Newaris on the other hand start their New Year with the day after the Deepawali (third day of Tihar) which falls on the night of the new moon in late October or early November. Their calendar is 880 years behind the Georgian calendar.*

**Hindu events** can include huge pilgrimages and fairs (*mela*), more introspective gatherings such as ritual bathings at sacred confluences (*tribeni*) or special acts of worship (*puja*) at temples. Sacrifices of animals are also often a part of those events, followed by family feasts, with priests and musicians. In the Kathmandu valley prades and processions (*jaatra*) are very common.

**Buddhist festivals** are typically bringing together maroon-robed clergy and lay pilgrims to walk and prostrate themselves around stupas.

There are many different **animist groups**, which are often following the Hindu calendar, but have also their local nature-worshipping rites. **Shamanic** rites usually take place at home, at the request of a particular family. It is not very common to see a shaman in action, and most likely you would have to travel widely and sensitively to see one.

Nepali **weddings** are mostly scheduled on astrologically auspicious days, mostly in the months Magh, Phaagun and Baisaakh. The bride usually wears red, and for the rest of her married life she will colour the parting of her hair with red *sindur*.

**Funeral** processions are very peaceful ceremonies and the body is normally carried to the cremation site within hours of death by white-shrouded friends and relatives. White is the colour of mourning for Hindus and the eldest son is expected to shave his head and wear white for a year following the death of a parent.

**Festival Calendar with the main festivals and some smaller ones**

<b>Magh (Jan-Feb)</b>	<b>Phaagun (Feb-March)</b>
<p><u>Magh (or Makar) Sankranti</u></p> <p>It marks the day the sun is farthest from the earth, a rare solar event. The first day of Magh (January 14 or 15) is an occasion for ritual bathing at sacred river junctions, especially at Devghat and Sankhu. In the following month daily readings of the Swasthani, a compilation of Hindu myths, take place.</p> <p><u>Basanta Panchami</u></p> <p>Is a one-day spring festival which is celebrated on the fifth day after the new moon in most Hindu hill areas. The day is also known as Saraswati Puja, after the goddess of learning, and Shri Panchami, after the Buddhist saint Manjushri. School playgrounds are decorated with streamers and children have their books and pens blessed.</p>	<p><u>Losar (Lochar)</u></p> <p>Is the Tibetan New Year and falls on the new moon of either Magh or Phaagun. It is opened by three days of drinking, dancing and feasting. The day itself is celebrated most avidly at Boudhanath, where morning rituals culminate with horn blasts and the hurling of tsampa. It is a time for families and is the highlight of the Buddhist calendar in the highland region as well as in Tibetan settlements all over Nepal.</p> <p><u>Shivaraatri</u></p> <p>This event falls on the new moon of Phaagun. “Shiva’s Night” is marked by bonfires and evening watches in all Hindu areas, but most spectacularly at Pashupatinath, where thousands of pilgrims and sadhus from all over the subcontinent gather for Nepal’s best-known <i>mela</i>.</p> <p><u>Holi</u></p> <p>This is Nepal’s version of the springtime water festival, common to many Asian countries, like Thailand, and lasts for a week. It commemorates a myth in which the god Krishna, when still a boy, outsmarted the demoness Holika. Anyone is a target for water balloons and coloured powder during this time. A wooden post, known as a <i>chir</i> is adorned with flags and erected in front of the palace. It is burned at night, representing the burning of the body of the old year.</p>
<b>Chait (March-April)</b>	<b>Baisaakh (April-May)</b>
<p><u>Chait Dasain</u></p> <p>The translation is “little Dasain” and it is indeed the little version of the autumn namesake. It is observed on the eighth day after the new moon and involves lots of animal sacrifices. The most bloodthirsty amongst them take place at</p>	<p><u>Nawa Barsa</u></p> <p>On the first day of Baisaakh (April 13 or 14) Nepalis celebrate their New Year. Many localized parades take place, culminating on Nawa Barsa, Bhaktapur’s five-day celebration, known as Bisket or Biska is the most colourful.</p>

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goddess temples, such as the one at Gorkha, and in the Kot courtyard near Kathmandu's Durbar Square.

Ram Nawami

This event celebrates the birthday of Lord Ram and is dedicated to Vishnu in his incarnation as the hero of the Ramayana, one of the great Hindu epics. It takes place on the ninth day after the full moon at all temples dedicated to Vishnu. Janakpur is the place where thousands of pilgrims' flock to the Ram temple and the biggest and most colourful celebrations are observed.

Machhendranath Rath Jaatra

It is considered to be Nepal's most spectacular festival: thousands gather to watch as the image of Machhendranath, a swaying, 18m-high chariot, the Kathmandu Valley's rain-bringing deity, is pulled around the streets of Lalitpur (Patan). It moves only on astrologically auspicious days, taking four weeks or more to complete its journey.

Buddha Jayanti

During this festival Buddha's, Siddharta Gautama's birthday is celebrated. Enlightenment and death is feted on the full-moon day of Baisakh at all Buddhist temples. The most visible is the one at Swayambunath, where the stupa is decorated with thousands of lights and ritual dances are performed by priests dressed as the five aspects of Buddhahood.

**Saaun (July-Aug)**

Janai Purnima

This festival marks the changing of the sacred thread (*janai*) worn by high-caste Hindu men. It takes place at holy bathing sites throughout the country on the full-moon day. Men and women of any caste may also receive a yellow-and-orange "protective band" (*raksha bandhan*) around one wrist, which is then worn until Tihaar, when it's supposed to be tied onto the tail of a cow. Mass observances are held in Gosainkunda, Pashupatinath and Lalitpur's Kumbeshwar temple.

Gaai Jaatra

This is a Newari festival and falls on the day after the full moon. It honours cows (*gai*), who are supposed to lead departed souls to Yamraj's abode, the god of death, who opens the gates of judgement on the day of the full moon, allowing departed souls to enter. It is an occasion for families to honour loved ones who have died in the past year, but also for young boys to dress up in fanciful cow costumes or masquerade as sadhus.

**Bhadau (Aug-Sept)**

Krishna Astami/Krishna Janmastahmi/Krishne Jayanti

On the seventh day after the full moon the birth of the god Krishna is celebrated in Krishna temples such as Patan's Krishna Mandir.

Teej/Tij

Teej is a three day "Women's Festival" where groups of women gather in red, singing and dancing through the streets. It starts with a girls' night out, feasting until midnight when they begin a day-long fast. It takes place on the third day after the new moon. On the second day, they will come to Pashupatinath and queue up to worship Shiva, break the fast and ritually bathe to remove their sins on the final day. It is celebrated for the long life of their husbands and long and firm relationship between them until the death, this life and all the lives to come. It is traditionally dedicated to the Goddess Parvati, remembering her union with Lord Shiva.

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<p><u>Nag Panchami</u></p> <p>Takes place on the fifth day after the new moon, where Kathmandu Valley residents quietly propitiate the <i>nag</i> (snake spirit), which is supposed to control the monsoon rains and earthquakes, by pasting pictures of <i>nag</i> over their doorways with cow dung and offering milk, rice and other favourite nag foods to the images. Wells are cleaned only on this day, when the <i>nag</i> are believed to be away worshipping their ancestral deities.</p>	<p><u>Indra Jaatra</u></p> <p>Around the full moon of Bhadau chariot processions and masked dance performances can be seen in Kathmandu. On the last day beer flows from the mouth of an idol in Durbar Square.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Asoj (Sept-Oct)</b></p> <p><u>Dasain/Dashera/Dashain</u></p> <p>This is to be considered Nepal's longest and greatest festival in the year, not just celebrated by Hindus, but by members of all religions and ethnic groups. It lasts for 15 days and stretches from the new moon to the full moon of Asoj. The most important, or let's say most active days are the seventh, ninth and tenth day. Dasain is a time for families to gather, children to be indulged, and animals to be sacrificed. On the seventh day, Fulpati, a bouquet of sacred flowers is carried in a procession from Rani Pokhari to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace in Kathmandu. The ninth day, Navami, begins at midnight with tantric buffalo sacrifices inside the forbidden Taleju temples of the Kathmandu Valley. During the day a lot of animals are sacrificed and their blood is sprinkled on tools, vehicles and even aircrafts to impart Durga's <i>Shakti</i> (power). There are several processions and masked dance troops going on in the streets and families visit their elders to receive blessings and tika.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Kaattik (Oct-Nov)</b></p> <p><u>Tihaar</u></p> <p>Another longer and very important festival, lasting for 5 days, starting two days before the new moon. It is the "Festival of Lights" and is associated with Yamraj, the god of death and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. Every day another animal is worshiped, on the first it is the crow, on the second the dog, on the third the cow. On the evening of the third day families all over Nepal ring their homes with oil lamps, candles or electric lights to guide Lakshmi to their homes so she can bless them with prosperity for the year. To Newaris, the fourth day is known as Mha Puja ("Self-Worship") an occasion for private rituals, and also their New Year's Day. On the fifth day, older sisters are blessing their younger brothers and giving them flower garlands, <i>tika</i> and sweetmeats.</p> <p><u>Chhath</u></p> <p>Is coinciding with the third day of Tihar and honours Surya, the sun god. The Sun, considered the god of energy and of the life-force, is worshiped during the Chhath festival to promote well-being, prosperity and progress. It is one of the most important festivals for the Maithili-speaking people of the eastern Terai. There are public holidays all over the country during the Chhath festival. The festival days of Chhath include holy bathing, fasting and abstaining from drinking water (<i>Vratta</i>), standing in water for long periods of time, and offering <i>prashad</i></p>

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(prayer offerings) and *arghya* to the setting and rising sun.

**Mangsir (Nov-Dec)**

Ram-Sita Biwaha Panchami

Another five day gathering, beginning on the new moon of Mangsir leads to a pilgrimage of as many as 100.000 to Janakpur. Highlight of the festival is the re-enactment of the wedding of Ram and Sita, the divine lovers of the Ramayana, one of the great Hindu epics.