THE GREATER LUMBINI AREA
RELIGIOUS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES
Lumbini can be reached by a 30 minute local flight from Nepal’s capital Kathmandu to Bhairahawa. The 280 kilometre journey by road takes approximately 8 hours. The nearest international border crossing to India is at Bhairahawa - Sunauli.

The climate of the region is dictated by the monsoon. The summers can be incredibly hot and humid, reaching temperatures of over 40°C. During the winter months the Terai is often covered by fog, the climate is damp, and the temperature can drop to single figures.

The most pleasant times of the year are the months of February and November. On a clear day, it is possible to look northwards across the plain, past the foothills of the Siwaliks and see the Himalayas rising in the distance.

Most hotels and guesthouses for all tastes are located to the East of Lumbini Protected Area. Pilgrims can stay at one of the numerous monasteries.

Renting a vehicle is the best way to access the archaeological sites within a day but sportive travellers might use bicycles.

The following itineraries start and end at Lumbini:

**ITINERARY 1**
Lumbini tour, including the Sacred Garden, the Maya Devi Temple, Monastic Zones, Lumbini Museum and the Peace Stupa.
You can either walk from the north entrance to the Sacred Garden or use rickshaws or rented bicycles. half to full day

**ITINERARY 2**
Tilaurakot including brief stops in Karma and Dohani.
63 km round trip, 4+ hours

**ITINERARY 3**
Tilaurakot including Kudan and Gothihawa
70 km round trip, 6+ hours

**ITINERARY 4**
Vist all sites west of Lumbini
110 km round trip, 8+ hours

**ITINERARY 5**
Ramagrama
64 km, 5+ hours
Ramagrama is only an 8 km round trip from the main highway between Lumbini and Kathmandu.
The Greater Lumbini Area (GLA) comprises the three Nepali districts of Rupandehi, Nawalparasi and Kapilavastu, and is centred on the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Lumbini. The GLA contains hundreds of archaeological sites, some of which are directly associated with the life of the Buddha. Key sites include Lumbini, where Lord Buddha was born, Tilaurakot-Kapilavastu, the city in which he spent the first 29 years of his life, and Ramagrama, one of the original eight nirvana stupas which house his ashes. Tilaurakot and Ramagrama are on the tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage Status.

The GLA lies within Nepal’s western Terai, a flat alluvial plain bisected by several major rivers. These rivers flow southwards from the Siwalik Hills before eventually merging with the Ganges River. The silts that are deposited by annual floodwaters from the rivers, are what make the region so agriculturally rich, and why people have been drawn to live here for millennia.

Whilst the Terai was the heartland and origin of Buddhism, most of the current population of the region are Hindu and Muslim. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Terai was sparsely inhabited. The dense forest and jungle acted as an informal buffer between the British Raj and the Hill States to the north. The main population living in the Terai were Tharu. Local communities practised small scale agriculture, and had developed a natural resistance to malaria. From the mid-19th century the forests of the Terai were slowly cleared for agriculture and industry, and archaeological sites associated with Buddhism were rediscovered.

In 1967, the UN Secretary-General U Thant initiated a major international campaign to develop and protect Lumbini. This prompted the Nepali government to establish the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) and today, the LDT and the Department of Archaeology share responsibilities for the management and protection of the historic sites.

More than 20 monasteries from as many countries have been established in Lumbini. Transportation within the GLA by several major rivers. These rivers flow southwards from the Siwalik Hills before eventually merging with the Ganges River. The silts that are deposited by annual floodwaters from the rivers, are what make the region so agriculturally rich, and why people have been drawn to live here for millennia.
When the Buddha was approaching the end of his life, he advised his followers that there were four great places of pilgrimage associated with his journey: Lumbini, where he was born; Bodh Gaya, where he achieved enlightenment; Sarnath, where he preached his first sermon; and Kushinagara, where he would achieve his “Great Passing Away” or Mahaparinirvana.

Since then, Buddhists have been undertaking pilgrimages to the region in order to worship in the footsteps of Lord Buddha. We now know that the first shrine at Lumbini was constructed almost immediately after his death. The first recorded pilgrimage to the region was that of Asoka, the Mauryan Emperor, in 249 BCE. He erected at least three pillars at Lumbini, Gotihawa and Niglihawa marking the birthplace of two Buddhas and the resting place of a third.

However, much of our knowledge of pilgrimage and the sites in the area is derived from the records of two Chinese pilgrims, Faxian and Xuanzang. They travelled throughout much of South Asia, including the Terai, in the fifth and seventh centuries CE respectively. They left detailed descriptions of sites they visited and their location in the landscape. Tracing the journeys of these pilgrims was in many ways the genesis of the archaeology of Buddhism in the subcontinent.

After the rediscovery of many of these sites in the late 19th century, pilgrims began to slowly flow back to Lumbini and other sites. U Thant’s desire to see Lumbini developed now sees the gla visited by over one million people per year, from Nepal and abroad. Many of these people are on personal spiritual journeys, while others are here to learn more about the history and values of Buddhism.
Lumbini was “rediscovered” in 1896 when Dr Führer, Archaeological Surveyor of the Indian Northwestern Provinces and Oudh Circle, was invited by General Khasha Shumsher J.B. Rana, the Governor of Palpa, to undertake archaeological investigations close to his camp. Together they identified four mounds, on the largest of which stood a temple dedicated to the river goddess Rupa Devi. Führer re-identified the statue of Rupa Devi as representing Maya Devi giving birth to Gautama Buddha. Adjacent to the temple was a broken pillar rising about ten feet from the ground. Führer and General Rana excavated the base of the pillar and uncovered Asoka’s inscription. The translation of the inscription clearly identified the site as Lumbini. The historic descriptions of Chinese pilgrims were used to identify further sites in the area, linking Tilaurakot with ancient Kapilavastu.

In 1899, P.C. Mukherji of the Archaeological Survey of India surveyed and excavated the ruins at Tilaurakot. Mukherji recognized the wooded mound as the site of a rectangular fort protected by a wall and ditch. He cut sections through the fortification wall and cleared the eastern gateway. He also confirmed the identification of the eastern stupa, the presence of industrial activity to the south of the site, and structures to the north and west of the city. Mukherji was convinced that the remains at the site of Tilaurakot represented Kapilavastu. He again used the descriptions of Faxian and Xuanzang to support his theory.

Whilst most people accepted Tilaurakot as Kapilavastu, there remained some doubt, stemming from differences in the descriptions given by the two Chinese pilgrims. Little archaeological work was carried out in the Terai during the mid-twentieth century. In 1962, joint excavations were conducted at Tilaurakot and Kudan by the Nepali Department of Archaeology and the Archaeological Survey of India, under the direction of Debala Mitra. She courted controversy by concluding that Tilaurakot was no older than the second century BCE, and thus could not be ancient Kapilavastu.

In 1972 the Nepali archaeologist B.K. Rijal began to expose and restore monuments at Lumbini, identifying the first pre-Mauryan structure north of the Asokan Pillar. He was followed by Tara Nanda Mishra, who conducted more systematic excavations at Lumbini and Tilaurakot during the 1980s. Mishra developed chronological sequences for the main sites, and focused on trying to understand their development over time.

Whilst a Japanese team from Rissho University exposed a series of structures at Tilaurakot between 1967 and 1977, major international interventions began in the 1990s. The Japanese Buddhist Federation conducted a large scale excavation of the Maya Devi Temple, exposing the brickwork that is visible today. The Italian archaeologist Giovanni Verardi reexcavated the stupa and pillar at Gotihawa, as well as the small settlement mound at Pipri.

In 2010 new work at the Maya Devi Temple was initiated by UNESCO and funded by the Japanese Government, including archaeological excavations, conservation of monuments and development of management plans. This work undertaken by the Department of Archaeology (Government of Nepal), Lumbini Development Trust and Durham University now encompasses Tilaurakot, Kudan, Aaurakot, Ramagrama and numerous other sites in the GLA. Through this, remains of the earliest Buddhist shrine at Lumbini were discovered, and the establishment of Tilaurakot pushed back to at least 800 BCE.
Lumbini is internationally recognised as the birthplace of Lord Buddha. It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 in recognition of its Outstanding Universal Value. In particular, UNESCO identified that Lumbini is one of the most holy and significant places for one of the world’s great religions.

The recent UNESCO project funded by Japan, revealed the presence of the earliest Buddhist shrine – a simple timber fence enclosing a tree. This tree would have been identified by the first pilgrims as the tree under which Lord Buddha was born. Radiocarbon dates indicate that this occurred at around 550 BCE, broadly about the same time as his mahaparanirvana, or great passing away. Over time, the timber fence was replaced by large brick kerb stones, and the surrounding area was paved with brick to create a prayer platform.

In 249 BCE, when the Mauryan Emperor Asoka made his pilgrimage to the site he built a small structure of timber and mud, with an open courtyard for the tree. The walls were covered in plaster and painted white, black, red and yellow. Shielded from the outside, the centre of the structure remained unroofed and open. The Marker Stone later became a focal point of worship. Asoka also erected a ten metre high pillar to the west of the temple. The inscription on the pillars identifies the location as Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, which Asoka visited in the twentieth year of his reign and that he exempted the local village from taxes.

Eventually the temple was expanded further, and by the Gupta period (4th – 7th cent. CE) it was reconfigured as a seven-bayed structure with carved and moulded brick opening to the east. The temple became fully enclosed, the Marker Stone was buried and the tree was no longer present. We do not know if it was a natural or deliberate end to the tree’s life.
Karma has been excavated in 2016/17 by a team from Durham University together with DoA. In order to protect the archaeological remains, the trenches were later covered by earth. The small fort’s layout is almost identical to that of Dohani. The two forts form a direct line between Lumbini and Tilaurakot-Kapilavastu, and were designed as stopping points for pilgrims, officials and traders moving between Lumbini and settlements to the west. The fort of Karma measures 49.5 x 43.5 metres and has rounded bastions on each corner. The ramparts are nearly two metres high, and the fort was surrounded by a two-metre-deep moat. When a team from Durham University and the Department of Archaeology extracted auger core samples, no cultural material was recovered. This suggests that the fort may not have been fully functional after it was constructed and that, unlike Dohani which was built over a pre-existing settlement, it was founded on virgin land.

A low rectangular mound, the first formal investigation of the site began with a subsurface geophysical survey in 2016. This revealed the presence of a square cardinally-oriented fort, complete with rounded bastions on each corner. Measuring 50 x 50 m, its fortifications share similarities with other Kushan period (100 BCE – 300 CE) forts in the region, such as Araurakot and Karma. Dohani would have served as a stopping point between Lumbini and settlements to the west.

Excavations and auger-coring in 2017 identified that the fort was constructed from brick faced ramparts of clay on top of an earlier settlement. Possibly dating back to 1000 BCE, the pottery and material found in the lowest layers of Dohani are very similar to that from Lumbini’s Village Mound. Indeed, Dohani may be one of the longest occupied sites in the Greater Lumbini Area. To protect the archaeological remains, the trenches were backfilled again.
Tilaurakot is recognised by most scholars as Kapilavastu, the city in which Lord Buddha spent the first 29 years of his life. It was from here that he left on his journey of spiritual enlightenment, departing through the Eastern Gateway.

The site was first discovered by P.C. Mukherji in 1899, who traced the journey of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang from Srvasti. Questions over the identification arose again in the 1960s when Debala Mitra excavated across the northern rampart. She concluded that the site could be no earlier than the 2nd century BCE, and thus could not be Kapilavastu. This instigated a long debate over the true location of the city – Tilaurakot, or across the border at Piprahawa. Excavations by the Nepali archaeologists Rijal and Mishra began to expose more of the city, including the Western and Eastern Gateways, the fortification walls and the Northern Stupas.

However, recent UNESCO-led archaeological investigations re-examined Mitra’s trench. Clay and timber fortifications were exposed, with the earliest palisade dating to the 6th century BCE, and thus concurrent with the life of Lord Buddha.

Geophysical surveys revealed the buried street plan of the city with roads running north-south and east-west and punctuated by small squares or plazas. At the very centre of the city is a walled complex, with gates at each cardinal point. Between 2012 and 2017 some of these structures were excavated, including a small shrine, a deep brick-lined water tank, parts of the northern and eastern ramparts, large sections of the central walled complex, and some smaller buildings and houses. Outside the city, a Mauryan Period monastery has been discovered near the Eastern Stupa, and an industrial zone to the south.
The Mauryan Emperor Asoka erected an inscribed pillar in 249 BCE, recording his veneration and enlargement of the nirvana stupa of the earlier Kanakamuni Buddha, one of the 27 Buddhas preceding Lord Buddha. The Chinese pilgrims Faxian (5th cent. CE) and Xuanzang (7th cent. CE) also described their visits to the pillar and stupa. Two fragments of the pillar were rediscovered in 1895, the upper portion was half submerged in the bank of the Niglisagar pond, while the lower part of the pillar was partially buried. Asoka’s pillar also bears a later inscription marking King Ripu Malla’s visit in 1312 CE.

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This fortified enclosure measures 270 x 270 m. The clay ramparts on its south and west are encased in brick, while those on the north and east are lower and unfaced. The brick ramparts are strengthened by stirrup bastions at regular intervals. Circular corner towers and a double moat are to be found on the western side. In 1899 P.C. Mukherji started excavations for the Archaeological Survey of India. He suggested that the difference in construction materials reflected the fact that Araurakot’s enemies were located to the south and west. However, it is equally possible that the site was only partially completed. The site’s morphology bears a striking resemblance to the early first millennium CE military outposts found throughout the Kushan Empire. Although there have been no excavations within the site, a subsurface geophysical survey in 2015 confirmed the different constructions of the ramparts as well as the presence of five stirrup bastions. The survey also revealed that the interior was largely empty, except for a raised platform in the southwest corner with foundations of two buildings. Carved bricks similar to those from Lumbini, Kudan and Tilaurakot have been recovered from the site, suggesting that it was occupied into the middle of the first millennium CE.
SAGRAHAWA

1. The tank from which the site gets its name.
2. Row of seven stupas. It is from here that the carved bricks were recovered by Mukherji.
3. Row of small stupas.
4. Führer and Mukherji described this as an ancient stupa, with a connected structure of twelve rooms measuring 2.7 x 3.0 metre in size. It was almost completely destroyed by excavations but looks similar in size, shape and form to the cruciform temples at Kudan. From the centre a copper casket containing bones, two gold naga statues, and semi-precious stones were recovered.
5. Mukherji reported the presence of some small ruins here. Unfortunately, very little survives today.
6. Mukherji reported that there were two small stupas and a small building here.

Today the site is densely covered by vegetation and it is difficult to view the large mound.

Excavations were first undertaken by the Indian archaeologist P.C. Mukherji in 1899, who suggested that the extensive ruins were most likely contemporary with Tilaurakot. He documented ditches on the north and west sides of the largest mound and a boundary wall to its south. His excavations on the largest of the mounds exposed rectangular buildings decorated with carved brick. Later research by Debala Mitra of the Archaeological Survey of India in the 1960s suggested that the structures exposed by Mukherji dated to no earlier than the 7th century CE. This was partly due to the complex of cells to the front of the temple platform, an arrangement similar to that of the temples at Kudan, although the presence of carved brick suggests an earlier date. A subsurface geophysical survey in 2016 identified additional structures under cultivated fields to the southeast of the larger mound.

Sagrahawa comprises of an expanse of large and small mounds, clustered around a water tank. Excavations in 1896 by Dr Führer from the Archaeological Survey of India exposed the remains of a large brick monument and smaller buildings at the western edge of the tank, as well as 17 small brick stupas to its southeast. The stupas were interpreted as commemorative of the deaths of the Sakyas – the people to which Lord Buddha’s family belonged - during the destruction of Kapilavastu by Virudhaka, the King of Kosala during the lifetime of the Buddha. Führer identified Sagrahawa as “the place of the massacre”, visited by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang in the 7th century CE. Until recently, the site remained unexplored and the previously exposed monuments are now eroded and overgrown.

A subsurface geophysical survey in 2016 identified a series of additional buried brick structures around the larger mound, indicating the presence of additional buildings, platforms or stupas, suggesting that this was a site of religious importance in the past.

CHATRADEI

1. Large mound. This is the location of the cruciform temple exposed by Mukherji.
2. Geophysics identified the presence of brick structures buried below the surface.
3. Not much is known about the smaller mound.

View of the excavations by Mukherji
Auger-coring to the south of the main mound
Elevation of one of the faces of the cruciform temple exposed by Mukherji in 1899.

View over the Sagrahawa tank towards the east
Designs on the carved bricks found within the foundations (redrawn from Mitra 1972)
Kudan means “to jump”, referring to the local legend of a giant, who could jump from one mound to the next. The site was first identified by P.C. Mukherji in 1899, who recorded a row of four ancient mounds. In 1962 the site was excavated by Debala Mitra from the Archaeological Survey of India.

She exposed two of the mounds, revealing large cruciform brick-built temples on either side of an ancient well. On the basis of the design of the exposed temple architecture and types of pottery, Mitra ascribed the construction of the temples to the 7th century CE, with later 9th century elaborations. Some scholars have suggested that Kudan may be the site of ancient Nigrodharama, the banyan grove where Gautama Buddha met his father several years after his departure from Kapilavastu, and where his son Rahul was ordained as a monk.

1. The octagonal Hindu temple on the summit of this mound is about 200 years old and encases a much older shiva linga.
2. This small mound contains the remains of an unknown structure in the "last stage of decay" when Mitra excavated.
3. Temple #1 measures 42.3 x 31.8m and just over 4.5m in height.
4. The well, constructed from brick, was excavated by Mitra to a depth of 3.7 without encountering water.
5. Temple #2
6. The tank was probably created as clay was extracted for making bricks. Major Vost had suggested in 1906 that the tank was Hastigrata, where it is believed the elephant thrown by the Buddha landed.

Ancient Gotihawa consists of a large brick stupa, the stump of an Asokan pillar and a water tank, nestled within a modern village. The site was first explored in the 1890s and in 1898, the stupa was partially excavated by Major Waddell. Some early archaeologists believed that the monuments marked the birthplace of Krakkuchanda Buddha, one of the earlier Buddhas.

The stupa was re-excavated by the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Verardi in the 1990s, who identified two construction phases. The initial stupa measured 19.5 metres in diameter and was built with concentric rings of rectangular and wedge-shaped bricks, many of which were incised. The stupa was later expanded to 21.5 metres in diameter, however, the new brickwork comprised solely of rectangular bricks. Verardi attributed the initial construction to Asoka (3rd cent. BCE) with an expansion during the Kushan period (100 BCE – 300 CE). The excavations also provided evidence that the site had already been occupied before the stupa was built. Radiocarbon tests date to 800 BCE, and finds of proto-northern Black Polished Ware indicate that it is contemporary with Lumbini’s Village mound of 1300 BCE.
The site comprises of a 260 metre long mound and a small circular mound 200 metres to its north. Excavations were first undertaken in 1899 by the Indian archaeologist P.C. Mukherji, who identified the foundations of a town with brick structures, mounds and a well. Further research undertaken by Debala Mitra of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1962 noted brick ruins on two sides of the mound, and concluded that the site dated back to at least the 1st cent. CE. In 1995, the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Verardi conducted a systematic collection of material on the surface of the mound, and dated Sisaniya’s occupation up to the 9th cent. CE. In 2016, a subsurface geophysical survey confirmed the presence of a large settlement of brick structures and open spaces, bisected by a north-south thoroughfare. It also showed the presence of a walled pond below the fields between the town and the northern mound, similar to ones identified around Tilaurakot’s Eastern Monastery. This suggests that there may have been monastic complexes around the town in the past.

1. Main Square. The geophysical survey showed an area of open space through which the main north-south road ran. 2. Below the surface are a series of buildings and small lanes. 3. Auger-coring showed the presence of a moat here. The moats can be seen as both defensive structures and symbolic representations of the cosmos. 4. Very little is known about the stupa, as no archaeological investigation has been undertaken. It measures about ten metres in diameter and about two metres in height. 5. Buried below the fields is a brick-lined water tank. This is very similar to the water tank found to the east of Tilaurakot. It is possible that there was a monastery connected to the stupa near here. 6. Area of early occupation. Auger-coring picked up traces of occupation predating the town in this area. However, until further work is carried out we don’t know how much older, or what form it took. 7. Small mound 200m to the east.

Results of the geophysical survey. The thick blue areas represent the main streets; striped areas are areas of occupation; and the grey lines represent buried walls and structures.

Ramagrama is on the tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage Status, and has attracted archaeological interest since 1896. The most striking feature of the site is its massive stupa, which is ten metres high and 23.5 metres in diameter. It is reputed to be one of the original eight nirvana stupas that was not reopened. Farmers had called this the “unlucky field” as no crops would grow in it. When a geophysical survey was conducted, it identified a perfect quadrangular Kushan monastery buried below the surface. The dense concentration of brick would have made it difficult for crops to establish themselves. 3. Kushan Monastery. Further quadrangular cells were found in this area forming part of the wider Kushan monastery at the site. 4. A series of brick walls are visible on the surface in this area. Their function and form is unknown.

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Geophysical survey of the “unlucky field”
Learn more about the Greater Lumbini Area:

Charles Allen, The Buddha and Dr Führer: An archaeological scandal, 2008
Basanta Bidari, Kapilavastu: The world of Siddhartha, 2007
Basanta Bidari, Lumbini Beckons, 2009

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