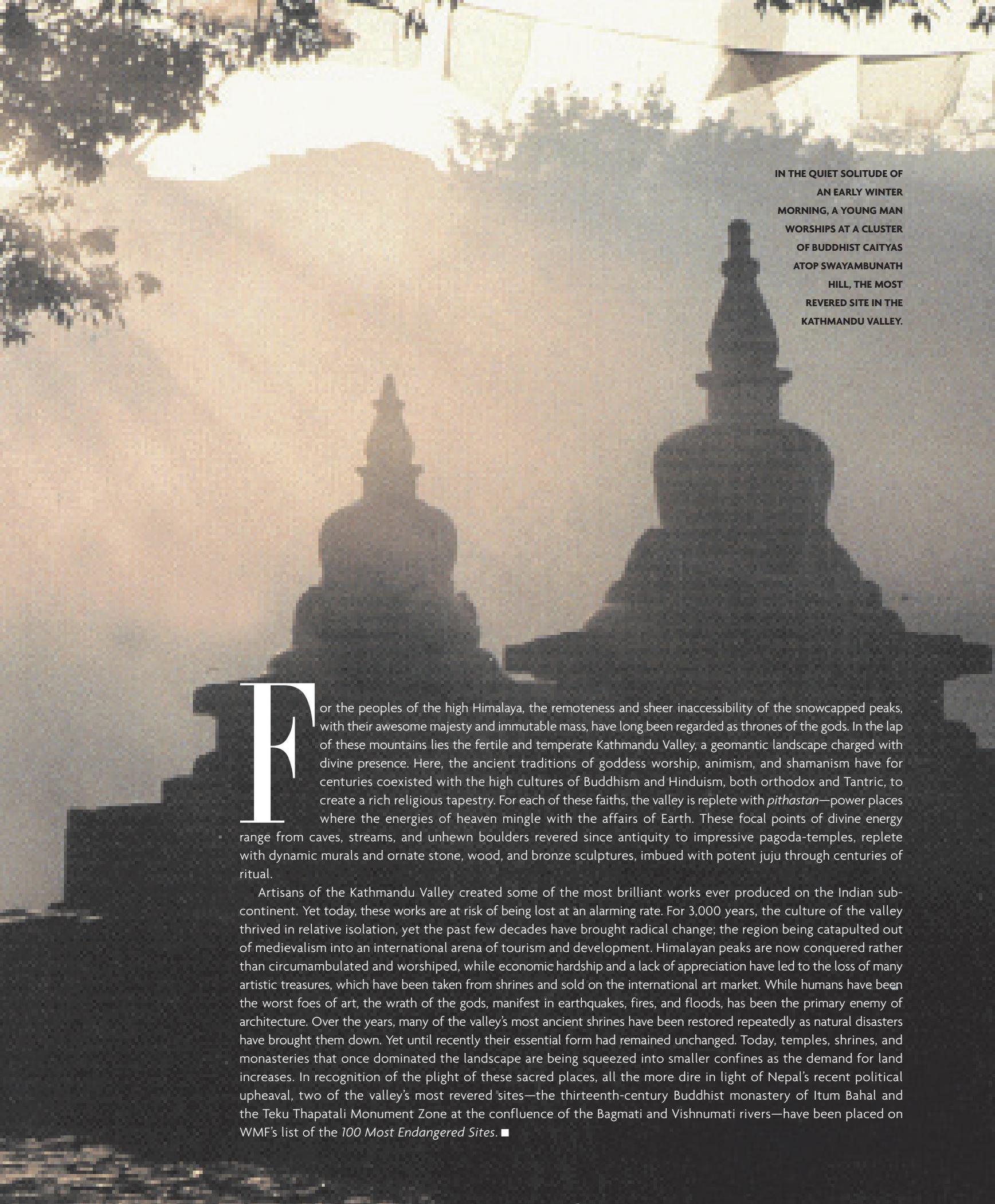


Abode of the  
**Gods**  
Sacred shrines of Kathmandu

*text by* KEITH DOWMAN

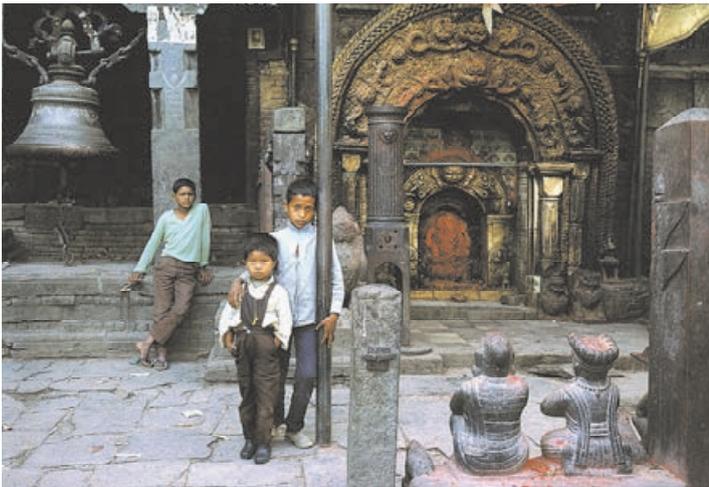
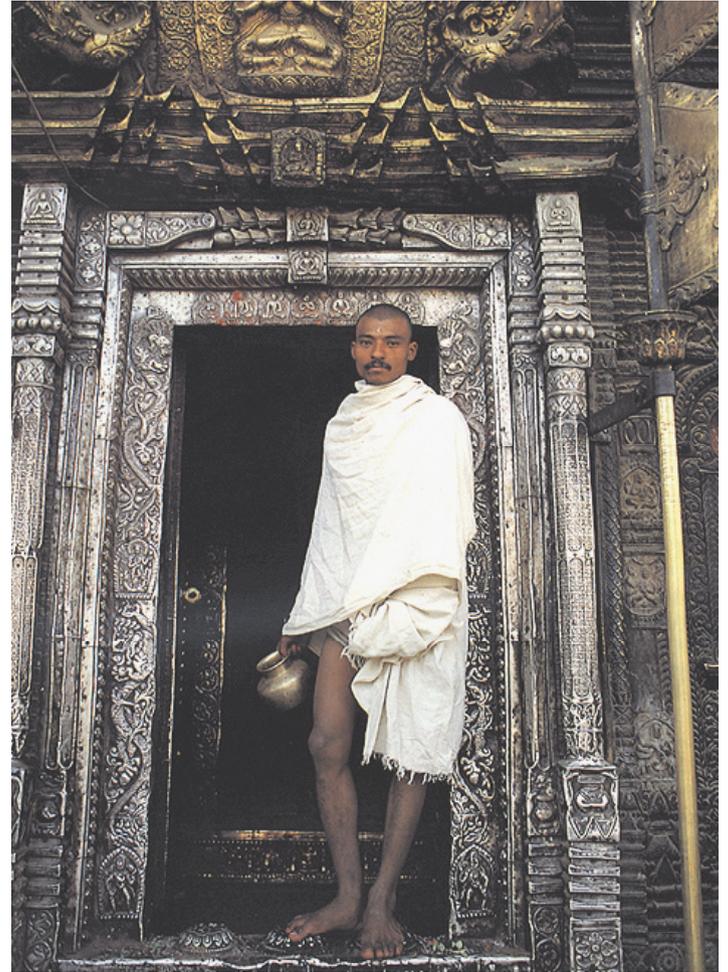
*photographs by* KEVIN BUBRISKI



IN THE QUIET SOLITUDE OF  
AN EARLY WINTER  
MORNING, A YOUNG MAN  
WORSHIPS AT A CLUSTER  
OF BUDDHIST CAITYAS  
ATOP SWAYAMBUNATH  
HILL, THE MOST  
REVERED SITE IN THE  
KATHMANDU VALLEY.

**F**or the peoples of the high Himalaya, the remoteness and sheer inaccessibility of the snowcapped peaks, with their awesome majesty and immutable mass, have long been regarded as thrones of the gods. In the lap of these mountains lies the fertile and temperate Kathmandu Valley, a geomantic landscape charged with divine presence. Here, the ancient traditions of goddess worship, animism, and shamanism have for centuries coexisted with the high cultures of Buddhism and Hinduism, both orthodox and Tantric, to create a rich religious tapestry. For each of these faiths, the valley is replete with *pithastan*—power places where the energies of heaven mingle with the affairs of Earth. These focal points of divine energy range from caves, streams, and unhewn boulders revered since antiquity to impressive pagoda-temples, replete with dynamic murals and ornate stone, wood, and bronze sculptures, imbued with potent juju through centuries of ritual.

Artisans of the Kathmandu Valley created some of the most brilliant works ever produced on the Indian subcontinent. Yet today, these works are at risk of being lost at an alarming rate. For 3,000 years, the culture of the valley thrived in relative isolation, yet the past few decades have brought radical change; the region being catapulted out of medievalism into an international arena of tourism and development. Himalayan peaks are now conquered rather than circumambulated and worshiped, while economic hardship and a lack of appreciation have led to the loss of many artistic treasures, which have been taken from shrines and sold on the international art market. While humans have been the worst foes of art, the wrath of the gods, manifest in earthquakes, fires, and floods, has been the primary enemy of architecture. Over the years, many of the valley's most ancient shrines have been restored repeatedly as natural disasters have brought them down. Yet until recently their essential form had remained unchanged. Today, temples, shrines, and monasteries that once dominated the landscape are being squeezed into smaller confines as the demand for land increases. In recognition of the plight of these sacred places, all the more dire in light of Nepal's recent political upheaval, two of the valley's most revered sites—the thirteenth-century Buddhist monastery of Itum Bahal and the Teku Thapatali Monument Zone at the confluence of the Bagmati and Vishnumati rivers—have been placed on WMF's list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. ■



BEGUN IN THE EARLY-FIFTH CENTURY AND MODIFIED OVER THE AGES, THE GREAT STUPA AT SWAYAMBHU, TOP, IS CONSIDERED THE MOST POWERFUL BUDDHIST SHRINE IN THE HIMALAYAS. YOUNG BOYS, ABOVE, AT THE SHRINE OF SURGE VINAYAKA, THE SUN GUARDIAN, WHICH WAS BUILT ON A FORESTED SLOPE SOUTH OF BHAKTAPUR. NEWLYWEDS COME HERE FOR HIS BLESSING OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE AND MANY CHILDREN. A CARETAKER, ABOVE RIGHT, AT THE TEMPLE OF RATO MATSYENDRANATH IN PATAN. PRAYER FLAGS, BELOW, FLUTTER IN THE BREEZE ABOVE A CLUSTER OF SMALL STUPAS ON MANJUSHRI HILL, NEAR SWAYAMBUNATH.





ABOVE THE BAGMATI RIVER VALLEY, JUST EAST OF KATHMANDU, COUNTLESS BUTTER LAMPS ILLUMINATE BOUDHANATH, ONE OF THE LARGEST STUPAS IN THE WORLD. BUILT IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, THE STUPA'S DOME IS 37 METERS IN DIAMETER. THE 13 STEPS OF ITS SPIRE AND CROWNING HARMIKA BOX ARE CLAD IN GILT COPPER SHEETS. A TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONK, LEFT, PERFORMS RITUALS AT BOUDHANATH. A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY GILDED PORTRAIT OF KING YOGANARENDRA MALLA RESTS ATOP A PILLAR IN PATAN'S DARBAR SQUARE, RIGHT. THE EARLIEST STRUCTURE ON THE SQUARE, A TEMPLE TO VISHNU, IS DATED 1566, BUT THE SQUARE HAS SERVED AS A CROSSROADS FOR MILLENNIA.

