

## Tourism in the Himalayas

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Since opening its doors to the outside world in 1951, Nepal tourism has weathered the onslaughts of political upheavals, regime change, national insurgency, earthquakes and floods, as well as external forces such as wars, blockades, terrorism, and plagues that have affected global travel patterns. In 2018, foreign arrivals to Nepal reached a record high of 1.17 million (up 25 percent from 2017), and increased another 13 percent in the first half of 2019. Next year's Visit Nepal 2020 programme aims to boost these numbers to 2 million (M), at the same time addressing some of the sector's intrinsic weaknesses. These include a dearth of new quality products around the country, and a dismal average daily expenditure of only USD 44 (down 23 percent from the previous year).

One third of tourists in Nepal come from India and China, and many others are short-stay pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar taking brief overnight visits to Lumbini. Of the 1.5 M visitors to Lord Buddha's birthplace, 1.4 M are from Nepal and India, spending less than one day, and the rest stay an average of only 1.8 days.

Does Nepal need more and more visitors if they are not paying a fair price for the superb cultural, mountain, adventure and wildlife products that we have to offer? I do not believe so. With potential negative environmental and social impacts from "over-tourism" in many destinations, tourism policy makers realise it is desirable to target a wide range of visitors to contribute greater benefits. We have forgotten that Nepal used to be good at appealing to high flyers as well as hippies.

My first month in Nepal, I was charged by a rhino, survived a small plane crash and helped douse a kitchen fire in the jungle of Chitwan National Park. It was spring 1974 and I had trekked the deepest gorge in the world, shadowed between the massive bulks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, to the windswept valley of Jomosom. The silver glint of the Kali Gandaki fanned out below, flowing through the grey moraine from forbidden Mustang, tantalisingly close behind the crystal peaks with the high wastes of the Tibetan plateau beyond.

The unpaved roads of Kathmandu saw little traffic, and I cycled narrow trails through the rice terraces of the emerald valley to visit temples, palaces and medieval bazaars. The air was as pristine as my naïve enthusiasm, fresh from my rural Northumberland upbringing.

I first stayed in City Lodge off Freak Street, which cost six rupees for a room with a narrow hard bed and little else. It was Nepal's hippie heyday and joints were rolled on café tabletops between dishes of momos and Mom's apple pie. To the bemusement of Nepali youth, long-haired, beaded "swinging sixties" travellers soaked in the slow-moving lifestyle and endemic marijuana weed.

But I was more captivated by the soaring scenery and the ethnic mix of Kathmandu's cultural crucible. As an unsuccessful hippie, it was a relief to join the workforce and wildlife conservation cause at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge, having persuaded Jim Edwards to give me a job. My Chitwan adventure and career in Nepal tourism had begun.

Himalayan tourism was in its infancy and I had arrived in Kathmandu just in time to rub shoulders with the early pioneers.

Boris Lisanevitch was the first to arrive in 1951, an ebullient White Russian whose exotic background included dancing with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris, and running the 300 Club in Calcutta, converting a royal palace into the Royal Hotel, introducing fancy foreign food and liquor.

Barbara Adams promoted guided tours and princely visits. Col Jimmy Roberts invented trekking and supported mountaineering to share the mountains he loved. John Coapman, Jim Edwards and Chuck Mc Dougal brought global attention to Chitwan's wildlife with the creation of Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge. As guests in this country, they realised that nurturing local people, their heritage and environment, was both good for them and for business.

These resourceful characters knew a thing or two about what was needed to attract high-paying visitors to Nepal's natural and cultural wonders. Together with some visionary Nepali entrepreneurs and energetic royals, they left a legacy that still resonates in a very different tourism world today. In those days, it needed imagination and resolve to lure the rich and famous

to the remote, mysterious Hindu kingdom, and tourist dollars started seeping into the economy. Boris's eclectic guests included Queen Sophia of Spain, Agatha Christie, Ingmar Bergman and Jean Paul Belmondo, who set the trend, and ordinary tourists soon followed.

Air travel was ponderous, roads were scarce, and communications were basic -- we relied on telex, telegrams and an unreliable crackly telephone line for reservations. Despite these hindrances, Nepal became a fashionable, sought-after spot for American and European vacationers. Reforming visa and drug regulations ensured that most hippies had departed by early 1975, in time not to discomfit foreign dignitaries invited to King Birendra's coronation. In their place came the celebrities, stars, Western round-the-world groups, trekkers, mountaineers and world travellers.

Nepal's tortuous internal transport logistics were a major barrier to tourism growth in those early days, hence the pace of development was slow. Nepal's first tourist group arrived only in March 1955. A small fleet of Douglas DC-3 aircraft brought visitors by charter flight via Patna in India.

There were no roads into the country, and the few vehicles in the Kathmandu Valley had not been driven there, but instead carried in, an epic effort by porters along the main trade route passing through the Chitlang Valley and over the Chandragiri Pass to Thankot. Elephants or horses were options in some parts of the country, but walking was still the norm.

Only in 1956 was the Tribhuvan Rajpath completed, the first road linking Kathmandu with India and the outside world. Rugged terrain hindered the road network, resulting in anomalies such as the western trading town of Pokhara becoming accessible by air well before it could be reached by car.

Clearly, domestic air travel would prove crucial to Nepal's tourism industry. The fledgling Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC later NAC) started in 1962 but it was not until the mid 1960s that regular domestic flights linked remote parts of the country with the capital. Twin Otters from Canada and Swiss Pilatus Porters were the aircraft of choice, most suited to the rugged conditions and rapidly shifting weather patterns.

Nepal continues to offer some of the most challenging flying in the world. Today, 20 domestic carriers operate both fixed wing and helicopter flights throughout the country, and Kathmandu airport receives scheduled services from 30 international airlines.

By 1962 Nepal had just over 6,000 foreign visitors, a significant number, considering the long journey and lack of tourist amenities once they arrived. Only in 1965 could Kathmandu claim its first modern hotel, the Hotel de l'Annapurna, followed in 1966 by the Soaltee Hotel and Yeti Travels, Nepal's leading group tour operator with the first fleet of tourist buses, managed by the energetic Jyoti Lal Khanna, all owned by Royal family members.

Since 1952, Dwarika Das Shrestha began collecting the exquisite woodcarvings that define Dwarika's, today Kathmandu's finest heritage hotel. Smaller and simpler lodges had opened in Basantapur, jocularly known as "Freak Street", to house the increasing number of hippies, mountaineers and overland visitors. In 1968, Karna Shakya, an environmentalist with a forestry background, opened the iconic Kathmandu Guest House, establishing the Thamel area as a vibrant world traveller hub that it remains today.

The promise of walking through natural landscapes and reaching untouched Himalayan villages has played a large part in Nepal's attraction for tourists seeking "authenticity" and "real" experiences, way before "experiential travel" became the buzzword. In many ways, Nepal's trekking industry has simply built upon elements of the country's spiritual and geographic history — from time immemorial, traders have plied the passes, and pilgrims have undertaken journeys of incredible hardship to attain teachings from gurus in Himalayan sanctuaries.

It was in 1965 that Nepal's first commercial trekkers arrived, a small group of six intrepid American women heading out to the Everest region, organised by Col. Jimmy Roberts, a dedicated mountaineer, military man and former British Defence Attache based in Kathmandu. With his company, Mountain Travel, Col. Jimmy not only created the trekking industry but also invented the term "trek", derived from a South African Boer word meaning "an arduous journey on foot".

Often staying weeks and returning annually, most of our Mountain Travel trekkers headed to the hills for seldom less than 14 days, and often for a month at a time. The introduction of trekking and its opportunities for employment was Colonel Jimmy's gift to the Sherpas, giving them an alternative and less vulnerable income from the dangerous work of high altitude portering. In a reversal of normal tourism development patterns, organised trek groups preceded individuals to use Nepal's network of trading trails and teahouses for multi-day hikes -- today, a serious business with over 200,000 annual trekkers.

Mountaineering tourism had made its first appearance in 1950 when a few teams with special permission had walked into Nepal. British and American expeditions were allowed to explore routes to Everest from the south.

On 3 June 1950 two Frenchmen, Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal, got to the summit of Annapurna 1, the first successful ascent of any 8,000-metre peak. Despite British and Swiss summit attempts on Everest in 1951 and 1952 respectively, it was not until 29 May 1953 that New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay reached the highest point on earth. Part of a British expedition, the joyous news reached London on Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation Day, giving Nepal and Everest more than usual profile and publicity.

Last year, Nepal's summits attracted 6,400 trekking peak climbers and 2,300 expedition members, with benefits accruing from their long stay patterns, high employment, and significant royalties.

Nature tourism began in Nepal when Tiger Tops opened in Chitwan with four treetop rooms in 1965. By the time I arrived, it was becoming a "must see" of Nepal tourism, with 40 percent market share from North America. We did not accept fewer than three-night stays, and the price of USD 300 per person (yes, USD 600 per room) included all meals and jungle activities. It must have been one of the higher room rates in 1970s Asia, especially as its 22 rooms lay deep in the forest and grasslands, constructed of local wood, bamboo and thatch.

The maverick Jim Edwards, who was my boss for 25 years, had taken over Tiger Tops in 1972 from John Coapman and his Texan owners, with American anthropologist and tiger specialist Chuck MacDougal. The

following year, Royal Chitwan National Park was gazetted as Nepal's first protected area, later declared a natural World Heritage Site protecting over 700 wildlife species, including endangered populations of Bengal tigers, one-horned rhinoceros and gharial crocodiles -- over 500 bird species that are more than in any other park in Nepal and about two-thirds of Nepal's globally threatened species.

Before the term "ecotourism" had been invented, Nepal was familiarising guests with environmental issues, justifying conservation and successfully contributing to local community livelihoods with tourism benefits. Chitwan became famous as one of the best wildlife viewing experiences in Asia.

Bhutan opened tourism in 1974 with 287 tourists, the same year Nepal received 90,000 visitors. It was not long before I had a chance to visit the newly emerging kingdom. Our client, the Swedish visionary entrepreneur Lars-Eric Lindblad, had an exotically decorated corner of his New York office as Bhutan's first representative in the mid-1970s.

Although I only got to Paro and Thimpu, I remember the tortuous roads, curious children, ever-fluttering prayer flags, and intense power of the fortress *dzongs*. Since those early days, much has changed in Himalayan tourism, including my own role in the business. From marketing Tiger Tops and Mountain Travel's brand of adventure, wildlife and trekking, I evolved over the decades to sustainable tourism consulting throughout the Asia Pacific region.

On several occasions I have been privileged to work in Bhutan, often under the eagle eye of Thuji Nadik and the Tourism Council. We happened to be in Thimphu as the drama unfolded on 9/11, impressed when the King personally consoled every American, and the monk body dedicated their prayers to those lost in the Twin Towers.

Les Clark and I were working on Bhutan's national ecotourism strategy in 2001. Amongst our recommendations was: "High Value, Low Impact", using financial mechanisms to control volumes to sustainable levels and achieve "low impacts" by ensuring visitors have a sense of care for Bhutan's culture and environment. Even then, we worried that embracing tourism from India might not meet Bhutan's carefully crafted national objectives. Indians with disposable income have preferred overseas sophistication,

whilst neighbours tend to receive the less affluent segments whose impacts threaten to outweigh their spending power.

Although much admired and even envied as an astute national policy, Bhutan's uniquely managed tourism with its low population density and gross national happiness brand is hard, probably impossible, to replicate in other destinations. I have observed that Nepal eyes Bhutan's blatant price elitism with envy, and in turn Bhutan has long been suspicious of Nepal, deriding it as selling out to commercialism and "mass tourism".

The reality is that travel operators have been collaborating for decades, and for many years, other Himalayan visitors have spent more than Bhutan's mandatory USD 250 per day. Overall Nepal is probably more successful at spreading tourism benefits throughout its scattered remote hillside communities, never a priority for the "top down" approach adopted in Bhutan, in which royalties are distributed by the government and much of the profits remain with the Paro and Thimphu travel operators.

Nepal's policy and the National Tourism Strategic Plan is enshrined in poverty reduction, allowing for rural tourism, encouraging village homestays, and recycling fees to buffer zone and forest user committees. For decades, tourism rupees have been filtering into local households, from employment and guiding, rural hospitality services, and sales of local produce and handicrafts. Some of the remote area outcomes may be unexpected or inequitable, and certainly not immune from less desirable impacts unleashed by market forces, but the focus of using tourism to boost local livelihoods is well accepted in Nepal.

Domestic tourism has flourished as Nepalis increasingly discover their own country, but growth in international numbers largely comes from budget neighbours or short-stay segments that have cemented Nepal's reputation as a low-cost destination, with the resulting negative spiral and lack of innovative investment.

Since the dark days of the insurgency -- when security halved international visitor arrivals, circuits shrunk to the relative safety of the Kathmandu Pokhara Chitwan triangle, and trekking was confined to Annapurna, Everest and Langtang -- today's distribution patterns have yet to recover. The important private-public platform of the Nepal Tourism Board suffered

a hiatus caused by a corrupt CEO, but is now back on track, and there is criticism that government regulations have even had the effect of stifling high value quality tourism to Nepal, compounded by the devastating effects of the 2015 earthquakes and southern border blockade. Further constitutional confusion has resulted from unclear lines of responsibility between national institutions and the new Provincial governments whose tourism ministries are mad keen to attract visitors, but unsure how to proceed successfully.

A significant percentage of all foreign and South Asian tourists visit protected areas, which cover nearly a quarter of Nepal's landmass, but the wardens and government department have no tourism expertise or specific training to ensure visitor interests are considered.

In 2012, the world-renowned wildlife lodge and tented camp lease concessions were not renewed in Chitwan or Bardia national parks, driving accommodation outside the park perimeters and losing high-end wildlife tourists to competing destinations elsewhere. The result is a worrying drop in arrivals to Nepal's core wildlife attractions of Chitwan and Bardia national parks, that have lost a third of foreign visitor numbers since 2012, and continue to suffer declining arrivals of 15 percent and 62 percent respectively in 2018 over the previous year. Overall, the percentage of Nepal's total foreign tourists visiting protected areas has dropped from two thirds to one third of the country's total visitors since 2012.

The mountain protected areas with their unsurpassed views, villages and pilgrimage spots are doing better in terms of popularity, but many routes are becoming disfigured with concrete construction and unsustainable hill road developments. Over 90 percent of all trekkers still flock to Annapurna, Sagarmatha and Langtang despite the efforts of the Great Himalaya Trails and other programmes to disperse tourism benefits. In 2018 these three major trekking destinations saw growth in visitors of 20 percent, 25 percent and 29 percent respectively.

Overall, despite the convincing increase in foreign arrivals, Nepal's tourism industry is threatened with an unmanaged proliferation of licences, rampant competitiveness, and lack of environmental impact controls, resulting in oversupply, price wars, compromised safety standards, and declining quality in many of its sectors. Casualties include weak foreign investment,

domestic air safety with a European Union ban still in place, and a glut of hotel rooms in Kathmandu and Pokhara, with not enough accommodation or developed attractions around the provinces.

There is little monitoring of the 3,500 travel agencies and 2,700 trekking companies, in terms of responsible operations, resulting in a lack of quality services and complaints of “over tourism” on Everest. As we head into VNY2020, a recently announced tourism tax would appear to be in direct contravention of our goal to attract more visitors.

Surely there is a better way to sell the magnificent scenery, compelling culture and adventure attractions, activities and assets of our beautiful Himalaya? The political will supporting VNY2020 is a great opportunity to expand the country’s product offering to appeal to higher value visitors -- growing the pie and appealing to a wider spectrum of visitors, rather than squabbling and undercutting to attract our current domestic and budget tourist markets on which the industry has come to depend. More effective and trusting partnerships between the public and private sector could improve the investment climate, joining hands to market with neighbours and helping engage our rural communities in more tangible benefits.

I continue to be optimistic. Perhaps we should allow the original foreign investors to have the last word. “After a few hours I fell madly in love with this country,” Boris declared in a 1961 interview. “I’d rather handle half as many tourists with each spending twice as much,” was Jim Edwards’ mantra. And Jimmy Roberts used to rue: “Why are we selling our beautiful mountains so cheap?”

*Note: Nepal Tourism Statistics 2018 and 2019 quoted are from Nepal Tourism Board, Ministry of Culture Tourism & Civil Aviation, Department of National Parks & Wildlife Conservation, Lumbini Development Trust and Nepal Rastra Bank.*