

Nepal – it's all about the way you tell it!

People either love Nepal or they don't know it exists.

Sadly this small Himalayan country has had a run of incidents over the last few years that have hit Nepalese life hard. Just as every tourism season is about to begin something happens that has a major impact on its economy, and the 'news' of that 'something' gets disseminated around the world in a matter of seconds. However, it is the unbalanced nature, formatting and essence of this information that actually creates a greater impact on tourism. It is estimated that the industry brings in approximately 4.5% of the GDP annually and the lack of foreign money is now making a big dent not only in the national resources, but especially in the economic situation of the hill people for whom trekking and mountaineering not only provides jobs but also short term financial security.



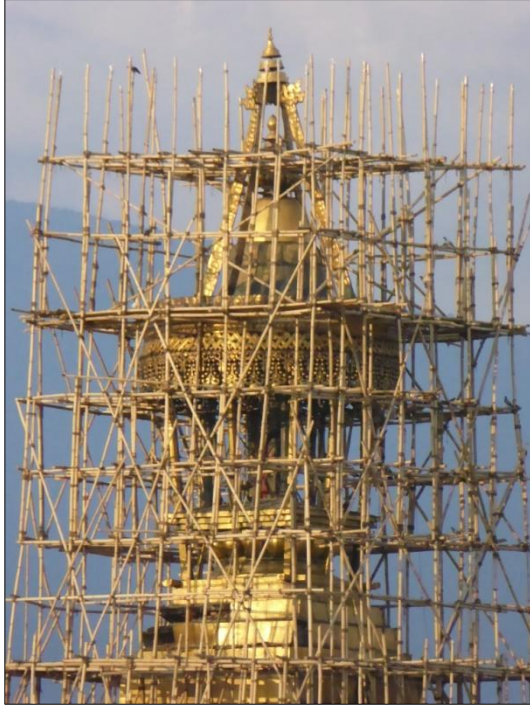
Ascending the trail to the Mesokantu La 5099m with Tilico Lake in the foreground and Annapurna 1 in the distance ©Ian Wall

Nepal is vulnerable to climatic change and as the earth warms the weather patterns become affected. Cyclone Hudhud hit the news in the autumn of 2014 because of the resulting deaths of many foreign trekkers and Nepali guides on the Annapurna



Phu village looking south-east across towards the Manaslu Himal ©Ian Wall

Circuit. However, every year the weather in and around the Bay of Bengal (Nepal's source of the monsoon rains) becomes increasingly intense and that, in autumn, eventually impacts on Nepal, but it does not create 'news' as thankfully very few people get killed or infrastructure destroyed. This is not a new weather event but it was more 'news' worthy in 2014 because of the deaths it caused. This reporting had a serious impact on tourism in the region, yet little positive events get reported, several expeditions achieved their goals during that very week and some major treks were completed, but as for the positive news coverage – nil.



The intricate bamboo scaffolding being used to assess the damage, if any to the Stupa at Boudhanath ©Ian Wall

Being situated on the major Southern Tibetan Fault earthquakes are no new geological event in Nepal. Each year over 20 tremours occur within the national borders, many are not even felt by the residents and very few buildings are damaged. However, in the spring of 2015 a 7.8 magnitude hit the country killing over 10,000 people and destroying many homes and villages. Although this was a national disaster and a great tragedy for those directly affected it has to be put into perspective, there are 3million people living in the Kathmandu valley alone while over 28 million inhabit greater Nepal (2014 figures). No significant reporting covered the lives, buildings and villages that were unaffected, the greater majority of the population. For example US Aid presented the facts (www.usaid.gov/nepal-earthquake/fy15/fs04) in hard format that 10,194 people were injured by the earthquake, that means that 27,989,806 were not affected, 2.8million people were displaced by the earthquake, meaning 27,999,997 were not displaced, 39 districts across Nepal were affected by the earthquake, meaning that 36 were not affected, the list goes on. As far as trekking was concerned it was stated that the majority of trekking routes were 'not safe', there were indeed many routes that were not safe (between Manaslu and Namche Bazaar) but the majority were still operating as normal. This purely negative coverage of a natural disaster had a major impact on the tourism figures for the spring and autumn seasons 2015 with tourist arrivals being approximately 65% down on an already weak situation still in recovery mode after the other reported events that occurred in Nepal. Now Nepal is on the earthquake map every little tremor gets international attention, specifically through government travel advice websites, insurances are therefore difficult to get and foreign traveler numbers declines at an alarming rate.

Nepal is a very young democracy, for hundreds of years not only was Nepal ruled by a Monarchy but it had closed borders. The borders were finally opened to foreigners in 1950 while the Monarchy was removed from power in 2004, and the Constitution finally passed in 2015. How long did it take other countries to reach this stage of development, and were their national administrative systems 100% correct from the outset, were there instant cell phone cameras in those days, was there internet and satellite connectivity? The answer in the majority of cases is NO, but today there is and today it is this mass communication network and the 'need' for selling stories that drives the negative and unbalanced journalism.

Since the earthquakes in April and May 2015 the Nepal Government realized that it did not have the legislation to enable it to pull down all the pledged foreign aid, the Constitution was rushed through to enable mechanisms to be established. India warned that Nepal should have an all inclusive Constitution, in the end it allegedly appears that this was not the case with the Terai people and particularly women being disadvantaged. Since then there have been many political issues specifically in the Terai, a predominantly non-tourist region yet the press have published articles suggesting that all of Nepal is suffering from inter ethnic disturbances, this is simply not the case. However, on the back of the 'news' plus the economic effect of the Indian border situation, the tourist flow has dried up. This situation is now far worse than it was as a result of the earthquake.

News must be accurate, no holds barred but it should also be balanced and illustrate the real perspective of the situation. Don't believe what you read in press, especially if it concerns Nepal – use a trekking company or individual that you trust, someone who is ideally based in Nepal and knows the real on the ground situation.

In conclusion, Nepal needs tourists and now, trekking routes are open except for the Langtang region. For those who might think the Annapurna Circuit has lost its appeal then there are several new trails, notably a Nar-Phu circuit, and although not new the Tilicho crossing is really good value for money! Treks to the Kanchenjunga region are fine and you can now do that option using tea-houses. To the west of Manaslu all the treks are fine and again some new trails have been opened. Nepal has also opened several new peaks for climbing and these are not all

mega big mountains, many are manageable 'holiday' time trips, again there is plenty of information available from Nepal based agents.

If you really want to visit Nepal then the 2016 seasons would be a good time to come. Yes we do have the on-going issues with petrol supplies and the prices are at the moment inflated which has a knock-on effect for the domestic flight costs. However one bonus is that there are less people and you can see the artisans using their skills to rebuild the temples and other building of the world heritage sites.

If you are in any doubt as to whether to travel or not and whether treks are open then please contact your local friendly agent who will give you accurate and up to date information, please don't give up on Nepal.



The time for immediate relief has gone, although people still need help. The money derived in local communities from your potential visit to Nepal through employing local hill people as porters or guides would go a long way to providing a little financial security for this little boy and his family, or to help rebuild the homes of this little girl and her family.

