

Now Nepal is back in business

Tourists are returning after a peace deal between the Government and rebels, says Jeremy Page

MARK HANNAFORD/JOHN WARBURTON-LEE



Back on track: climbers in the Everest region of Nepal. Visitor numbers to the country have grown by 31 per cent since last year

FOR much of the past decade, any visit to Nepal has inevitably involved a crash course in local politics — usually of the violent sort.

The short drive from Kathmandu's international airport to the city centre would often take hours as police battled with angry mobs protesting against the Government or the unpopular King Gyanendra.

The trekking stores, bookshops and backpacker cafés of Thamel, the city's tourist hub, would shut down at a moment's notice as Maoist rebels called regular nationwide strikes.

Trekkers in the mountains would occasionally be stopped by gun-toting Maoists demanding "taxes" to fund their "people's war" to overthrow the monarchy and establish a one-party state.

On a visit to Kathmandu in 2004, I attended a drinks party at which most of the Cabinet were drowning their sorrows after being sacked that day by the King.

"Nothing to worry about — it happens all the time," one of them slurred nonchalantly into his whisky. "Welcome to chaos."

Returning to Kathmandu

last month, however, there was an unfamiliar sense of order in the air — clogged as it was with fumes from the capital's ubiquitous traffic jams.

The reason was simple: the Government signed a peace deal with the Maoists in November, ending a decade of fighting that cost 13,000 lives and crippled the economy, especially the tourist industry.

Nepal attracted almost half a million visitors in 1999, three years after the Maoist revolt began. By last year, that number had dropped to 280,000. But now the peace deal is in place, the Government is trying to lure back foreign tourists and has set itself a target of 600,000 visitors for the current fiscal year, which began in July.

It has launched a "Nepal for all Seasons" campaign to attract visitors year round, rather than just over the summer, and to its restaurants, casinos and hotels, as well as its spectacular Himalayan peaks. It is planning to slash fees for climbing Mount Everest — one of its top tourist attractions — during the off-season. It has

announced plans to invest millions of pounds in new infrastructure, including a new international airport and a motorway to the Annapurna range — a popular trekking destination. With the few international flights to Nepal filled to capacity, it is allowing more foreign airlines, including Silk Air, a subsidiary of Singapore Airlines, to fly direct to Kathmandu.

The Nepal Tourism Board's slick new website (www.welcomenepal.com) is reaching out to new kinds of tourists by promoting weekend breaks tailored to everyone from

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young lovers to golf enthusiasts. "Spend the weekend in a remote jungle resort showing her what an animal you are," reads the promotional blurb for "Awesome Dirty Weekends". Another for "Wild Stag Weekends" suggests: "Don't forget to have a drink at one of the local dance bars, where beautiful

Nepali belles will dance circles around your pals."

Critics say that the campaign is doomed to fail because of corruption and inefficiency within the Government and continuing political instability around the country of about 29 million people.

Nepal still suffers regular strikes, protests and bouts of unrest — particularly in the south where locals say they are being marginalised by the political elite. Last week, dozens of Maoist students were arrested in Kathmandu after clashing with rival activists and trying to set fire to a member of parliament.

Tour operators, restaurateurs and hoteliers — even within Thamel — accuse the Maoists of continuing to extort money as they did during their "people's war". The Maoists, meanwhile, have repeatedly threatened to pull out of the Government if their demands are not met ahead of an election in November for a new constituent assembly. The original plan was for the new assembly to vote on whether to abolish Nepal's monarchy, but

the Maoists now say the country should become a republic before the November election.

"We have our doubts," Prachanda, the Maoist leader who uses only one name, told reporters last month, when asked if the polls would be held on time. "We want the election on schedule, but it is still fraught with uncertainty... We will launch a peaceful popular protest movement to ensure timely elections." He gave no date for the planned protests.

But despite the uncertainty surrounding the poll — and the peace deal — the latest figures for tourist arrivals are encouraging. More than 26,000 foreigners arrived by air in July alone, 25 per cent more than in the same month last year, according to the Ministry of Tourism. The bulk of foreign tourists are Britons, and their numbers have grown by 31 per cent since last year. No doubt the Government is hoping that they will heed the advice of the tourism board's new promotional slogan, "Naturally Nepal," it says. "Once is not enough."

Need to know

Getting there: Gulf Air (0870 777 1717, www.gulfair.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Kathmandu from £843 return. Qatar Airways flies from Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester (0870 7704215, www.qatarairways.com) from £566.50 return. Singapore Airlines (www.singaporeair.com) from Heathrow connects with SilkAir's service (www.silkair.com) from Singapore to Kathmandu, beginning October 30, from £837 return.

Where to stay in Kathmandu: (double B&B a night) Hyatt Regency (00 977 1 449 1234, www.hyatt.com) from £76. Shangri-La Hotel (1 441 5754, www.hotels Shangri-La.com) from £73. Radisson (1 441 1818, www.radisson.com/kathmandune) from £108.

Tours: Mountains for softies: The Adventure Company (0845 450 5312, www.adventurecompany.co.uk) has a non-trekking Himalayan Discovery trip to Nepal later this month, including an elephant safari in Chitwan national park. The price of £1,112pp includes flights from Heathrow on September 19, 11 nights' accommodation and most meals.

Himalayas for children: Explore's Himalayan Discovery family group tour (0870 333 4001, www.explore.co.uk) includes an overnight mountain camp. The price, from £1,595 for adults and £1,399 for children, includes flights, 11 nights' B&B (one camping), some meals and a guide.

Peak effort: The Mountain Company (020-7498 0953, www.themountaincompany.co.uk) runs a 24-day expedition for experienced walkers, culminating in the ascent of the 6,476m Mera peak. The next trek on March 27 costs £1,545pp, excluding flights, but including accommodation.

More information: www.welcomenepal.com, www.visitnepal.com

Renata Rubnikowicz

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