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NEXT STOP | KATMANDU

As Turmoil Subsides, Tourism in Nepal Surges

By SETH SHERWOOD

AS morning crowds of sari-clad women and mustached men packed the busy streets of [Katmandu](#) on the first day of December, The Himalayan Times, an English-language daily newspaper, trumpeted a staggering discovery.

“Yeti Footprints Found at Khumbu,” declared the headline in bold type. An article explained that an expedition had come across a mammoth five-toed footprint buried in the ice near the base camp for Mount Everest. After a long period without a credible sighting, the elusive creature seemed to have suddenly reappeared.

In fact, it was hardly the only reappearance to celebrate. All over Katmandu that week, from trekking agencies to curry houses, some almost equally prized specimens were leaving tracks after years of scarcity: foreign travelers. According to the [Nepal](#) Tourism Board, December capped a banner year, with air arrivals up 27 percent over the 2006 total. Overall, 2007 welcomed some 360,000 foreign air travelers to the country, making it the most successful year for tourism since 2000.

For a poor but picturesque country that was nearly pulled apart by a decade of bloodshed and political turmoil — which witnessed some 13,000 deaths from a Maoist insurrection, the bizarre murder of most of the royal family by the crown prince, the seizure of absolute power by a subsequent king and the resulting pro-democracy riots — the numbers are heartening indeed.

They owe much to the calmed political situation. The civilian government has been restored, the Maoists have signed a peace treaty, and democratic elections are scheduled for later this year. As a result, several airlines resumed service or began new routes to Katmandu last year. Hotels report surges in bookings. And the streets of the city where raging protests once flared are again humming with bicycle rickshaws, sacred cows and beat-up taxis ferrying international visitors to the numerous World Heritage Sites in and around the capital city.

“We had planned to come a couple of years ago, but the political unrest made it impossible,” said Christa Hoyal, from [Utah](#), as she lunched at the Katmandu Guest House with her traveling companion, Liz Tanner, also from Utah. A copy of The Himalayan Times with the yeti article on the front lay next to them. “But when things settled down,” she said, “we rebooked our tickets and came over.”

So far, Ms. Hoyal said, they had ridden elephants on safari in Royal Chitwan National Park and explored Katmandu’s centuries-old Hindu shrines and former royal palaces.

“There have been no concerns at all in terms of personal safety,” she said.

For others who have canceled or deferred journeys to Katmandu, the good news is that the troubled decade did nothing to harm the city's age-old appeals.

THE snowcapped Himalayas, visible on clear days, soar eternally upward. Impervious to the vicissitudes of politics and trends, Katmandu's artisans continue to produce rich carpets, yak-wool clothing, wood sculptures and thangka paintings. Day after day, crowds still await the appearance of the Kumari — a Nepali child considered to be the incarnation of a deity — below her mansion's window in the city's iconic Durbar Square.

And while the city might not be the mythical Shangri-La — crumbling buildings, rusted-out vehicles, emaciated dogs and impoverished families fill the poorly drained streets — the ancient religions of Hinduism and Buddhism do much to infuse meaning and color into the landscape. For more than anything else, Katmandu's twin faiths make the city one of the planet's most powerful magnets for spiritual seekers and philosophic souls.

In myriad guises and manifestations, each threads itself through daily life: the vermilion anointments on the foreheads of clerks and laborers; the wreaths of marigolds hanging from motorcycle handlebars; the prayer beads wrapped around wrists and necks; the colorful pictures of Shiva painted on huge exhaust-spewing trucks; the temples that draw worshipers from all over the world.

On an evening in late November, the scent of smoldering incense mingled with the stench of burning garbage as dusk settled over the massive stupa of Boudhanath. Resembling a gold pyramid propped on a mammoth white dome, the stupa is the center of Buddhist worship in Katmandu.

Around its base, hundreds of Tibetan and Nepali worshipers walked in a ritual clockwise circuit, spinning prayer wheels and muttering chants. A couple of dozen Westerners, many of them dressed in the colorful fabrics and hammered metal jewelry sold in nearby shops, also joined the human tide. Some were students at the White Monastery, one of the 30-odd Buddhist monasteries tucked into the predominantly Tibetan neighborhood. Some were on more private and more personal missions to Katmandu.

"A friend of mine died in [Fiji](#) while he was scuba [diving](#)," said Mark Daddario, an American traveler from Southern California, as he watched the slow-moving pageant. "He was wearing some of my equipment when it happened.

"I have some of his ashes with me on this trip," he continued, explaining that he had quit his job as a beer salesman to make time for the journey, which was also to include [India](#) and Southeast Asia. "I've been depositing them at monasteries all over the country."

High above, painted atop the stupa, the huge, disembodied eyes of the Buddha gazed downward at the procession. Was Mr. Daddario at all concerned about visiting a remote nation that, until recently, tourists had largely avoided?

Mr. Daddario shook his head and smiled.

"My mom is probably worried about me," he said, "but she knows that I'm on my fourth passport."

A few days later, a diverse crowd of Nepalis and foreigners milled among the Ganesh and Shiva shrines in

the temple complex of Pashupatinath, the holiest spot of Hindu ground in Katmandu. Situated along the banks of the Bagmati River, a tributary of India's sacred Ganges, the assemblage of time-eater stone statues and buildings suggests a Nepalese version of Angkor Wat.

As hordes of brown monkeys scuttled over the stones, the human throngs peered at an unfolding spectacle along the riverbank. Several large cremation platforms — known as ghats — began to crackle with flames and billow with smoke and ash. Many of the bodies could still be perceived, like shadows, within the roaring orange blazes. Next to one of the ghats, a Nepali family lay out the stiffened body of a white-haired woman on rock slab and began to wrap it in an orange sheet.

“The conception of death is amazingly different here,” remarked Sean Speers, from [San Francisco](#), as he watched the scene. Nearby, a group of sadhus — Hindu holy men — with painted faces and limbs coated in white ash were chatting with Mr. Speers's girlfriend.

Mr. Speers said he had come to Nepal to visit his girlfriend, a fellow San Franciscan who was living in a rural village, and to trek to the base camp of Mount Everest.

“But a big draw for me was also just to meet the Nepali people,” Mr. Speers added, motioning to the sadhus. “I have to say, they've been delightful.”

As night arrived on the first day of December and news of the yeti footprint spread though the city, thousands of young Nepalis and scores of Westerners packed the lanes of the Thamel neighborhood for the fifth annual Tuborg Project: Peace, an outdoor [music](#) festival. On a series of stages, D.J.'s and bands played loud sets, sending music reverberating through the district's tightly packed guest houses, bars, ethnic restaurants and handicraft shops.

For years, as the Maoist insurgency gained steam and political tensions mounted, no neighborhood suffered as much from the tourism drop-off as Thamel. On this night, however, the many foreign faces and accents in the streets gave the promise of better times ahead.

After the final set, a Nepali M.C. took the stage and addressed the crowd in English. “Remember, tonight is for peace!” he yelled to the sea of waving hands. Green shafts of laser light streaked overhead in the sky. He paused, then shouted, “We're all happier with peace, right?”

His words echoed through the streets and faded into the night. But judging from the burst of cheers that followed, the message clearly lingered.

VISITOR INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE

There are no direct flights between the [United States](#) and [Katmandu](#). For certain dates in April, [Qatar Airways](#) (www.qatarairways.com) offers flights from Newark airport to Katmandu, with a stop in the Qatari capital of Doha, from about \$1,600.

WHERE TO STAY

In the busy Thamel entertainment district, the Katmandu Guest House (977-1-470-0800; www.ktmgh.com) has standard doubles from \$25 per day. Doubles with air-conditioning from \$50. A stone's throw from the iconic Buddhist stupa of Boudhanath, Pal Rabten Khansar Guest House (www.sakyatharig.org.np) has very simple double rooms from 900 rupees (\$13.39 at 67.2 Nepalese rupees to the dollar).

WHERE TO EAT

Outfitted with a pleasant roof deck, Third Eye Restaurant on the main drag in Thamel does very good Indian and Nepali foods, such as nan, kebabs, curries and fruit lassis. Around 1,000 rupees for a three-course meal for two people. Overlooking the Boudhanath stupa, the Stupa View Restaurant (977-1-448-0262) serves momos (Tibetan dumplings), pizzas and pasta with yak cheese. A three-course meal for two people is also around 1,000 rupees.

WHERE TO SHOP

The Thamel district teems with shops selling all manner of handmade Buddha statues, woven fabrics, ritual masks and yak woolens. Small but worth tracking down, Best Tea and Spices Shop (across from the Hotel Garuda in Thamel; 977-1-470-0505) sells spicy Nepali masala tea (250 rupees a box), jasmine tea (200 rupees a box), [Darjeeling](#) tea (200 rupees a box) and more.

Just inside the Boudhanath Gate, dozens of small shops sell Tibetan and Nepali woodwork, instruments, carpets, clothing and jewelry. Tibet Furniture (977-1-207-3412; www.tibetfurniture.com) is a trove of painted wooden doors, carved chests and fine metalwork.

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