

Leisure tourism in nepal



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Introduction

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation, (UNWTO), undoubtedly the most influential international tourism organisation, describes tourists as “ people who travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited”. (Richards & Hall, 2000, P 36) Whilst this rather complex interpretation does not do justice to itinerant and obsessive travellers, or to the thousands of young westerners who live for months on the beaches and mountain resorts of alien countries, it effectively narrows down tourism to a short or medium term self funded leisure activity in foreign, unknown, strange or unfamiliar environs.

Sharpley’s definition of tourism as a phenomenon of modern society, (1994) whilst being apt with regard to timeline, does not also do justice to this seething and volatile activity, the largest and possibly the most complex organised process in today’s world. Tourism is widely known to be not just the world’s largest business but also its principal employer. It accounts for practically 8 % of global GDP and continues to grow at a clip of 4 %, despite its massive base. (Richards & Hall, 2000) Millions of people all over the world, from the largest metropolises to the remotest hamlets, depend upon tourism for their livelihood, opening up their countries and towns to enable people from other countries and cultures to come and gain touristic experiences.

Tourism, since the inception of the concept, has primarily been associated with the desires of affluent citizens of advanced nations to go out of their ordinary places of residence for experiential activities that provide emotional and physical satisfaction. (Richards & Hall, 2000) Even though tourism has constantly been viewed as a self indulgent activity, its phenomenal increase and adoption by all affluent societies has led to the creation of a multi billion dollar octopus like activity; one with numerous tentacles in different activities and places. (Richards & Hall, 2000)

Leisure tourism has witnessed a dramatic upsurge in the last few decades, driven by (a) steadily increasing incomes and discretionary spending powers in the advanced and industrialising nations, (b) cheaper air travel, (c) strong western currencies, (d) globalisation, (e) the emergence and consolidation of a unipolar world, and (f) the opening up of numerous tourism destinations and experiences. (Mowforth & Munt, 2003) As such, whilst tourism has expanded phenomenally in recent years, the reasons for this phenomenon possibly lie in a number of modern day happenings that have come together for the expression of latent but previously existing desires. The fact that a modern day occurrence, can, in a matter of decades become the world's largest activity also belies any simple definition or explanation. (Mowforth & Munt, 2003)

The complexity of tourism can be gauged from the number of activities and businesses it encompasses, including, among other things, different modes of transport, varieties of accommodation, choices of cuisines and eating ambiences, range of activities, and innumerable players. Touristic pursuits are now becoming segmented into different areas like culinary, cultural,

historical, health, wildlife, sex, and outdoor adventure activities. (Richards & Hall, 2000) Out door adventure pursuits are again further subdivided into a plethora of activities like trekking, mountaineering, mountain and flat land cycling, para-gliding, and white water rafting. (Richards & Hall, 2000) Driven by changing lifestyles, these activities are becoming increasingly popular with more and more people wishing to experience more rewarding leisure experiences. (Richards & Hall, 2000)

Countries with natural resources conducive to outdoor sports have naturally started leveraging their resources to take advantage of this upsurge in interest. Australia and New Zealand, for example, have taken adventure tourism to new levels by building facilities and infrastructure that not only showcase the country's natural beauty but allow visitors to participate safely in a range of outdoor activities. (Mowforth & Munt, 2003) Whilst these countries have been able to exploit their resources successfully, other nations, equally rich in natural beauty, have been unable to fulfil or even come near their potential in attracting leisure or adventure tourism traffic.

Nepal, a nation state tucked away in the Himalayas between China and India is a land of unimaginable beauty, grandeur, and ruggedness, and is ideal for leisure and adventure tourism. The country has attracted considerable leisure tourism interest from Europe and the UK and a number of British tourism companies have tried to set up operations in the state, especially in areas relating to white water rafting, mountaineering, and adventure trekking. Whilst disturbed political conditions during the last few years had led to a significant decrease in tourist arrivals, recent developments involving the formation and installation of a democratic government have

now resulted in more stable conditions and an upsurge in tourism interest. (Basu & Riaz, 2007)

This assignment deals with Nepal's attractiveness as a White Water Rafting and Leisure Tourism destination, its current position as a tourist attraction, and the various initiatives that need to be taken at the private and public level to attract visitors and promote tourism on a sustainable basis.

Commentary and Analysis

White Water Rafting

Rafting is widely accepted by historians to be one of the most primitive modes of water transportation. The activity evolved thousands of years ago when humans started using water currents for transportation by roping wooden logs into platforms for floating downstream. Rafts have changed little over the centuries and even today represent small flat bottomed floating vessels without engines or sails, dependent fully upon water currents and oars for forward propulsion. (Robinson, 2004) Rafts are nowadays made of specially manufactured thick plastic or fabric. (Robinson, 2004) The material is multi layered, adequately waterproofed, and stitched or fused into inflatable multi chambered rubber vessels with flat bottoms and short sides. (Robinson, 2004) Not large in size, modern day rafts are less than 20 feet long, about 6 to 8 feet wide, and can seat a maximum of 12 people. (Robinson, 2004) Being inflatable they can be easily transported over long distances and are economical to buy and maintain. (Robinson, 2004)

White water rafting (WWR) originated a couple of decades ago with the use of these rafts by pleasure seekers for rushing down swiftly flowing mountain

streams. (Robinson, 2004) The turbulence of mountain streams and rivers, the feel of spray in the face, the froth, the foam, and the association with danger, combine to make rafting a thrilling and enjoyable proposition. (Robinson, 2004) WWR has gained significantly in popularity and is now available across the globe. Involving trips to distant places with the opportunity to participate in intrinsically enjoyable outdoor activity, WWR makes for an ideal group, individual and family pursuit and is open to all reasonably healthy people. (Robinson, 2004) WWR expeditions last from a few hours to days, depending upon the stretch of available water, and often incorporate outdoor camping, tent accommodation, barbecues and spits next to the river at night, and local cultural shows.

“ Though river rafting once was thought akin to slaying dragons, the sport has grown dramatically in the last two decades, pursued on more than 145 rivers around the country, according to David Brown, director of America Outdoors, a trade association. But trends in rafting are steering away from expeditions designed for thrill-seekers and toward family-style trips and one-day float outings”(Cooke & Haggerty, 1996)

Safety is obviously of paramount importance for WWR and rafters use specific gear including helmets and inflatable vests. (Robinson, 2004) Getting thrown off the raft is common during turbulent stretches and rafters are provided with detailed instructions before the commencement of trips. Extremely stormy conditions increase the risk of such occurrences as well as the chances of being swept downstream. Water stretches used for rafting are categorised in accordance with the level of danger involved, levels 1 to 3

being mild stretches ideal for beginners and levels 4 to 6 being rough and meant for experienced rafters. (Robinson, 2004)

The significant increase in WWR activity over the last two decades has been attributed by social researchers to a number of factors, which include its widespread availability and manageable costs, the opportunities it provides for group and family bonding, and the growing increase in interest in outdoor activity. It is also associated with the pleasure people obtain out of escaping from urban work and life tensions, the proximity to natural beauty, ruggedness and majesty, and the adrenalin rush that comes from exciting physical activity. Rowlands (2008) feels that the popularity of the activity is due mostly to it being high on adrenalin, medium on fitness, and low on cost. Recent innovations like the designing and fitment of special seats on rafts for people who can not use their lower limbs indicate the spreading popularity of the activity.

“ We’ve got special seats on rafts adapted for people who don’t have use of their lower limbs. The seat helps to stabilise you in the raft, gives extra support and has quick-release straps so you can get out quickly if necessary. People with sight or hearing difficulties also come rafting with us - it’s a really inclusive activity.”(Rowlands, 2008)

The low cost of setting up rafting facilities (expenditure comprising largely of investment in reasonably low priced equipment, and trained instructors and guides) is also a major reason for the mushrooming of WWR activity, more so in developing nations where local entrepreneurs and nature enthusiasts are otherwise hindered by lack of capital and resources. (Robinson, 2004)

Improvement in communication, greater information availability, and cheaper air travel costs have also contributed enormously to the growing popularity of WWR. Cheaper air travel has enabled tourists to travel to distant destinations even during short holidays and it is now common for Britishers, Americans, and citizens of other affluent countries to engage in intercontinental travel for tourism experiences that could last even lesser than a week. The plethora of information available over the internet has brought information about hitherto exotic and distant locations into the common realm of knowledge and the availability of online booking facilities for airline tickets, hotel accommodation and tourism experiences has empowered tourists to act on their own and undertake trips at short notice without the involvement of travel agents. Tourism experts feel that the interest in WWR activity is bound to increase in future, given its many appealing features and possibility of the opening up of numerous fresh locales. (Robinson, 2004)

White Water Rafting in Nepal

Nepal, a small Himalayan nation state currently undergoing a difficult transition from a monarchy to a democratic republic, has among the most abundant mountaineering and WRR resources in the world. Home to 8 out of the world's highest 14 mountain peaks, the country nestles in majestic mountain country. (Welcome to Nepal, 2008) It is abundantly fed by swiftly flowing rivers, covered with dense forests, and is home to an incredible range of flora and fauna. (Welcome to Nepal, 2008) Connected by air and road the country is not difficult to access and is normally reached after a stopover in a major Indian city. (Welcome to Nepal, 2008) Kathmandu, the

capital of Nepal is a remarkably tourist friendly city; rich in cosmopolitanism, culinary variety, and culture, and was a major backpacker and mountaineering destination even a few years ago. Local entrepreneurs along with British and European companies have started promoting Nepal as a strong WWR destination and a number of its rivers are being used for rafting trips. Appendix 1 provides details about various Nepalese rivers and the duration of WWR trips possible on each of them.

Approximately 61 companies service Nepal's tourism industry, which in turn provides employment to thousands of Nepalese citizens. (Nepal Association of Rafting Agents, 2008) Despite its enormous tourism resources and its friendly people, Nepal has in recent years been beset with large scale peace and order problems caused by agitating Maoists and other anti monarchists. (Basu & Riaz, 2007) The installation of an elected government in 2006 has led to a cessation of large scale violence and whilst civil strife and unrest is yet to cease completely the situation is steadily moving towards normalcy. (Basu & Riaz, 2007) Various European and North American governments still have negative travel advisories for their citizens wishing to travel to Nepal. The Canadian government, for example, advises its citizens to exercise great caution whilst visiting Nepal.

“ You should evaluate carefully the implications for your security and safety before deciding to travel to Nepal. Canadians in Nepal should maintain a high level of personal security awareness at all times due to the unpredictable safety situation. Following an intense period of unrest and armed conflict, the political and security situation remains fragile and volatile.” (Travel Report Nepal, 2008)

Nepalese WWR providers have however started work on rebuilding awareness in Europe and the UK about facilities available for rafting on Nepalese mountain streams and rivers. The Nepalese Association of Rafting Agents has in fact recently concluded the 7th Himalayan White Water Challenge. (Nepal Association of Rafting Agents, 2008) Held in November 2007 in association with Peak UK, an English White Water and Kayaking Equipment Company, the event was designed as a multi disciplinary one boat competition that combined extreme slalom and river running skills with down river speed and free style action. (Nepal Association of Rafting Agents, 2008) Combining state of the art forms of slalom and head to head racing, the event drew 80 international and 30 local participants and turned out to be a huge success, despite the troubled state of the country and the somewhat inclement weather. (Nepal Association of Rafting Agents, 2008) Whilst the successful holding of the event should help in bringing back WWR enthusiasts to Nepal in the coming season, much still needs to be done to make WWR and allied tourism activities in the country truly self sustaining and beneficial for the local population.

Challenges and Hazards before Nepal 's WWR Tourism Activity

Even as a modern and democratic Nepal tries to reengage with the global community after nearly a decade of unrest and isolation, it will need to put in extraordinary efforts to rebuild its inward tourism activity on a sustainable basis if it is to ensure protection of its environment and the passing of tourism benefits to the local population.

Tourism has been the subject of endless research and discussion in recent years. Even as hoteliers, airline operators, travel agents, keepers of historical

sites, designers and operators of amusement parks and other touristic activities, and the numerous other operators have striven to provide better and differentiated offerings, the industry has been criticised for sharpening income divides, creating low skill employment, causing large scale environmental degradation, generating pockets of work as well as income divides in scarcity ridden areas, and for being one of the chief causes of greenhouse emissions. (Robinson, 2004) Debate has raged over other aspects of tourism especially the impact of modernism and postmodernism on the evolution of the business. Thinkers like MacCannell, Sharpley, Ritzer and Liska have raised a number of issues about existing tourism practices, introduced postmodernist concepts, and stressed the need to bring in far reaching changes in government attitudes and public policy in dealing with the issue. Postmodern views on tourism encompass various perspectives, including the imperative need to make tourism sustainable.

A major global initiative in this regard came about in 2002 when representatives of inbound and outbound tour operators, emerging entrepreneurs in the tourism industry, national parks, provincial conservation authorities, all spheres of government, tourism professionals, tourism authorities, NGOs and hotel groups and other tourism stakeholders, from 20 countries in Africa, North and South America, Europe and Asia came together in Cape Town to consider the issue of responsible tourism and agreed to a number of actions. (Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002) These included adoption of a number of processes that aimed at inculcating responsibility in tourism. Conference members agreed to (a) minimise negative economic, environmental, and social impacts, generate greater

economic benefits for local people and enhance the well-being of host communities, (b) improve working conditions and access to the industry, (c) involve local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances, (d) make positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, (e) maintain the world's diversity, (f) provide more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues, (g) provide access for physically challenged people and (h) engender respect between tourists and hosts, and (i) build local pride and confidence. (Responsible Tourism in Destinations, 2002)

WWR and associated touristic activities in Nepal have the potential of causing severe damage to the environment through large scale littering of river banks, cutting and burning of forest resource, spillage of diesel and petroleum products in rivers, destruction of local flora and fauna, and spoilage of natural habitat and biodiversity. Tourism authorities in Nepal along with local tourism operators need to ensure that increase in WWR tourism does not harm the environment and is able to bring about real benefits to the local population.

Marketing of Nepal as a WWR destination

WWR activities, like other touristic pursuits, are mainly concerned with optimal utilisation of leisure time and characterised by “ a sense of separation from the everyday world, feelings of intense pleasure, freedom of choice, spontaneity, timelessness, fantasy, adventure and self-realization.” (Otto and Ritchie, 1996, p 54) Leisure is also associated with six conditions, namely intrinsic satisfaction, perceived freedom, involvement, arousal,

mastery and spontaneity, and also characterized by two forms of risk, functional and psychosocial. (Otto and Ritchie, 1996) It contributes to strong feelings of camaraderie and mental bonding, especially when tourists take part in group activities, be they harmless sightseeing tours or riskier mountaineering or white water rafting expeditions. (Otto and Ritchie, 1996) Tourism can also be categorised in two dimensions, existential, representing satisfaction, freedom, involvement, pleasure and reward as well as structural, which deals with physical tasks and an element of external enforcement like, e. g., visits to safari parks or the undertaking of supervised hill climbing expeditions. (Otto and Ritchie, 1996) A number of tourism experiences have greater or lesser elements of risk. (Otto and Ritchie, 1996) As such, tourists subconsciously deal with a number of psychological and social issues while making a tourism choice. (Otto and Ritchie, 1996)

As these perspectives are also not readily transferable to managerial activity to prompt suitable decisions, most marketers of tourism tend to focus on discrete service quality factors and tend to ignore the various psychological factors that are closely related to leisure activities. (Otto and Ritchie, 1996) Concentration only on the technical aspects of WWR and ignoring various involved emotions will lead to an inadequate understanding of the true nature of consumer satisfaction and the true extent of satisfaction with a tourism experience. It is evident that proper and holistic marketing of WWR activity for Nepal must address the total needs of the prospective traveller, which comprise not only of objective and physically quantifiable components but also of emotional and subjective parts that do not lend themselves to

physical quantification, but are nevertheless important components of a total leisure experience.

WWR tourism in Nepal will depend upon a complex amalgam of a number of service industries as well as on the efficiency and ability of primary service providers like Travel Agents, Tour Operators, the Airlines, and the Hotels as also local guides, leisure activity experts, transporters, restaurants and shopping infrastructures at major Nepalese cities. The political stability, the government controlling the affairs of the tourism destination, and the nodal tourism agency play very important roles in the effective marketing of a tourist destination. (Klenosky and Gitelson, 1998)

A primary market audit of Nepalese tourism reveals that inward travellers mostly come in from India and whilst the majority of visitors are Indians, the country also attracts adventure tourism aficionados from the western countries and religious tourists from South East Asia. Whilst the country was experiencing increasing tourism arrivals until the late 1990s, recent years have seen a decline due to unstable political conditions. The most popular tourism destinations are Kathmandu and Pokhara, both of which are near WWR starting points. Most of the tourists who come at present are in search of mountain and jungle holidays. Nepal is situated on the Northern border of India, and many visitors nowadays prefer to engage in WWR and allied activities in the neighbouring country.

A PEST analysis indicates that the country is on its way to becoming a stable and peaceful democracy. The government is committed to increasing tourism and has a tourist friendly approach. Whilst there is a local Maoist

threat, terrorist activity is still absent and the country has not experienced bombings like those that occurred in London, Madrid, Bali or Bombay. Nepal is a developing nation and tourism is its largest service industry. The number of hotel beds is growing and whilst there are numerous travel agents, few are of significance. Katmandu has many WWR and car rental services as well as numerous bars, restaurants and cafes. Nepal has in the past been a Hindu kingdom and is progressing towards becoming a secular democracy. Whilst it is technologically backward it has enormous natural and religious touristic resources. As the birthplace of the Buddha it attracts visitors from all over east and Southeast Asia.

A SWOT analysis shows that Nepal has very strong WWR resources. It has an accessible location and is proximal to both India and China. It has magnificent mountains, crystal clear rivers and immensely varied wildlife and forestry resources. The country has a strong tradition of history and culture, friendly people and a reasonably developed tourism industry. It has good air connections, proper roads, comfortable hotels, taxi services, restaurants, cafes, and bars. Prices are far lesser than in major European countries, and holidays in Nepal are economical and provide value for money.

The country has a poor railway system and sanitation and drinking water facilities are inadequate. Ecommerce in the tourism industry has not developed in line with that of European countries and online bookings are available only for a few hotels. A perusal of tourism websites indicates that marketing of tourism is weak compared to that of western nations and most visitors are not affluent. Average days spent by tourists in Nepal as well as

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money spends are low. Most arrivals are during the summer months and there is underutilisation in the lean periods. Language barriers also pose a problem for tourists to access services.

The tourism industry has opportunities to increase off-season business and step up the number of arrivals in the cold winter months. There is great scope to increase cultural and historical tourism because of the availability of significant historical resource. Efforts to step up visits of more affluent tourists and arrange for longer visits through introduction of structured tours can also boost tourism earnings significantly.

Underdevelopment of infrastructure could encourage tourists to go to other locations. Low-income tourists are very liable to change their mind and move to other locations at short notices and this threat will continue until the income profile of tourists' changes. Very little information is available on market segmentation and growth has been organic.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Opportunities to increase tourist arrivals and promote Nepal as a WWR tourist and leisure destination are immense. It is evident from the SWOT analysis and the available data that the country has numerous underdeveloped areas, which if properly addressed can improve the quantity, and quality of tourist flows significantly.

Tourism efforts should focus upon positioning Nepal as a WWR destination through a combination of interconnected and complementary set of attractions that provide tourists with an interesting and enjoyable value proposition; in this case a mix of WWR, interesting culture, novel cuisine,

historic sites, lovely climate, gorgeous mountains, extravagant jungles, and a range of mountain and hill oriented outdoor activity.

Marketing efforts will need to be provided through a mix of various suppliers who combine together to offer the tourism experience, i. e., the local tourism body, tour operators, airlines, hotels, taxi operators, WWR services, restaurants, cafes and guides. The tourism body needs to co-ordinate with all service providers to ensure improvement in services as well as adoption of a common marketing approach.

The co coordinating body needs to develop value propositions that will appeal to various market segments, e. g. the low budget tourist, the affluent visitor, people desirous of WWR or mountaineering holidays, historical and cultural experiences or a mix of both. These value propositions need further development to form visitor activity packages that will satisfy the subjective and objective demands of tourists.

A complex branding exercise for the complete tourism experience as well as its components like WWR needs development and implementation. The country has various touristic experiences on offer that have their unique appeal and need distinguishing and highlighting. Brand development is a complex exercise and must encompass the physical aspects of Nepalese holidays, cultural components, historical sites and the fun aspect of the total tourism package on offer.

The country has extremely inadequate infrastructural facilities like train services, competent local tour operators, drinking water availability, waste disposal systems, and availability of guides with knowledge of foreign

languages. The Nepalese authorities need to encourage and catalyse various initiatives, private, public and private-public partnerships that aim to improve the quality of infrastructure. In addition to improvement of basic tourism infrastructure WWR activity will be well served by improvement in the quality of guides and operators, introduction of mandatory safety requirements, and dissemination of information about the different WWR options.

The tendency of tourists to avoid tour operators wherever possible and organise their tourism experiences on their own is increasing constantly, especially in the USA and Europe. It is essential that the parties involved in marketing WWR in Nepal should arrange for strong on line presence, including payment options. E Commerce gives rise to enormous possibilities to increase the value proposition of the tourism experience through different tourism sectors like WWR operators joining restaurants and cafes to offer discounts, free meals, entry and other benefits.

Apart from setting up these initiatives the introduction of a practical monitoring system to assess progress in various areas will also help enormously in effectively marketing Nepal as a major tourism and WWR destination.

Appendix 1

Rivers Suitable for WWR in Nepal (Nepal Association of Rafting Agents, 2008)

Serial	Name of River	Duration of Rafting Trips in days
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- 1 Trishuli 1 to 3
- 2 Seti 2
- 3 Bhote Koshi 2
- 4 Kali Gandki 3
- 5 Marshvangd
i 4
- 6 Sun Koshi 7 to 9
- 7 Arun Up to 9
- 8 Karnali Up to 10
- 9 Tamur Up to 11

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