

# High **EMOTIONS**

**NEPAL** has fueled hiker dreams for more than four decades. It's time for hikers to return the favor—but be prepared for an experience that goes beyond great treks. BY STEPHANIE PEARSON

Manaslu Peak looms over the monastery in Lho. The two-week Manaslu Circuit is open to trekkers.

PHOTO BY LEON WERDINGER

**In April 2015, A MAGNITUDE 7.8 EARTHQUAKE DEVASTATED NEPAL. In May, A SECOND QUAKE OF MAGNITUDE 7.3 HIT. No one knows how many LIVES WERE LOST in the most remote villages. The official tally, however, came to 9,000 DEATHS, 23,000 INJURIES, AND \$5 BILLION IN DAMAGES.**

Maybe you made a donation to relief efforts. The outdoor community-trekkers, manufacturers, retailers—gave generously. But it wasn't enough. Six months after the devastation, Nepalis in need had yet to see any of the \$4.1 billion in total promised aid from foreign countries. And even areas undamaged by the quake were suffering. Close to a million Nepalis depend on the tourism economy, and tourism plummeted by more than 40 percent last year.

Many concerned parties, from the Nepali government to this magazine, said the best thing you could do to help was go to Nepal. *Go for that dream trek now, when the need is greatest.* But still, many people, including me, were fearful. Reports of extensive damage were understandably troubling. The U.S. State Department's Travel Warning remained in place for months after the quake. Would it be safe? Would getting around in Nepal be logistically possible? Would it be fun? *Should* it be fun?

With mixed feelings, I took a 16-day trip there last fall to find out. And I learned that we were asking the wrong questions. The fundamental question isn't whether Nepal is ready for travelers. The question is whether travelers are ready for Nepal. If you go, be prepared to navigate an emotional journey as profound and varied as the country itself.

#### ELATION

My reservations about having fun were quickly put to rest by a day of paragliding. Six months after the earthquake, with Nepal still in the midst of rebuilding, I'm soaring over Pokhara, a laid-back lakeside resort city at the base of the Annapurna range. Pokhara lies 50 miles from the earthquake's epicenter, but there's not much visible damage. Because the city is surrounded by diverse terrain, has consistent thermals, and sits next to a massive lake that makes for a nice emergency landing pad, it has earned a reputation among paragliders as an Asian Chamonix. Before the earthquake, more than 5,000 annual tourists would go airborne with expert pilots like Bijay Gautam, my guide today. Post-quake, that number plunged to 500, and it's evident Bijay is excited to show this tourist what everyone has been missing.

It's a disembodied sort of peace up here, hundreds of feet in the air. As we spiral higher in the updrafts, the view distracts me from my nerves. Machapuchare's 22,943-foot peak pokes through the clouds like a shark's fin. We follow a ridgeline over green fields cut into mountainsides. Bijay catches another thermal and we corkscrew higher.

"Ready for a wingover?" he asks.

"Yeah!" I reply with false bravado. I have no idea what a wingover is.

Bijay shifts his weight and brakes to the right, building up speed that throws us into an inverted spin. I feel like I'm hurtling on a roller coaster that's gone off the rails. We float inverted just long enough to see shimmering Phewa Lake far below. The line between exhilaration and terror is often razor thin, and I've crossed it.

When Bijay pulls us out of our spin and lands us near the shoreline,

Kathmandu's spiritual center, Durbar Square, was decimated by the earthquake. A Nepali woman prays amid the rubble.



PHOTO BY SLOPPX



Nepal's trails, like this one near Annapurna, are used by trekkers and locals alike.

I realize that I'm relying on him for safety, just as he's relying on me for business. That two-way relationship is one of the things that separates adventure travel from mere sight-seeing. Another is the heightened awareness I feel after redlining my adrenaline. I feel every life-giving thump in my chest, see the abundance of rice growing in thick green paddies, and hear the flutter of the wing as Bijay tackles it to the ground.

But what I feel an hour later is more than a thrill-seeker's high. Call it elation—an emotion that never really goes away during my time in Nepal. It comes with immersing myself in a new adventure, a feeling many Westerners are chasing here while trekking, mountaineering, rafting, and more. That hasn't changed.

### GUILT

What *has* changed is the way I feel about this quest for a recreational rush. I trekked to Everest Base Camp in the spring of 2010, one of the few climbing seasons in recent history that suffered no major disasters. During my three-week stay at Base Camp, the economic disparity between Sherpas and Western climbers was evident, but it didn't make me question being there. It was exhilarating to be among mountain-loving people—local and foreign—in the world's highest peaks.

Since the earthquakes last May, however, 2.8 million displaced Nepalis have been struggling with basic needs, like food and shelter. That makes my thrill ride through the sky feel uncomfortably self-indulgent, no matter how much it fuels the tourist economy.

Before arriving in Pokhara, I spent a few

days in Kathmandu and the surrounding valley, witnessing the earthquake's swath of destruction. In Durbar Square, the city's spiritual center, the Shiva temple pagoda was obliterated, as was its 17th-century sister, the Narayan temple pagoda, among others. At Boudhanath, the fifth-century Tibetan Buddhist temple in the center of Kathmandu, the cracked spire had been taken down for repair, leaving behind a white mound that reminded me of a headless ghost.

I also visited "Camp Hope," a tent village built on a former soccer field in the middle of the city. There, 330 displaced people from Sindhupalchowk, a region that lost 90 percent of its homes, are living until they can return to their villages. Camp Hope is peaceful and clean and the 150 kids who live there can walk to a school five minutes away. But it's tight quarters: There are four families, or 15 to 21 people, per 12-by-18-foot tent. Most families will likely be there for the next three years as Engineers Without Borders, a U.S.-based nonprofit, works to design and build earthquake-resistant villages.

While they wait, the displaced residents are learning skills like masonry and carpentry. But still, it's "very difficult to pass the day," as Sonam Sherpa, a chef who had been working at a restaurant in Dubai, tells me. After the earthquake, he returned to Nepal to locate his family, then stayed to help run Camp Hope. As a result, he lost his job in Dubai, the primary source of income for his family.

"How does it feel to live here?" I ask.

"Outside, we may seem happy, but inside we're not really happy," he tells me. "We don't have anything but our bodies."

Sonam says this with no self-pity and asks

for nothing. It's simply the state of his life.

Camp Hope makes me wonder: Is it appropriate for me to breeze into the country and throw around as many rupees as I can afford, then jet out again? Or should I have just stayed home and sent my travel money to relief efforts instead?

### AWE

It's 4:40 a.m. Out my window at the Alpine Lodge in Namche Bazaar, the ragged edges of 21,729-foot Thamskeru are backlit by the moon. I throw off the covers, pull on my parka, descend the narrow wooden stairway, and break out into the dawn. The lodge puppy, Gelu, a black ball of fluff, is there to greet me. He reminds me that it's OK to find joy in simple pleasures, even in the midst of disaster. I set off for higher ground, Gelu at my heels, to watch the sunrise.

If the earthquake hadn't happened, I wouldn't be alone right now. Namche would be buzzing, with every teahouse at capacity and trekkers crowding patios. On average, pre-quake, 45,000 trekkers and mountaineers passed through the Khumbu region annually, on their way to Mt. Everest, Ama Dablam, or other Himalayan giants. But this morning, save for a few crowing roosters and construction workers (less than 10 percent of Namche was damaged in the earthquake), the town feels empty. Last night, I shared the 15-bedroom lodge with two French couples who hiked the 9 miles from Lukla yesterday.

"The trail is perfect!" one of the men told me as they played a board game in the lodge dining room. "We thought about changing our

plan, but it's the best season to be here. We're surprised at how little damage there is, and it's not crowded at all."

All true. The Everest Base Camp trek north of Namche has been called the world's best hike, and having done it on a previous trip, I can't argue. The clear fall air brings a sharp focus to the legendary scenery. The white mountains dwarf the *mani* stones (inscribed with mantras) and the neat houses trimmed in blue. There are small signs of destruction, like a distinct wave in the formerly smooth gravel helpad, but Namche's stone stairways and surrounding paths and bridges remain intact.

After the sunrise, I ascend from Namche to Thame, about a half-day's walk west. I'm not alone on the hike—Mingma Dorji Sherpa, his 18-year-old great-grand-niece Tshering Wongmu Sherpa, and our guide, Lokendra Rai, accompany me. Their presence is comforting in the vast solitude; we see few locals and only two foreign groups over a tough six and a half miles.

Mingma grew up in Namche and his father was a porter on Sir Edmund Hillary's legendary 1953 expedition. Mingma has offered to show me around Thame, which sits at 12,467 feet, along the original salt trade caravan from Tibet to India. Unlike Namche, it was decimated by the earthquake—more than 90 percent of the houses were destroyed, including Mingma's aunt's and uncle's house.

Mingma, 57, now lives on the outskirts of Kathmandu where he and his sons operate a lodge, a coffee farm, and the trekking company Last Frontiers. For 30 years, Mingma has also been REI Adventures' Nepal operations manager. He's a man of many resources, all of which he leveraged after the earthquake to help his neighbors. In the hard-hit district of Nuwakot, directly north of Kathmandu, Mingma opened the doors of his coffee farm, providing food and shelter to 35 families. In conjunction with REI's U.S. headquarters, he arranged to pay his staff lost wages and tips when the season's treks were canceled.

On the final push to Thame, we hike under 20,299-foot Kongde Ri and cross a footbridge over the thundering Bhote Koshi River. The town's restoration efforts are remarkably far along. A few Red Cross tents still linger, as well as some piles of bricks, but a scattering of tightly constructed new houses with blue tin roofs also proves that much has been accomplished, despite the trickle of external aid.

Absent direct government help, the resourceful Nepalis have taken recovery efforts into their own hands. They've rebuilt their own homes, then helped neighbors rebuild theirs. Mingma capitalized on his relationships with REI, Sagarmatha National Park officials, and locals who oversee environmental issues to create a disaster relief center in Namche—the first of its kind—that's stocked with supplies like sleeping bags, climbing ropes, water filters, and fire management equipment. (It opened in spring 2016.)

Natural disasters always seem to bring out the best in people. But in some places it's more evident than others. Up here in the Khumbu, there's no margin for selfish disregard when winter is coming. As Namche's



Chitwan National Park's rhino population has nearly doubled since 2005.

Police Inspector Ramkaji Thami tells me one evening, "The people want to help each other here. This is the tradition of the Sherpa community. If we can manage it properly, this will be the best place in the world because it's so beautiful."

### SADNESS

"There were women with torn clothes and their whole bodies were deformed. One child's hand was caught in the wall. We tried to release it but we couldn't. It was a situation of panic. We could still feel the aftershocks, but we were trying to rescue people and many were buried."

I'm sipping tea with Jitendra Manandhar, my 31-year-old guide from Kathmandu-based Dharma Adventures, at a roadside restaurant on our way from Pokhara to Chitwan National Park. I've been traveling with him for almost a week and it's only now that I'm learning the details of his rescue attempts on April 25, 2015. When the earthquake hit, Jitendra happened to be near Kathmandu's Dharahara, the nine-story, 184-year-old tower that collapsed and killed 180 people. "We were able to rescue three people [the trapped boy lived], but many people were buried and I don't want to speak anymore of the casualties I saw."

Months after the quake, many of the Nepalis I meet are still processing the trauma they've experienced and often living far away from family members who are struggling to survive. But as I've learned from my time with Mingma and other hosts, this is a culture that prioritizes "guest as God." Nepalis rarely show their sadness to strangers.

Jitendra has masked his trauma behind a quick smile throughout the week, and it's only now, when I've asked directly, that he tells me some of what he's seen. His reluctance makes me realize that my inquiry may alleviate my curiosity, but it doesn't change his pain.

### INSPIRATION

Governments big and small struggle to protect endangered wildlife from habitat destruction and poaching. This makes Chitwan National Park one of the most unlikely success stories you'll find anywhere. Despite the government's alleged corruption and lack of resources, this 360-square-mile oasis of subtropical broad-leaf forests and grasslands in Nepal's southern Terai region is the only place in the world where rhino poaching has stopped altogether. Last May, right after the earthquake, the government released figures that the country's one-horned rhino population in Chitwan and the surrounding buffer zone had steadily grown to 645, up from 372 in 2005.

Why care about this wildlife victory amid so much human tragedy? The locals here depend on rhino tourism just as much as the mountain-dwellers depend on trekkers. They're both part of a sustainable tourist economy which, I realize now, is more valuable in the long run than any one-time donation. And while it would have been easy to relax safeguards for these rare animals after the earthquakes, not a single one had died or been poached six months after the disaster.

The effective campaign combines tough anti-poaching laws (five to 15 years in jail) and incentives for villagers who live in the park's 295-mile buffer zone. Local communities get 50 percent of park revenues if they police themselves so that no one is tempted to kill the rhinos, leopards, sambar deer, wild boars, and even Bengal tigers that wander through and trample crops.

"The buffer zone idea lets people continue with daily life and contributes to conservation," Bim Bahadur Kumal, the chairman of the Rapti Control Community Forum, one of the local buffer zone authorities, tells me.

And these rhinos aren't just research-driven numbers that appear in official government reports. On a dawn safari, I see four in Baghmara Community Forest, which borders the

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) NAPON THIPHAYAMONTOL / 500PX; STEPHEN BURES



park. One crashes through the forest underbrush, another wallows in the mud along the Rapti River, and two more graze in the tall grasses. Their giant, weathered bodies look like prehistoric coats of armor. They gaze up at me with beady, tortoise eyes.

"If we have animals, we have tourists," Kumal says. "If we have tourists we can sell fruits and vegetables and work as guides. I can't think of any downsides. It's been three years since an animal has been poached." If they can do it here, it can be done anywhere.

## PEACE

On one of my last days in Nepal, I hike through the dense pines of Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park, a 61-square-mile wilderness abutting the northern edge of Kathmandu's sprawl. In three hours I've seen just one Austrian tourist, a line of six uniformed Nepalese Army on foot patrol, and eight village women

who silently plod past us on the narrow trail, their massive loads of firewood dwarfing their sturdy frames.

By lunchtime, I reach the stone steps leading to Nagi Gumba Buddhist nunnery, which sits at 6,500 feet in a garden of marigolds overlooking Kathmandu. Before I see the crumbled façade of the lower temple, which was destroyed by the earthquake, I hear the clash of cymbals and banging of drums from inside the still-intact upper temple.

I sit down on the bench outside the temple, listen to the *puja* ceremony, and let the last few weeks of whipsaw emotions seep into my consciousness. All the feelings I've experienced wash over me and I start to cry. I'm finally, fully overwhelmed by the kindness I've experienced, the beauty I've seen, the sadness I've felt, and the helplessness I fear.

As I reflect on the past two weeks, I recall dozens of conversations I've had about the state of Nepal. One in particular stands out. It was with Norbu Tenzing Norgay, the son of

Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, Sir Edmund Hillary's climbing partner.

"What do you think will happen to Nepal?" I asked him during our conversation in Namche Bazaar.

"Nepal is very resilient," he told me. "After the earthquake, people came together in a way they never have before. If the government can't do it for us, we'll just do it ourselves."

Even as I sit crying, I see laborers hauling wheelbarrows of dirt from a massive pit, working to rebuild surrounding structures. It dawns on me that I'm the only one crying. In my entire visit I haven't seen any Nepalis weeping for themselves. They're too busy building their future, creating a stronger infrastructure that will keep them safe and tempt tourists back. The best thing I or anyone else can do is show up and lend a hand. That is, a foot, if you're a hiker. ■

*Stephanie Pearson's writing has been anthologized in The Best American Travel Writing.*

## TRIP PLANNER

**TRAILS** For fewer crowds, this is the best time in decades to trek iconic routes like the Everest Base Camp Trek. Want something new? Check out the Nar Phu Valley Trek, an eight-day spur off the classic Annapurna trek. At press time, Langtang National Park was the only major trekking area that was

still rebuilding (ready in fall 2016 or spring 2017).

**GUIDES** Nepali officials want all foreign trekkers to be accompanied by a guide or porter in the interest of safety (a law requiring it has been discussed). But you should hire local help regardless—it's good for the economy. The Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal ([taan.org.np](http://taan.org.np))

has a comprehensive list. Good bet: Kathmandu-based Dharma Adventures ([dharmaadventures.com](http://dharmaadventures.com)), which can arrange custom trips. For paragliding in Pokhara: [aviacubnepal.com](http://aviacubnepal.com). For a walking safari in Chitwan National Park: [barahijunglelodge.com](http://barahijunglelodge.com).

**SEASON** Mid-September to mid-December is the best

high-altitude trekking season in Nepal, with moderate temperatures, little rain, and good visibility. Fall is also the best time for spotting rhinos and tigers in Chitwan National Park, when vegetation is less dense.

**INFO** For a comprehensive online guide with updates on earthquake trail repairs, go to [greathimalayatrails.com](http://greathimalayatrails.com).