

Nepal: it's time to return

Six months on from the earthquake, the trails are safe, the welcome is warm – and you'll have the roof of the world to yourself.

Chris Haslam reports from the Himalayas

On a pine-cloaked spur, high above the thundering Dudh Kosi River, I got my first glimpse of Everest. Daz-white against a blue-black sky, it burnt itself into my memory. Its preciousness was enhanced by its exclusivity: in past years, hundreds of trekkers would have been jostling for that view. Last Tuesday, there were just seven of us.

In April, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake killed 8,617 people in Nepal and left nearly 3m homeless. Governments worldwide warned their citizens to stay away. Now, at the start of the new trekking season, I've come to the Himalayas to assess the state of play.

The hill town of Lukla is the starting point for the 38-mile trek up the Khumbu Valley to Everest Base Camp. This time last year, as many as 700 hikers a day touched down on its notoriously short uphill runway, but when I join a group travelling with KE Adventure Travel, we lucky seven are among fewer than 50 hitting the trail. The flow of trekkers has all but dried up.

On October 7, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office finally lifted its advice against travel to this



Breathtaking A lone trekker pauses to admire the 21,729ft Thamserku on the way to Everest Base Camp

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL
Shots from the summit: see a slideshow of Chris's photographs from Nepal
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neighbourhood and the Annapurna region. It had warned of destruction of tourist facilities and a heightened risk of landslides. But as I walk the most popular trail in the country, it's hard to see where the FCO's information came from.

In the hamlet of Chhuthawa, one house is being rebuilt. Outside Phakding, the footpath has been re-routed around a landslide. Further on, towards Monjo, the remains of a single house lie scattered across a meadow, as though hit by a bomb rather than an earthquake.

And that's it. Frankly, I've seen greater devastation on a day trip to Margate.

The Sherpa capital, Namche Bazaar – the hardest point to reach on the entire trek – is unscathed, and desperate for business. One lodge owner tells me 80% of his rooms are vacant. The Americans and the Israelis were the first to cancel, he says. The British and the Germans kept coming. "God save the Queen," he says, saluting. He doesn't mention Frau Merkel.

From Namche, a low-level helicopter recce of the route to Everest Base Camp confirms the guides' reports that the footpath across this treeless wasteland of glacier and moraine is entirely intact, and almost completely deserted.

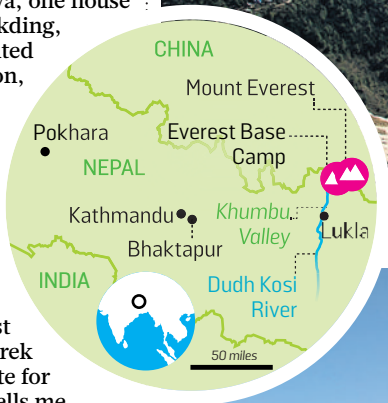
That emptiness isn't the only unusual circumstance on Nepal's trails right now. A month ago, a constitutional spat led the aggrieved Madhesi people, in the country's south, to blockade the borders. Imports of fuel, cooking supplies and other basic necessities have been badly affected, and Nepal is slowly grinding to a halt.

The most optimistic estimates predict that the fuel crisis will be over by the end of the month, but its effects on the trekking routes could linger. Diesel shortages mean generators can't run, so it's candlelit dinners and no wi-fi. (Take a solar charger for camera batteries.) Propane shortages mean wood-fuelled cooking fires and cold showers. Food shortages mean the notoriously bad lodge cuisine is even more execrable.

It's off-putting for the timid, but the more adventurous – and most of those attracted to Nepal in the first place presumably fall into that category – will recognise an extraordinary opportunity to turn back the clock. With few tourists, no Facebook and the excuse to go days without washing, it's like 1977 all over again, and the trekking is a more elemental, liberating and moving experience than it's been for decades.

My fellow time travellers and I crawl along the Khumbu Valley like ants in Manhattan, unable to comprehend the grandeur of our surroundings. The soundtrack is the cawing of crows, the clanging of yak bells, the roar of the river and the flat clink of thousands of hammers as optimistic Sherpa builders chisel boulders into ever more guesthouses for the tourist hordes they hope will return.

Every now and then, one or other of our band pauses for breath. His eyes scan upwards from the precarious cable bridges across the milky torrent of glacial meltwater, across the grey scree and the waterfall-threaded slopes of dense blue pine, to the cracked white peaks that bite the sky. Unfeasibly high, impossibly huge, these icebound summits don't even count as mountains to our porters, who regard anything less than 20,000ft high as a hill.



How travel firms became aid agencies

In the fortnight following the Nepalese earthquake, charitable donations to the UK's Disasters Emergency Committee – representing aid agencies including ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children – exceeded £50m. Yet many people chose to shun the big charities and donate instead to tour operators, some of which are taking direct action and funding their own relief efforts. Why?

"Our clients demanded it," explains Valerie Parkinson, who has been leading Exodus tours in Nepal for 29 years. "Many people have lost faith in NGOs, and there was an overwhelming feeling that it was better to put the money straight into the hands of the people who needed it most."

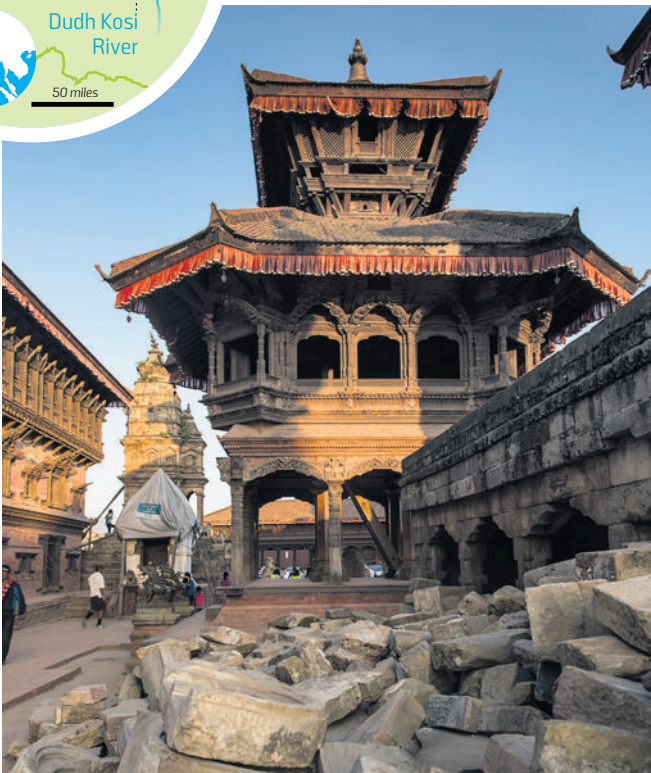
"Our immediate response was to hand cash to homeless families to buy tarpaulins and rice. Then we provided funds so they could build tin shelters. Phase three will see sums of £1,000 given to families to rebuild their homes. By doing it this way, you can see exactly where the money is going."

KE Adventure Travel has raised £93,000 to rebuild eight schools destroyed by the earthquake, but it is also involved in small projects overlooked by the big organisations. At Monjo, in the Khumbu Valley, a donation of £800 bought the 4,000ft of piping needed to bring drinking water to the village school.

"It would have taken years to get government funding for standpipes at the school," said the community leader Nima Tenzing Sherpa, "so we're dependent on KE Adventure."



Guide turned aid worker Valerie Parkinson



With few tourists on the trails, no wi-fi access and the excuse to go days without washing, it's like 1977 all over again

A long way to go
Above, a porter carries firewood to the Sherpa capital, Namche Bazaar; and earthquake damage on Durbar Square in Bhaktapur

When I ask the veteran guide Rajendra Rai how far it is to Everest Base Camp, he smiles like a backpack-toting Buddha. "Don't think about the destination," he says. "Live in the moment."

Those moments are, well, nirvana-like. A 200ft waterfall plunging into a pool of rainbows; a warm breath of pine-scented wind; the heart-melting



smiles of kids rushing to a school that's a 90-minute hike from home; and that first heart-thumping view of the high Himalayas, seen from a crag on day two.

"Which one is Everest?" I ask Raj, peering at the peaks through a gap in the pines.

He gives me a look. "The tallest one," he sighs.

You'll see more evidence of the earthquake in Kathmandu and its surrounds, but your biggest problem, in the short term, is that fuel crisis. Taxis and buses are like hen's teeth. In some hotels, the lifts are out of action to save power (if you're heading to the Himalayas, you should be using the stairs anyway), and by some estimates, 80% of tourist restaurants are either closed or operating drastically shortened opening hours. Somehow, though, the wall-to-wall nightlife in Thamel district continues, albeit by candlelight.

As for Kathmandu's cultural attractions, the most striking feature is not the scale of the damage, but the effort that's been made to clean it up. The royal palace of Hanuman Dhoka remains closed, but other key sites have reopened even as repair work continues.

At Boudhanath, I watched as rueful workmen dismantled the reconstructed spire of the stupa after stern-faced inspectors found it to be less than vertical. On the magnificent Durbar Square, in Bhaktapur, where the five-storey Nyatapola temple survived intact, neat piles of reclaimed bricks stood piled on scrupulously swept patios. The master woodcarver Bishan Kushi, whose company will spend the next three years repairing the 13 temples damaged in the quake, told me his biggest problem is stopping locals selling ancient carvings salvaged from the rubble to tourists.

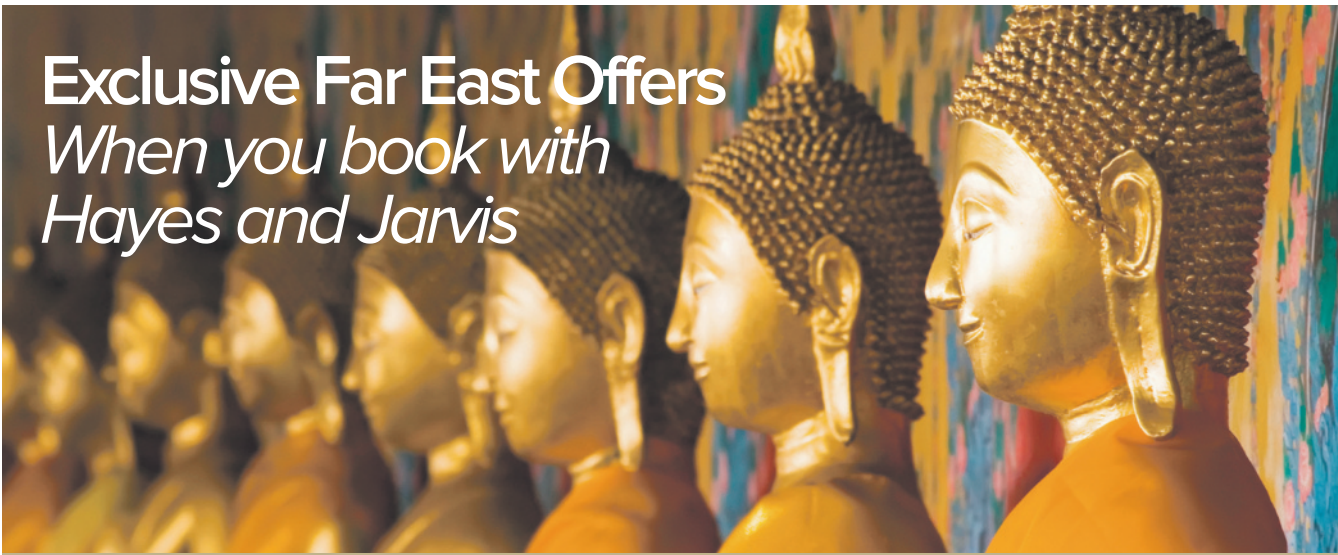
From Kathmandu, I take the 30-minute flight west to Pokhara, gateway to the Annapurna trekking circuit. Despite being untouched by the earthquake, it's a ghost town. At the Peace Stupa – with its views of Machhapuchchhre, probably the most spectacularly sited religious building on earth – just one pair of boots sits at the entrance to the sacred space. Along the lakefront, shopkeepers stand like relatives waiting for a train that isn't coming.

A freelance guide, Anul Lhama, approaches me with a serious offer. He'll take me hiking on the Annapurna Circuit for cost. If I'm happy to pay my bus fare – presuming I can find a bus with diesel – and my board and lodging, he'll guide me free. The catch, and it's a pretty desperate one, is that "you tell your friends how safe it is on Facebook and Twitter".

So, should you go to Nepal? Yes, and fast. The fuel crisis won't last for ever, and nor will the opportunity to have those

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