Women’s Movement: Traveling Nepal

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Women’s Movement:
Traveling Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal is a country formed by the highest peaks in the world, numerous unique cultures and ethnicities, religious pilgrimage sites for both Buddhist and Hindus, and more festivals than days in the year. For Lonely Planet’s Best in Travel 2017, Nepal was deemed the world’s “Best Value Destination”. Tourism plays a vital role in Nepal’s economy, but its inds is heavily aimed towards the international market. Nepalis in the hospitality industry, scholars, and economists have argued that domestic tourism could be a key component for overall socioeconomic and cultural changes in their society.1

There has been a surge of domestic tourism in recent years, opening new doors for the economy of rural Nepal and the imaginations of the travelers themselves when they bring their experiences back home.

A special component of these travelers are women traveling solo. The idea of a woman traveling on her own for the purpose of exploration and learning, rather than pilgrimage or to visit family, is a radical one in Nepali society. The travel community Nepali Travellers facilitates the “Women Solo Travel Challenge”, which provides grants to accepted applicants to plan, prepare, and complete an extended travel period to destinations throughout their country. The long term goal of the challenge is to change the narrative around young Nepali travel, especially for women. In the following paper, these women’s stories of travel, from the perceptions they challenged, to the reactions they got, and what they learned, will be told.

Acknowledgements

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delicious food (at his amazing new cafe, Raithaane, near Patan Dubar Square). To Sunil Sharma from the Nepal Tourism Board, for elegantly presenting me a comprehensive context at the start of my research for what was to follow, from the source itself. To all the Nepalis I met along the way in the hospitality business—our conversations, your opinions, and your incredible kindness make me regret the fact I have to leave and that I could not continue writing on this intriguing topic. Finally, to the incredible solo woman travelers. I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to meet with me and tell me your experiences. You are all an inspiration to me, your communities, and the rest of the world. I feel incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to share your stories.
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Introduction

The beginning of foreign tourism in Nepal is marked by the climbing of Mount Everest on May 29th, 1953, by Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary, bringing the world’s attention to Nepal. The Nepal Government welcomed visitors with the handing out of tourist visas, which were previously provided by the East India Company under the British Government².

The first Everest climbers Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa.
Photo by National Geographic.

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, hippy culture brought more tourists, bringing to attention the need for institutionalization and guidelines, and the idea of a master plan. Sunil Sharma, the standing Senior Manager of the Research and Monitoring Department at the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), explained that at the time of the establishment of Ministry of Tourism in 1967, Nepal defined the tourist as not Nepali—instead an outsider who came to Nepal. From the beginning, the system was structured to focus on the tourist that was not internal or domestic, but the external. In 2007, when the recession hit many countries hard, Nepal was insulated due to its lack of outward connection. The government then realized that if there is a sudden drop in the arrival of foreign tourists, it can be supplemented by the domestic one.

“In Nepal, we say we have three religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and tourism,” Sharma told me in his office in the brick Nepal Tourism Board center, located in the dead center of Kathmandu.

It was not until five or six years ago that Nepal saw a trend of travelers within their country. A system mechanized for a different market is beginning to shift towards its own people.

The concept of travel has always been only for the purpose of work or pilgrimage. This narrative is changing as many Nepalis travel during holiday time with the simple intention of exploration. Nepalis are often seen traveling in large groups on popular treks. But now, there are a new group of travelers who are not only changing the culture around travel, and the larger issue of gender equality, through solo woman travel. The women go face-to-face with their biggest fears, prove perceptions wrong, gain insights about themselves and their country, and trailblaze new possibilities for their society through their adventures.

Tourism in Nepal

When one walks the streets of the foreign tourist destination, Thamel, in Kathmandu, Nepal, almost every store advertises trekking guides and supplies. Nepal is known for its peaks, when in reality this is only a small fraction of what can be traveled in the dynamic country. These avenues were also not visited by the huge market of Nepalis themselves until recently.
Anil Chitrakar, is a social entrepreneur, co-founder of the Himalayan Climate Initiative, and President of Siddarthink, an organization that promotes a sustainable future for Nepal. In his piece “Re-imagining Tourism” for *Nepali Times*, Chitrakar argues that Nepal can never get its true worth if it is sold as a cheap destination³.

“Charity tourism takes visitors to orphanages and homes for destitute women and schools, where they display ragged and dirty children as tourism products.” he writes. “Animals in cages and in chains, like the elephant breeding center, and even safaris in Chitwan have no future either as animal rights activism grows.”

After the 2015 earthquake, visitors to Nepal took a sharp 31% decline. As a result, many aspects of the tourism industry were rethought, such as expanding the market beyond mountaineers to get leisure tourists and pilgrims from closer by, like India and China. The diverse communities, cultures and traditions, with the countless festivals and celebrations give plenty of reasons to visit⁴.

The tourism industry, which is the largest source of foreign exchange and revenue in Nepal, holds massive potential for growth, but many things need to change first. The trifecta of popular destinations are Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Chitwan, but this limits traffic to other parts of the country. Sunil Sharma (NTB) reiterates:

If a country is branded as trekking and mountaineering, a family with young children is easily turned off by the intimidating perception of the mountains. The biggest aspect of Nepal is the people and the culture. We do not showcase that. All media, such as the Discovery Channel and National Geographic, blow it out of proportion.

Nepal’s government has allocated Rs. 15,000,000 in its largest tourism project to identify new destinations for both international and domestic travelers, with the hope of growing beyond the usual destinations.

**Infrastructure and Mobility**

However, tourism in Nepal can only grow so much with what facilities it has to offer. Nepalis came together post-earthquake to improve the tourism sector with the intention of upgrading transportation systems and better tourism market research systems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nepal Tourism Recovery, a Facebook group with more than 6,000 members, is taking these immediate steps to improve the tourism industry:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Improving our international airport, starting with a welcoming graffiti</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Creating promotional videos of Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Developing a website for ‘NepalNOW’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Organizing a promotional event for Gai Jatra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ideas in the back page have been retrieved from Tourism Development International's 2014 study on trends in the Nepali tourism market.*

Biggest points for tourism recovery post-earthquake. Image courtesy of the Nepali Times.

Nepal has the product but lacks in location management. The majority of the government funding will go towards the development of roads and amenities, and from there, the areas can be promoted.

Sunil Sharma at NTB gave several examples on where he sees needed improvement. When he visited Seoul in South Korea, there would be a water fountain every 200 m on the road to hydrate, then after another 200m a toilet to urinate, as well as parks and sitting chairs to take a break. In New Zealand, you have to apply in advance to go trekking because they have a capstone on capacity. Bhutan looks for value over volume, because hydroelectricity is prioritized over tourism.
Sharma said China learned trekking tourism from Nepal, but now they have outgrown Nepal. For the Everest Base Camp there, a car will come, replacing the need to hire sherpas. Sunil emphasizes the importance of being strict with management:

> Whether you like it or not, tourism is the bread and butter here. Our best aspect is our landscape, so we have to maintain it properly and mature ourselves. Maturing means being responsible, to take care of parking, toilets, sitting arrangements for old people, accommodations for children and the disabled, and a good rescue operation available within a flash of a second.

The lack of developed infrastructure of transportation is one of the biggest obstacles for travel in Nepal⁵. A second international airport is being constructed in Southern Nepal, with the potential of becoming a major transit hub for all of South Asia. And while the ‘Buddha was born in Nepal’ slogan is a big promoter, the roads to the UNESCO-listed world heritage sites like Swayambhunath and Boudha are in poor condition⁶.

**Visit Nepal 2020**

In airports, on the streets of Thamel, and throughout Nepal, signs are currently hanging promoting the government campaign: “Visit Nepal 2020”, with the hope of welcoming 2 million foreign tourists. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA) set this goal, as well as employment in the tourist sector to hit one million by 2020. However, they still have yet to achieve the goal of one million international tourists that they set back in 2012. But they are getting close, with 940,218 visitors in 2017⁷.

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Sharma provides the current status of the campaign:

We say you don’t travel to Nepal, you experience Nepal. We have a program coordination committee formed that is coming up with ideas and programs. But it has to take into account the sentiments of the Nepalese people, the entrepreneurs, long-term business, social inclusion, federal systems...we can’t put it onto paper yet because of all the factors at play. There have been meetings but no solid conclusions yet.

Nepal is simultaneously promoting record-breaking numbers of visitors while acknowledging the infrastructure is not yet there to support them. A Nepali Times editorial raises the question of what message it will send to the rest of the world to see the congested city and chaotic airport, with its citizens choking in pollution.8

“Nepal’s biggest selling point is its hospitable people. We have not enhanced our natural assets, instead we have depleted them. How about concentrating on cleaning things up at home before launching an international promotion?” the piece argues. “We are limited to old tourism products, and it is actually domestic tourism that has come to the rescue.”

Domestic Travel

Domestic tourism in Nepal only recently became a trend, mostly due to cultural ideas regarding travel in Nepal. Jason Shah, the founder of Nepali Travellers, a travel company geared towards the Nepali market, believes that no one in Nepal looks at travel from the Nepali perspective.

However, as the literacy rate and per capita income of Nepali increases, traveling within Nepal is seeing major industry growth by investment and motivation.9

A study on the travel motivations of domestic tourists in Nepal done by the Kathmandu University school of management found that domestic travel spending generated 59.0 percent of the direct travel and tourism GDP in 2014, and expected to grow by 8.5 percent for 2015.

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In the study, half of the sample study had a salary above 51,000 NPR and the other half below, with slightly more males than females, and 91 percent single. The majority had bachelor and masters level education and aged 21-30. The sample was chosen based off of engagement in domestic travel in the past six months, so is therefore indicative that mostly the younger generation is involved in domestic tourism.

The study found that Nepali domestic travelers are making travel decisions based on affordability, variety and history and culture of place. This differed from similar studies done in other regions because prestige was the lowest push factor, and accessibility being the top pull factor. This is consistent with Nepal having low per capita-income and lack of developed infrastructure of transportation.

With the rise of domestic tourists, Nepalis are now starting to see new entry fees, such as at Lumbini, that were not applied before. Soon, the government may force the Nepalese to also have guides during treks.

The biggest issue when addressing domestic tourists in Nepal is that there is no solidified system to collect data on them, due to the birth of the system being based entirely on the foreign tourist.

*Conceptions of Travel for the Nepalese*

In general, travel is not in the Nepali people’s culture, unless it is for work, school, or pilgrimage. Jason Shah reiterates that unless family members travel, it is rare to grow up
in Nepal with stories of people traveling, and is therefore hard to imagine being in places away from home. Further, parents are strict with letting their children go places they have not been before.

The majority of travelers in Nepal are part of the younger generation. It is now common for groups to plan vacations at the end of semesters during breaks at university. In some cases, students prefer to study abroad before looking within their own country. Students will pool together money to visit places they learn about in school, such as Everest base camp, in order to see things for themselves and understand where they come from at a higher level.

**Special Treatment**

Juliana Shrestha, a solo woman traveler, gave me a personal account of the changes in the trekking culture: “When I was at Marti, there were more Nepali people than tourists. At one point, tourists even had to sleep in a less cozy area, because Nepalis booked it before them. It used to be a very big problem when service providers would always prefer international tourists because they pay more, but that is changing.”

Some believe that young Nepalese are not a prioritized market, and instead foreigners are focused on as an exclusive clientele. But in reality, the domestic traveler has an equal purchasing power, and often will actually spend more than the foreigner. Sunil Sharma
said that while backpackers prefer to go to budgeted restaurant and collect discounted items, the Nepalese prefer a lavish lunch or dinner, because they need to have a full stomach.

3 Sisters Adventure Trekking is world famous for pioneering the field of female trekking guides, unprecedented in Nepal’s patriarchal society. The trekking industry in Nepal almost entirely lacked the role of women until they were established in the early 1990’s. The eldest sister, Lucky Chhetri, spoke on how the rise of domestic travelers affects their international market-focused agency, to me in her Pokhara office:

While it is good that Nepalis are traveling domestically, it is not good when the trekking season and festival time overlap, making it hard to find places for the foreign tourists to stay. The culture is different because Nepalis are loud and like to have fun. In Western culture, they always like to be quiet and relaxed. So, it is both good and a challenge.

Overall, as told through the experiences of Nepali travelers, there are instances of different treatment in both negative and positive ways. In some cases, they are not offered the same quality of services as foreigners, but just as often, they may not be charged for their stay or meal at all.

**Social Media**

“The booming of media instigated the travel inside Nepal. Nobody really knows Nepal, even the Nepalese don’t know,” Sunil Sharma has a particular passion for the role and
potential social media has for tourism. “Suddenly the boom of the internet showed them the circus and the different products of Nepal. They see how beautiful the country is, and that it is not just Everest and Annapurna.”

Nepalese photographs are now being broadcasted to an international audience. After the earthquake, the Nepal Tourism Board launched a campaign called “#Nepalnow”, in response to international media’s claims that all of Nepal had been flattened. They utilized user generated content by having people take pictures of themselves with a sign that had the hashtag on it, to show the world that the majority of the country was intact and ready to be visited.

There is no denying the role that social media plays in the travel industry. Travel bloggers and Instgrammers hold the power and influence with their beautiful images and massive followings, luring people to new destinations.

The shift in domestic travel has much to do with the rise of social media, another reason the tech-savvy younger generation is moving around more. Travelers post images online of places they visit, planting the idea in the minds of their friends and family.
Solo Woman Travel

Jason Shah believes that content needs to be created for the Nepali traveler. There are no travel guides on Nepal that are made for Nepalis. The expanding of imagination that comes with beautiful content from places in Nepal, as broadcasted by Nepalis, is a key factor to changing the narrative around travel here.

Jason started the Solo Woman Travel Challenge in 2015, a travel grant competition that funds chosen applicants to travel around Nepal. Hundreds of women apply and go through a rigorous process of gaining votes on Facebook, to interviews, to creating potential itineraries, in order to be selected.

The challenge has gained immense popularity, as proven by the fact that every Nepali women I asked about it already knew. Those selected create content during their trip, with the long term goal of encouraging the Nepali community at large to travel their country for exploration and learning sake. Nepal is a supremely patriarchal society, where many women are married at a young age and dedicate their lives to tending to the home, and traveling alone is considered unsafe. So, this platform addresses women’s studies and the topic of risk.

The concept of travel is relatively new in Nepal, so the idea of Nepali women traveling, by themselves, is even more radical. What follows is the stories of the women who dared to do what no one had done before. These trailblazers reveal perceptions challenged, lessons learned, and realizations made along their personal journeys.
Juliana Shrestha. 22 (aged 21 at time of trip). Across Nepal for 28 days.

Juliana found out about the Solo Woman Travel Challenge through a friend who applied, but never ended up going because her family did not let her\textsuperscript{10}.

“I was like, how did I not know about this?” Juliana told me, as we both sat drinking black coffees. “So, the next year I applied. In 2017, I was graduating from Kathmandu University and said, ‘I am going to finish my degree, apply for this, and then travel’.”

Impressions of travel were left on Juliana by her mother, who was often traveling for work while Juliana lived with her grandparents. They would talk daily on the phone about the Terai region—how hot it was, how the dialect was hard to understand even though it was still Nepali, the sunset. Juliana describes why she wanted to get out of Kathmandu:

I always wanted to explore Nepal outside of Kathmandu, I was born here, I live here, and I have never really been anywhere besides Pokhara, Chitwan, the commercial places. The commonality among Nepali youth is to go inside the Himalayas, and this was my first instinct. But Nepal isn’t just the Himalayas. Instead, I want to travel the whole length, and it being a rectangular country would make it easy.

At first Juliana thought she could take a bus every other day to consistently arrive at new places, but due to the reality of transportation through the hills being so difficult, Jason told her it would be impossible, something she never realized before.

Her journey went from the far west to east borders, along the southern belt of the whole country of Nepal. The first bus she took to Dadeldhura, a developed region in the far West, took 26 hours (6 more than expected), and she could not sleep the whole time.

While the Himalayas have viewpoints and flora and fauna, Juliana did not know what to expect from the plains besides religious sites. Even though there was so much physical and mental preparation, once she actually got there, she was scared.

At the first hotel she stayed at, she saw a sign about palace ruins nearby. Everyone she spoke to about going was concerned about her being alone. She was told that it would take her 8 hours to make the trip, which could only be made on foot, and since it was already late morning, to not even go. Juliana said it ended up being a turning moment:

I had a strong instinct that I needed to go. I could call if anything happened, so I went. And it took me way less time than expected. I decided that I will take people’s advice but be my own judge. If I didn’t take that risk, I would still be in that state of mind of, ‘I don’t know if I will make it, maybe I shouldn’t go’.

I think I grew up with that thinking as well. I am a Newar, and in our families, and with anyone who grows up in Kathmandu, we rely and depend so much on our families for making any decisions. Even for what we want to study, many of my friends’ careers, a vital part of their lives, were decided by their parents. I think a major driving factor in domestic tourism is young people looking for time off from family.

Often, Juliana would lie and say she was with an NGO when people asked where she was from and why she was traveling alone. A woman in Sanfebagar, Achham, who owned a tailor shop offered her tea and while they were talking, she told Juliana that she always went with her husband to the nearest city to get the products she needs. She said she never went anywhere by herself, before or after marriage, because she did not think she could do it alone.

That was the first time Juliana was honest about purposefully traveling on her own. And the woman told her that if she was traveling just for exploration, and not research, then next time she went to the city, she would go alone.

“That’s the moment I realized how big of an impact this is making. Not just for the girls traveling, but also everyone around them,” Juliana stated. “I think it’s because women relate more to women. Just sharing these stories, we learn so much from each other.”
Another time, while staying at a tea house, Juliana got so deep into conversation with one of the owners that they realized her grandfather and their grandfather were once neighbors. She said that this story was just one crazy example of how many connections there are, and how easy it is to relate once you really talk to someone. You realize the world is not so big.

Before the trip, Juliana had social anxiety and told me she probably would not have been able to have a conversation like the one we shared.

She made friends with another solo traveler, from China, and they are now planning to visit India together. She was accepted as a daughter by the elders in the homestays she visited. She danced in the rain with the people of Dadeldhura during the big festival Gaura. She learned what she was capable of when she pushed herself.

“My gut instinct is really strong. Whenever I have to make a decision, the family trusts me after traveling alone and are confident in my abilities as a grown adult,” Juliana explained about what has changed since her return. “And for someone living in this society, this is a big achievement.”

Juliana is currently in her second gap year, untraditional within her education-oriented family. She just started working with an outdoor education program that takes privileged high school students, who have never slept in sleeping bags before, to rural areas to do social service. The next day she took 55 high school students on her first trip.
Recently, Juliana took her younger sister and her grandparents to Lumbini, to stay in a monastery being built by the Newar community. When she grew up with them in Kirtipur, she said they would never leave their house unless the absolutely had to.

Juliana now plans to go to graduate school for international relations and development programs. During her time off, she realized that she wants to create change by working for the government in foreign affairs. Something she hopes to focus on is the accessibility of international visas for the Nepalese.

“All of my guy friends were skeptical when I went, and thought I was going to call them crying. But once I got back, they all said, you know what, I’m going to do this. Everyone looks at me differently as a result,” She tucked a short lock of dark hair behind her funky patterned head scarf. “I cut my hair really short, just because I wanted to. Another thing I realized when traveling was that if you really want to do something, then just do it.”

Sapna during her travel through Mahendranagar, Nepal. Image by Sapna Timilsina

**Sapna Timilsina. 23 (aged 22 at time of trip). West Nepal.**

Sapna said she was into traveling from the moment she could understand things, due to her father’s stories of travel to the far west and east Nepal. When people would flock to Kathmandu from all over Nepal for Dashain, Sapna could not relate to their long bus rides to return home, since she was already from there, and always wondered what it felt like.\(^4\)

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She was happy to be introduced to trekking starting in Classes 8 and 9, when her whole class did organized treks, and then for a road trip to Sikkim and Darjeeling (India) in Classes 11 and 12. During university, she would organize short trips with her women friends, only the beginning of her experiences with people not being open with women traveling.

After watching the movie *Into the Wild*, Sapna realized that she wanted to go alone. Instead of a trek, she decided to do a road trip through all nine districts in the far west region of Nepal.

“It was so liberating. I could be myself, and even if I was not myself, no one was there to criticize or judge,” Sapna said of her experience. “My grandmother takes so much pride in me, she tells everyone, ‘She should’ve been born as a son, but she is a girl. But even though she’s a girl, she does so many things. She is wonderful!’”

Sapna, the youngest of four, was a “chatterbox” when she was younger, and would invite the foreign students that would come and teach her classes into her home.

“There was this feeling that we need to put all our efforts to treat them as guests. But now, that’s changed for me,” she said “As a child, I did not understand things properly, I thought everything should be according to them. But now I believe that our ways should not be changed because of them, they should be the ones to adjust to the way we live.

Sapna’s 6th grade Environmental Health and Sciences class teacher taught them to not throw waste out of the school bus, and to instead put it in their bags. This left an impression on her, and plastic waste is her top interest within her field, environmental science. This is a huge issue in Nepal that she wants to address.

“From the environmental standpoint, I don't think that Nepalis practice ‘leave no trace’ when they travel. We have not conceived of alternatives, such as recycling, yet.”

Sapna now has the dream of traveling to all 77 districts of Nepal.
Puspa Paudel. 28 (aged 26 at time of trip). East to West Nepal.

The conception of travel came to Puspa through her father and brother, who often went to areas across Nepal. Her father traveled during the civil war and witnessed a violent outbreak between the Maoist forces and the state in Western Nepal\textsuperscript{12}.

Puspa said she was drawn to traveling to the southern plains after the new constitution was signed, which dissatisfied minority ethnic and religious groups. They wanted more ethnically based states, larger territory for bigger groups, and more seats for ethnic minorities in parliament and government, none of which was provided by the constitution, causing violent protests to break out\textsuperscript{13}.

She decided to leave during Dashain festival, at the dismay of her family, who thought she should celebrate with them. But Puspa knew she just needed to go, so after submitting her itinerary, she packed her bag, waited for the bus, and left.

“Traveling during festival time is difficult because it is extremely hard to get a seat on the bus,” Puspa laughed. “I had to sit sideways, but I lied to my mother and said I got a great seat.”

\textsuperscript{12} Paudel, Puspa. Conversation with author. Kathmandu, 15 November 2018.
She wanted to travel from East to West, and was able to stay with friends. The places she visited are very difficult to reach, so Puspa does not know if she could pull off the journey again.

Echoing the other solo woman travelers, Puspa said that everyone wanted to know why she was traveling alone.

“They would ask, ‘Are you a nurse?’” she told me. “They would raise their eyebrows after I said I was there only for traveling and then say, ‘Why alone? Do you think it’s safe? Don’t you have a family, are you married or not, do you have kids?”

Puspa was not expecting her trip to be full of so many incredible experiences. She felt welcomed by the people she met and was often given tours of the cities she visited, and would then become family to her.

“Meat is something special to offer guests, so many families I stayed with were confused when I did not eat it,” Puspa smiled. “Instead, they would cook me five different types of vegetables.”

The scariest moment she had was when she was traveling to a highway and met a local who offered to take her to his village. Because she did not know him, and she did not speak the same language as his village, she quickly memorized the number of the police station. But nothing bad happened, she was introduced to the villagers and although they
did not understand each other, it ended up being one of the most special experiences of the time.

After her 14 days of planned traveling ended, Puspa decided not to return home because she wanted to travel more. One day she was sightseeing with a friend outside of reception, and was unable to call her mom as she promised.

“She demanded that I call twice a day, in the morning and the evening. This particular day, I forgot, and she scolded me,” Puspa said. “She was so scared to send her daughter to the southern plain, a place they think is extremely dangerous because of the conflict.

Her mother also asked if she had to face any sexual violence while she was in the south, because she holds the notion that those in the south are of this dangerous nature. Puspa told her mother that it was wrong to believe the people in the region are bad.

As a result of her trip, Puspa became increasingly engaged in why the protests occur there. It changed her perceptions on the idea of “the inside and the outside”.

“For example, about the police violence in those areas. Why are people doing these things to people in their own country?” Puspa told me, during her break at the library, where she was working on a paper about sexual violence. In it, she was making connections between unresolved cases of girls that had been raped and murdered. We also discussed how the #MeToo movement is starting to reach Nepal, and how Puspa believes it shows great promise for change in the future.

“Traveling for the Nepalese is pilgrimage, going to temples. We have just started this idea of traveling inside the country. Even for boys, traveling solo is still a crazy idea,” Puspa explained. “If it was not for the [solo woman travel] challenge, we would have never even thought of it. But now I choose to travel solo, I feel like I can go anywhere by myself.”
Jiswan Tuladhar. 41 (aged 39 at time of trip). Annapurna Base Camp.

When Jiswan was a child, if a family member was traveling anywhere, she would follow them. No matter where it was, she went because she wanted to see. She got into the tourism industry at age 19, working for one of the oldest and well-known agencies in Nepal, because of the interaction it provided with foreigners. A few years later, she decided to start her own agency. Twelve years later, Jiswan is the Managing Director at Swaa Tours & Travels, a successful agency that provides services mostly for Nepalis wanting to travel internationally. When I came into the office, I was impressed by her ample staff, and was led to her back office, where we spoke in between her desk phone consistently going off. She told me that she is constantly on the job to provide personable service to her clients, and is ready to answer their calls at any given moment, no matter the time difference.

“I tell everyone that they should travel and see the world. That is my life goal. People are going to die, and the only thing they bring with them is experience,” she told me. “Luckily, through the tourism business, I can see the world. I will often travel with groups just so I can see the place.”

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Jiswan was in the Philippines when a friend tagged her in a post on Facebook about the travel competition. She was intrigued about the attention it was gaining, and with travel experience from the past ten years, sometimes solo, she applied to show that not only young girls are capable.

In Nepal, a lot of people have money but they don’t know how to spend it. This has completely changed in the past 5 years as people are starting to travel, especially during holiday. I think almost 30-40% of people are traveling now, even from the countryside. Before, people would always spend festival day and money on house, land, and gold, and just save it. If you are in one place, you don’t learn anything new. I think the foreigners have that mindset, but Nepalese did not until recently.

When she was on her trek, Jiswan came across a young village girl who would walk six hours in a day. This shocked her, and made her realize that she had been pampering her 6 and 14 year old daughters by driving them places, in turn making them more dependent.

“If you don’t teach your children how to work, they will not learn how to work, and our world is rapidly changing. The time to learn is now. You have to work, you must save and spend wisely. I want them to know that you have to work, you have to save money, but most importantly, you have to see the world and meet the people all over the world.”
During her Annapurna Base Camp trek, she met a porter that had started working at 13, and at age 50 was still doing the same job. He told her he does not do it for the money, he does it simply because he loves to.

Jiswan recently registered a new travel company to train women from rural areas to be in the tourism sector. She believes that there is huge opportunity for female guides to also profit off the industry.

“\[I used to think that foreigners were god. I thought they were so adventurous for going to places like Everest Base Camp. But that’s simply not true, anyone can do it,\]” she said. “Nepalese are still very dependent as travelers, but I want to write my own book and travel guide to help them gain the confidence to go on their own.”

Jiswan did the travel challenge not because she needed the funding, but rather to inspire the married women who spend their lives at home.

“Women, especially in Nepal, are still taking care of the home. They spend their whole lives taking care of their children and husbands,\]” said Jiswan. “Those women should travel solo. I want to inspire them to come out of it so strong and confident, knowing that they can do anything.”
Bibisha is a medical student who was working at a hospital when she decided to apply for the travel challenge.

As the oldest sibling and the first to travel in her family, she had to do a lot of convincing to have her parents let her go\(^1\). She chose ABC because her father works for the Annapurna Conservation Area and it is a popular trail, so they would be okay with it.

“I had to do trainings on my own. I started walking around by myself for a few hours at a time, and also learned swimming to get physically fit. I felt very self-conscious traveling alone in Nepal, because it’s not common here,” she told me. “I thought I would be looked at weirdly, and was very hesitant and conscious of what others might say.”

Bibisha meditates and enjoys spending time with herself, and now looks at travel as meditation. She does not consider herself to be very personable, and before leaving for ABC, she slowly started talking to more people to enhance her communication skills.

“I learned a lot even before traveling solo,” she said. “Now, if I ever think of giving up, I remind myself of these moments where I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and it keeps me going.”

Now, Bibisha continues to do solo travels around Nepal, but still has to convince her parents for each one. They refuse to let her go to Langtang because of the media attention.

around rape cases there. She said her travels have also allowed her friends to convince their parents to let them also go solo, because they have Bibisha as a reference.

“When I travel by myself, my level of awareness increases, because I have to look out for my own safety,” Bibisha said. “The ability to make decisions entirely on my own was very empowering in itself. I used to depend on others even for small decisions. Because of traveling solo, I feel so much stronger and gained major confidence in myself.”

Prekchhya pulls off a pony pose while on her journey. Photo by Prekchhya Shrestha.

**Prekchhya Shrestha. 20 (aged 19 at time of trip). Mid-west Nepal, Lumbini, Chitwan.**

Women LEAD, a nonprofit organization that runs leadership and professional skills training for young Nepali women, partners with Nepali Travellers to send three of their alumni on travels. Women LEAD has their own selection process and are then combined with the rest of the group of women for workshops and preparation.

Due to her young age, Prekchhya had to convince Nepali Travellers that she could do the trail she wanted, a new one that would take nine days, in a non-touristy area. But in the end, she said the person she had to convince the most was herself.

“It is very rare for girls to travel in Nepal, and I did not have anyone in my family who had traveled before as an example. Traveling on its own is a totally new concept, so traveling solo is so out of the box,” she said during our meeting in at the quiet and beautiful

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Women LEAD offices. “They were very shocked and had no idea what I was talking about. It took up until the time I left to convince them.”

Jason Shah told her that it is always hard being the first one to start something new, which is why people don’t do it. It takes patience and passion.

Right away, her journey took an unexpected turn when a truck fell down on the small road her bus was taking and had to be closed. Prekchhya had to sleep on the bus itself, a scary experience due to the bugs and unfamiliar people, who could potentially be thieves.

The villagers were very welcoming and kind, because it was not a travel path, so it was a big deal when a new traveler did come. She wanted to bring something there during her visit, and went to four schools to lead a hands-on learning experience. She led simple exercises using small LED lights to learn things such as how electricity works.

“We would use the lights to make art to represent their society. For a problem they saw, they would be an LED in,” she said. “There were a group of girls who put the LED in a cow shed, to show the darkness they experience when they are sent there because of chhaupadi[^7].”

It was challenging to decide what to tell people when they asked why she was alone. She had to constantly make a judgement about how much she could reveal to stay safe, and would often lie and say that she worked for an NGO or had someone waiting for her at the next destination.

The villagers felt very abnormal when they she told them she was alone: “They would ask, ‘Did you leave your home and run away? Why are you here? Are you married? Do you have kids?’”

Prekchhya said the biggest concern that came up was if she was married or not. When she told the women who asked her that she was only 19, they said that they had been married by that time. But once Prekchhya had explained that she was studying, they were inspired by her totally different life.

[^7]: A social tradition in Western Nepal where women are considered “impure” and kept out of the house during menstruation periods.
“They would say, ‘You are my age and I have kids, but you are doing all these things and just keep going’”, she said. “They would encourage me to take full advantage of the opportunity I had.”

Once she reached her destination of Rara Lake, she was back around Nepali tourists from Kathmandu.

“I met one woman who’s son wanted to travel solo, but she thought it was absurd and refused to let him go. After meeting me, she changed her mind,” Prekchhya smiled. “Many people said their own children wanted to travel, but they had thought it was dangerous. I encouraged them to let them go. I sort of became this, oh, if I can do it, your child can also.”

After completing her trek, Prekchhya spent ten days in Lumbini and Chitwan. In Chitwan, she was speaking with an ex-policeman who scolded her for coming solo, and asked her: “Don’t you know better? Didn’t your parents and school teach you?”

Prekchhya believes that people in urban areas have the mentality that they are superior to rural people, and that when they go to the villages, they think they give whatever you can. But once she actually went, she realized that was completely wrong. They have their own lives, and actually know much more than you in their area.

“I realized that I was vulnerable and that they helped me, such as with how to take the road correctly, much more than I could help them,” she relayed. “It just comes down to what you know, not superior or inferior knowledge. Just accepting one another. It is not that one person knows more, it is just that what you know is different.”

Now, Prekchhya works with Girls Empowered by Travel Nepal, an organization that runs an urban-rural exchange project. She was a participant in the first phase of the program, but now helped run the third phase:

We took people from five urban regions of Nepal to the Terai regions and ran programs that were focused on sexual and reproductive health, but we do different focuses each time. We also took girls from the Terai into urban Nepal, which is an interesting process of getting to know the people there and convincing them to engage, since we basically show up out of nowhere. We want to have girls empower one another through travel, and I think it is quite successful to get familiar with each other’s lifestyle, and learn from the travel itself.
Shlesha Acharya. 23 (aged 22 at time of trip). Langtang, Gosaikunda.

Before her solo travel, Shlesha used to think she could not go anywhere without a group. She chose Langtang, “an easy trail”, because she did not feel confident at all:

While I was there, it was a challenge to convince the people along the trail that I was actually alone. The first question was, ‘how big is your group?’ Sometimes I was even denied a place to stay. But the journey made me believe and trust in myself, I realized how brave I am. My mother has always supported me because the things I am doing now, she always wanted to do.

Shlesha was impressed by how independent the international travelers appeared to be. Some were on the trail at over 60 years old, and had already been to Nepal over ten times.

“We haven’t explored Nepal as much as they have,” she laughed. “I learned a lot from their stories. There were Indonesian women the same age as my mother that were traveling on their own.”

Shlesha is a civil engineer who designs buildings. She chose the field because through it, she is able to travel into rural areas. She spent over a month in a village in Western Nepal doing work.

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“It is very rural over there, they do not have road facility yet, or any transportation, really,” she said. “It is very interesting and underdeveloped. They have to walk up to three hours just to get to school. Traveling made me realize that I have to do something for my country, and I can do that through engineering.”

Saniya Giri. 23 (aged 22 at time of trip). Midwest Nepal.

Saniya, like many other Nepalese, grew up going on family trips to religious sites. She was always fascinated with the beauty of her country, and wanted to experience on her own. But she never would have imagined herself actually doing it until the challenge presented itself as an opportunity.

She prepared by doing small solo journeys on her own, but at that point, they were still the longest distances she had gone by herself in her life.

Saniya wanted to visit non-tourist areas of Nepal, where people do not normally think of going.

“People think of mountains and trekking, not road trips and villages,” she said. “Of course there were scary feelings about falling down hills, sexual harassment, things being stolen. But I had a wrong expectation about the people, I could have never predicted them to be so helpful and hospitable.”
She said that in Nepal, even when you are going somewhere alone, you are never really alone because there are so many people always looking at you. Before she could even get from one destination to another, the people there were aware of her arrival.

Saniya believes that by nature, humans complain a lot about the things they don’t have. But through travel, a satisfaction comes from realizing how privileged we are: “I think it would be good for urban Nepalis to go to rural areas to realize how much they are, and their potential. They will understand the importance of living, of surviving. There should be a budget on travel and luxury to help people understand the value of money, and how not everything can be bought by money at times.”

Saniya is a law student and believes that some urban groups that create projects and grants for rural areas have never even been there before. Therefore, they cannot define development for them.

“People there don’t need what we want them to have, they need what they want. We assume a lot,” she explained. “A lot of the programs the government creates lack that insight.”

Saniya now hopes to visit all districts of Nepal through the continuation of her law practice.
Gaurie has been in the tourism industry for over 15 years. After losing her parents at a young age and as the oldest sibling of four, it became her responsibility to look after her family. One of best friend’s father’s set her up with a job, as a maid at a hotel, and she has not left hospitality since. She ended up working at managerial positions at a couple luxury resorts at wildlife reserves and worked with celebrities like Hillary Clinton and Leonardo DiCaprio.19

She would often travel through work but could not find time for herself. She wanted to experience traveling alone without any sort of office work or project as the purpose.

“I decided to quit my job for some time and see what would happen next,” she told me as we split a pizza, only a couple days after she returned from her journey.

Even though she is in the travel industry, she said the process of doing research and talking to people to plan out her trip was interesting, because she always got the same question—why by yourself?

“First reaction is always disbelief about a Nepali women traveling by herself, especially if she hadn't been there before,” she reiterated the shared experience of the other women I spoke to. “But there were no challenges besides the long walks. I felt prepared to not go if I did not feel at my best, but that never happened. I always felt a freshness.”

Gaurie wants to be a travel agent that promotes Nepal, and for people to travel more in general. Specifically, she wants to focus on sustainable tourism, not just promotion, and be conscious of current environmental problems through eco-tourism.

“I watched a video made in Ladakh, titled ‘Killing Ladakh’, and it was about how the domestic tourists are putting Ladakh in such a vulnerable state because there is so much waste, and they are making the shortage on water drastically worse,” she said. “Manang and Mustang are similar to Ladakh, so it was interesting to see that in person.”

She says these places are visited by people who come, just because they saw a Bollywood movie filmed there, without being conscious about waste management or pollution. She believes that while it is good that people are traveling, they need to hold the responsibility of understanding the meaning of travel, why they travel, and the impact they are going to leave behind.

What Does Travel Mean to You?

“Travel for me has become a basic need, just as we need air to breathe, food and water to survive, I need travel to experience life to the fullest I feel. That could be a bit vague perhaps but it’s what it is, after all life is a journey of discoveries and adventures!”

Juliana Shrestha

“What does travel mean to you is different for different people. But I know for many of us, it’s not just about seeing mountains, the lakes, the forests. Seeing everything was fun, seeing the grassland was fun.”

Puspa Paudel

“The concept of travel is vacation, rather than going to learn something new or explore. Often travel is linked to luxury. We should travel for learning. Travel is a weird thing. When people see other people traveling, and they see pictures, they only see the good side of it. But there is always the hard part, and that’s why people don’t travel. I think it’s the discomfort. Being comfortable with the uncomfortable. The more you have the uncomfortable experiences, that’s when you learn more.”

Prekchhya Shrestha

“Solo travel is an opportunity to explore your inner self and go beyond self-made boundaries. But it is frightening and boring at times. Overall, it is full of learning inside and out.”

Bibisha Baaniya

“Travel for me is meditation and therapy. When you are there by yourself, you don’t think about everything, you just focus on that travel. You get to meet new people, learn new things, learn about new lifestyles, how different you are.”

Shlesha Acharya

“Traveling is discovering. It’s discovering new places, new people, new culture, new food, something new about yourself that you didn’t know before.”

Saniya Giri

“The meaning of travel is to expose yourself to a place you have never been before. Besides the nature and the surrounding peoples, it is understanding the economical benefits to the
locals. Because everybody is more concentrated in the cities and the local businesses there. But if you are traveling and staying with the local peoples, they are getting some income.”

Gauri Malakar

“For me traveling is kind of spirituality...I love to travel because I see life and live on traveling only. After you die your memories are the only thing you take with you. So collect memory with all possibility, visit new places, meet new people, make friends with strangers, learn new things, as human nature is curious.”

Jiswan Shrestha

**Conclusion**

The tourism industry in Nepal was geared towards international trekkers from its beginning. Now, the idea of travel is changing as more Nepalis decide to explore the country and see what it has to offer for themselves. Beyond the mountains, Nepal is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, with a wide range of landscapes. The people and hospitality are unparalleled, and the travel industry is and will continue to be a major source of income for this landlocked country.

Among this shift in industry, there are a group of women taking ahold of their capabilities and challenging deep-rooted ideas by choosing to travel alone to unknown places. In the process, they discover insight on major issues facing Nepal, such as environmental concerns, the disconnect between urban and rural, and the downfalls of tourism. At a deeper level, society’s ideas of dependence on family, safety concerns, and women empowerment are given a reality check, revealing the stark future of possibilities that travel, especially for women traveling alone, holds.

In reflection, this process made me look introspectively at my role as both a foreign tourist and a woman traveling alone (as I did during ISP period) for the purpose of exploration and learning. In speaking with these incredible women, it was easy to find the connections between us, and their stories reflected experiences of which I was familiar. It also made me think about my decision to come to Nepal, or to always be thinking of visiting other countries, when I have seen maybe 10% of my own country. I feel incredibly lucky for the opportunities I have been afforded, especially inspired by these women, and intrigued by how much more there is to learn about this world and ourselves.
Bibliography


Future Research

Tourism and hospitality in Nepal is really almost like a third religion. The trekking industry, homestays, urban-rural exchange, eco-tourism, infrastructure, and reaching capacity are just a handful of topics among an ocean. It would also be interesting to dissect how companies such as Airbnb are changing ancient cities like Patan, or to examine the dichotomy of tourist and traveler. When I did the Mardi Himal trail, which was repeatedly mentioned by the women travelers and other Nepali friends, as a relatively new and primarily Nepali travel destination, I was amazed to see all factors I was researching in action. So much so that I could not even fit it in this paper. Almost every young Nepali I met and spoke with was either a hospitality student, wanted to be a trekking guide, start a travel agency, or have some sort of stake in the travel industry.

Photo by author on Mardi Himal trail.