Year of lost opportunities

JANUARY: The Indian blockade was in its fourth month as of the start of 2016, and Nepalese were still waiting under crippling shortages of fuel, medicines and essential commodities.

FEBRUARY: The blockade was finally lifted, and Prime Minister KP Oli made a symbolic visit to India.

MARCH: Divided lingering and signed an historic trade and transit treaty with China to reduce landlocked Nepal’s dependence on India.

APRIL: Nepal marked the first anniversary of the April 25 earthquake, nearly two million Nepalis were still living in tents through the National Reconstruction Authority continued to be mired in politics and management.

MAY: The NC tried to stage a coup against the Maoist coalition by purginging the Maoists to form the NC, who survived the coup by striking a new deal with the Goosain.

JUNE: A Nepali head by a British security firm to guard the Russian embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan were killed in a deadly attack.

JULY: Ganesh KC won an unopposed hunger strike, this time demanding the impeachment of the CEA’s (Kamal Singh Karni), accusing him of abusing his authority.

AUGUST: The Maoists finally succeeded in pulling the rug out from under the NC government, and Pushpa Kamal Dahal became the new Prime Minister.

SEPTEMBER: Dahal visited New Delhi, and led the ground work for Indian President Pranab Mukherjee’s visit to Nepal.

OCTOBER: Soil depletion ended in Kathmandu valley after a decade, as the new management of the Nepal Electricity Authority put an end to blackouts and power outages.

NOVEMBER: The Dahal government tabled the Second Amendment to the Constitution, prompting the opposition to back out of the unity government in power.

DECEMBER: Two of the three sections of the 27 km Melamchi tunnel bringing water to a parched capital were finally completed.

FEELING GROOVY
Finding sun images of Kathmandu’s colourful hippie era
By Lucía de Vries

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A HAPPIER NEW YEAR

2015 was a year of disasters. 2016 was a year of lost opportunities. What will 2017 bring?

O n social networking sites, many people around the world are saying ‘good riddance’ to 2016 but there isn’t much optimism about 2017 either. Even as the US President Elect fills his cabinet with climate-deniers and oil tycoons, the world has seen the warmest year in history with record depletion of Arctic ice.

Here in Nepal, we breathed a sigh of relief to say goodbye to 2015 — the year of geotectonic and geopolitical earthquakes. We thought the earthquake was bad until the backlash hit. We waited in vain for the whole of 2016 for the politics to stabilise, but despite regime change we seem no closer to a resolution to the constitutional crisis caused by the deadlock over the Second Amendment.

2017 is going to be even critical because unless this stalemate is solved and we are able to hold local, provincial and parliamentary elections by 21 January 2018, the political vacuum will have unprecedented and unpredictable consequences for Nepal.

Parliament has now been deadlocked for more than three weeks as the opposition UML invokes Article 274 of the Constitution to step up pressure for a rollback of the proposed amendment. A substantive portion of that amendment would chop off the hill districts of Province 5 and graft them into Province 4. To be sure, there is vocal opposition to the move even among leaders belonging to the Nepali Congress and Maosist Centre in the ruling coalition, and the mid-western hills and plains have been reeling under long-running protests.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and his establishment colleagues are seen to be under pressure from outside (read: India) to push through the amendment. In response, the UML has been waving the nationalist flag by describing Province 5 as a dress rehearsal for the real goal: to incise the three-eastern-most districts of Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari as well as Kailali and Kanchanpur in the far-west so that the two proposed Madhes provinces encompass all the Tarai districts.

The Madhesi parties have portrayed this as a last-ditch constitutional attempt to resolve the issue of federal autonomy for the plains. They argue that they have climbed down from their original demand of a single Madhes state for a two-province model, but insist that all the plains districts should be included in those two states.

This is an electoral issue of vote banks and politics, which is what makes it so complicated. There is no way Nepali Congress and Maoist leaders will give up Kailali and Kanchanpur, and the UML sees Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari as its heartland. Even though all five districts are in the plains, they have seen a vast influx of hill settlers in the past 50 years due to state-sponsored transmigration. With passions running so high, and politics getting mixed with identity, territoriality and boundary disputes, it may be prudent to shelf any rejigging of federal provinces for now. Senior political leaders from across the main parties are pushing for the amendment, while the UML is holding the impeachment of CCAA Chief Lokman Singh Karki as another demand on which it wants a package agreement.

Allowing that stalemate to prolong any further will make elections uncertain and threaten a Constitution that was finally drafted by a democratically-elected Constitution Assembly after seven decades.

2015 was a year of disasters. 2016 was a year of lost opportunities. We will have to see what 2017 will bring.
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A Himalayan mess
Turbulent times for Nepal-China joint venture airline

OM ASTHA RAI

Tension between management and staff grew when Zhao Guo Quiang of Tibet Airlines—which holds 49% share in Himalaya Airlines (with 51% share owned by Nepal’s Yeti World Investment Pvt. Ltd)—became the new president three months ago. He was also declared the Accountable Manager, but Asenceo argued that the appointments to the posts vital for air safety were subject to CAAN’s approval. Asenceo paid the price for drawing the company’s attention to CAAN requirements. He did not receive his salary for two months, and his contract was finally terminated. It has been learned that the airline sacked him on the ground that he was above 65—the age limit for pilots. But he had crossed that limit a year before joining Himalaya Airlines, and was not a crew member.

After Zhao’s arrival, the airline also slashed allowances for pilots, who were already angry over not being given insurance coverage for medical expenses and loss of income. After several pilots quit, the airline apparently cancelled the leaves of some of the remaining pilots. Some disgruntled staff members also said the airline was reducing the number of hours that co-pilots need to fly the planes in order to be promoted as pilots.

Another crew member told Nepal Times that training protocols for first officers were shortened, to enable them to be upgraded more quickly, at the expense of safety.

“Co-pilots need to fly for 4,000 hours to become pilots as per the original training manual of Himalaya Airlines. Reducing that number without proper assessment compromises aviation safety,” said a senior pilot.

Vijay Shrestha, who represents the Yoti group in Himalaya Airlines, dismissed the allegation.

“We are revising the manual so Nepal co-pilots can become pilots sooner,” he said. “And we are doing this only after assessing that the 4,000-hour requirement was not necessary.”

Himalaya Airlines is also accused of operating without a qualified safety manager, but Shrestha said that an experienced Chinese official who previously worked for the Civil Aviation Authority of China (CAAC) has been appointed as a safety manager and his name has been forwarded to CAAN for approval.

CAAN spokesman Roshneesh Shrestha said: “We have received documents about his appointment, but need time to review them and decide whether the Chinese candidate is qualified for this job.”

Geopolitics at play?
Himalaya Airlines was aiming to add a second aircraft to its fleet in September, targeting new destinations the new Delhi. But it failed to secure the lease of another Airbus 320, and India is delaying the approval for such an aircraft to fly to New Delhi. Indian officials seem to believe that Himalaya Airlines is essentially a Chinese venture, and that China is trying to capitalise on it to spread its influence in Nepal.

“Nepal is a low-hanging fruit in the international aviation industry,” said an Indian national working for Himalaya Airlines. “But the way this airline is being run shows that the Chinese do not want to turn it into a successful business.”

There are allegations that Tibet Airlines will bring in planes on wet leases and use Nepal’s traffic rights on lucrative routes with Nepali migrant workers.

“Bringing in an aircraft on a wet lease will not generate employment for Nepalis,” the pilot said. “It will just be a way for Tibet Airlines to cash in on the profits out of Nepal.”

However, some Nepali aviation sources said the Indians are just envious that the Chinese were first with an airline joint venture. Himalaya Airlines’ Vice President Vijay Shrestha is hopeful that his company will be allowed to fly to New Delhi when the second Airbus 320 finally arrives in January.

“We will bring in three new aircraft every year, and the first two will be under dry leases,” he said. “Only the third aircraft will be on a wet lease.”
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QIU TIAN

While Japan’s high-profile highway projects in Nepal get all the attention, less well-known is the work Japanese social entrepreneurs are doing with Nepali farmers to transform livelihoods in an earthquake-hit region of the Himalayas.

A tasty variety of Japanese strawberry ideally suited for the soil and climate at 2,500m in the villages surrounding Kaski, 27 km from Kathmandu, has become a rewarding cash crop and job generator for local villages.

“Nepal is blessed with rich nature but lacks scientific planting methods, which led to the inefficient strawberry farming in the past decades,” says Nanami Wakayama, co-founder of Himiberry, which is a unique Japan-Nepal agriculture joint venture.

The Japanese first saw the potential for strawberry farming in Kaski 25 years ago when agronomist Makoto Hiroshi brought six sapling plants which flourished and spread among farmers who till them and had been growing radish for the Kathmandu market.

The project fizzled out when Nepal was engulfed in conflict. Now, Nanami Wakayama and her husband are back to continue the work of growing and selling the lucrative cash crop.

“Now, the business is even more systematic: the farmers are learning to build greenhouses, use drip irrigation in the arid slopes, and use an advanced business concept to sell the organic pesticide-free fruits in nearby Kathmandu.

When they first came to Nepal in 2014, the Wakayama discovered that strawberry not only made business sense but would also benefit local farmers if they got a fair price for their product. Using Nepal’s natural resources and Japanese technology, they created a high-quality product that created jobs. It took them six years to grow the business.

Growing strawberries in open sloping terraces did not ensure steady harvests, so Himiberry imported the sweetener, juicer, and more in a variety of ‘Nyoso’ strawberries. They are now grown in 40 new greenhouses in which temperature is not allowed to dip below 5 degrees at night.

Kakani has always had a water shortage, so Himiberry uses drip irrigation technology from Israel to save water and more efficiently use of fertiliser. But soil quality is a problem. “We need to do soil tests and produce specific fertilisers for strawberry,” explains Himiberry’s technical instructor, Shiva Raj Pokhrel, adding that the company will set up its own bio-fertiliser factory next year.

Wakayama’s team also brought a new business model, that works with a farmer cooperative. “Our first goal is to create jobs,” Nanami Wakayama explained to Nepal Times. “It is not a handout, so it gives farmers dignity and satisfaction.”

The company offers loans, training, free seeds, fertilisers, and greenhouses and then buys the produce at a fair price, and advances to its company motto of ‘more jobs, better lives’.

Among Himiberry contracted farmers, Ram Kumar Tamang (pictured) above has the biggest strawberry patches and most greenhouses. He is retired from the Ministry of Agriculture and says he wanted to just make money but to help villagers.

“I want to learn more professional farming technology from the Japanese, since advanced business concepts are what exactly we Nepali farmers lack now,” he said.

Shiva Kumar Lama is also growing strawberries in Kakani, and says going organic is a huge advantage. “We used chemicals to grow strawberries even though we knew it was harmful, but there was no other way,” Lama said. “But now we have to use organic fertilisers to produce healthy strawberries.”

Himiberry has a strict code of conduct that brings farmers not to sell to middlemen, not mix the plants with other species, and to follow the Japanese methods of cultivation.

In return, the Japanese have learnt from Nepali farmers the need to respect tradition and family, although the Japanese have also had to get used to the slow pace of work in Nepal.

“It takes a long time to complete even simple tasks here, and we have learnt to be patient,” said Wakayama.

Himiberry sells organic strawberry in packs of 300g in Kathmandu with a delivery service for homes, hotels and supermarkets. The positive response from markets gives the Wakayamas confidence to expand the business and create 200 more jobs next year.

Back in 2003 when the war ended strawberry farming, 700 people involved in the business and that figure has dropped by half, but if things go according to plan that number should increase.

Says Shree Bahadur KC of JATT Nepal, which first started strawberry farming in Kakani 25 years ago. “I think with modern farming technology young Nepalis will return to do business in their own land, which can definitely contribute to Nepal’s economic recovery.”

nepalitimes.com

"The history of strawberry farming in Kakani"

Agronomist Masakazu Hiroshi of JATT Nepal sets up strawberry plants to Kakani and the plant flourish.

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Agronomist Masakazu Hiroshi of JATT Nepal sets up strawberry plants to Kakani and the plant flourish.

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Plastic cups were introduced to propagate plants for more efficient strawberry farming.

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Strawberry nurseries started distributing plants to local farmers who were trained to grow the fruits.

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Himiberry continued strawberry farming with new technologies and a new business model.

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Over 700 farmers in Kakani were involved in strawberry farming, but the conflict made it difficult to sustain the business.

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Himiberry continued strawberry farming with new technologies and a new business model.
As soon as she became the first Nepali woman to win a medal in an international bodybuilding competition last month, Nainita Maharjan has learnt an important lesson: being a champion wouldn’t have been possible without support from her family.

Although passionate about bodybuilding, the 31-year-old mother had never imagined that she would win the bronze medal at the World Bodybuilding and Physique Sports Championship in Thailand earlier this month – turning her into a celebrity overnight and bringing prestige to Nepal.

“There is nothing a woman can’t do and all I needed was my family’s support,” said Maharjan in her three-storey house in Kirtipur, “my husband has been very supportive and my mother-in-law has helped by taking care of my son and managing household chores.”

Maharjan got married at 23 and had her child a year later. After putting on a lot of weight post delivery, she joined a gym to maintain her physical fitness and brought down her weight from 73kg to 53kg.

After she toned her body, Maharjan’s trainer noticed that she had great potential to be a bodybuilder. Her husband and mother-in-law encouraged her to participate in a national level bodybuilding championship even though both knew she had to don a bikini on stage, and Maharjan says that was the turning point in her career.

Nainita’s passion seems to have rubbed off on husband Rajan Rajaharya, who is also training to participate in a bodybuilding championship next year. “I realised that the scope of bodybuilding was wider for Nainita than it is for me,” he said, “what she wears during the competition wasn’t as important as the game itself.”

After four months of rigorous training and proper diet, Nainita won the Mrs Kathmandu and first ladies fitness championship early this year. She went on to win the bronze in the Women’s Athletic Physique category (up to 165 cm) of the World Bodybuilding and Physique Sports Championship in the first week of December in Putaya, Thailand on 4 December.

Maharjan’s mother-in-law remembers being overwhelmed with joy when she heard the news. “Nainita’s success is a matter of national pride and I will continue to support her in the future, and it is important to show that daughters-in-law should not be confined to the home, everyone of us has the right to be free.”

Trainer Ruchesh Shakti is also excited about her medal, and confirms that the win was the culmination of Maharjan’s hard work, dedication and family support. He explains: “It can take bodybuilders years to train their bodies, but Nainita is blessed with strong physique that came into form in no time.”

Maharjan has now set her sights to win the gold medal in next year’s bodybuilding championship in Mongolia, and wants to open her own gym for bodybuilders. ⚫️ Shreya Shrestha
Lucia de Vries

Relics of the hippie era in Kathmandu have been slowly eroded by the passage of time, and whatever remained in Jochhen from that psychedelic period was brought down by last year’s earthquake.

One of the few hippie hangouts that is still intact is what used to be called Freak Street or Snowman Café. On a recent afternoon, it was packed with Nepali youngsters but none of them had any idea how the street got its name. 

Freak Street is an integral part of Nepal’s modern history, and indeed of a global youth culture of the late 1960s, but the hippie period is yet to be formally documented—especially in pictures. The ‘flower children’ were essentially refugees from a materialistic and militaristic culture, and represented a unique global movement that transcended physical and mental boundaries. It coincided with an eruption of anti-establishment protests across Europe and the United States.

In Nepal it was the precursor of the country’s tourism industry, and is worthy of preservation even for historical reasons. But there are not many western Bohemians left among those who stayed behind in Kathmandu. Their Nepali counterparts are getting on in age too.

I went to meet the gifted artist, Jimmy Thapa, who used to run a dope outlet on Freak Street called Jimmy’s Wagon. “Meet Billy,” Jimmy told me. “He’ll tell you all.”

Billy is William Forbes, better known as ‘Swayambhu Billy’ and his wife Susan Burns. They have lived at the base of Swayambhu Hill and off since the early 1970s. Their present house in Kamal is guarded by a larger than life Chow Chow, the walls are festooned with artwork by renowned ‘real’ hippies and beatniks they befriended in Kathmandu: Iris Cohen, Petra Vogt and Hetty Mcgee.

Forbes and Burns were both born in 1943 to Communist parents with no interest in spirituality. But while growing up in New York, Forbes met people who had returned from India with tales of inner discovery. He booked a flight to Europe and travelled overlaid to India. It was 1970 and he ‘fell into a groove’.

Burns followed him two years later, and remembers: “We were riding rickety buses, touching some holy stone. I felt definitely at home. It seemed this was it for me.”

Their photographs of the late 1960s and early 1970s show a largely empty city with few cars and few people. Majestic bulls had the right of way. Life seemed to flow according to astrologers’ calendars from one festival to the next. Swayambhunath was untouched, and Bodhnath was just a cluster of houses in the middle paddy fields.

Into this largely pristine valley with the Himalaya beckoning to the north and Gos to the south, travelers from all over the world converged, smoked, danced and ruminated about Rumi. It was the first time a generation of youth could simply drop out and be who they wanted to be, without the pressures of parents and society.

“It was a chaotic but also highly creative scene,” remembers Forbes. “Everyone was on their own trip.”

Besides Freak Street there were Swayambhunath and Bodhnath – two outposts representing distinct groups of hippie expats. Bodhnath specialised in Tibetan Buddhism, artiques and carpet businesses. It had Shiva’s Slaves, riding
mandu's colourful hippie era

Classic bikes such as BSA, Triumph and Royal Enfield. Swayambhunath was more of a trip treat, easier on the budget, suitable for those who preferred tea over beer and chillums over other drugs.

But hippies from both places inevitably ended up on Freak Street. By the mid-70s, this narrow side street was still the hot spot to get the latest tapes and books. Restaurants with funky names like Don’t Pass Me By, The Hungry Eye, and Lost Horizon, had good stereo sets and the latest Beatles and Santana songs seeped out of the open windows to the street below.

Few places matched Trilochan Shrestha’s Ying Yang restaurant on the square opposite Hanuman Dhoka Palace. Here one could dance any time of the day because the place never really seemed to close. “Trilochan had all of us trapped in there,” Burns recalls.

Freak Street became a thriving artistic hub. Ira Cohen published poetry on handmade paper, Angus Maclain created books from tree bark, Keith Redman taught the Secret Yogi of Naropa to a growing following and everyone visited the Spirit Catcher Bookshop to listen to poetry or some jamming. There were also cremations, after someone OD’d and died. “It was a world in which death was always a possibility,” Burns says. “But mostly it was tea and a smoke and someone always strumming a guitar in the background.”

Quality photos of this era are rare. Cameras got stolen and others got swapped for hand knotted carpets. But even those who had cameras didn’t like snapping personal pictures. “The whole scene was a kind of underground,” Forbes explained, “no one liked to have their pictures taken. There was this privacy thing, you thought of the people you left behind. They might not like seeing you stoned or doing crazy things.”

Nepal Picture Library aims to set up a hippie archive and recently published Magic Days, featuring photographs by William Forbes and Susan Barnes, and a portrait series by Ira Cohen. Available at Kathmandu bookshops Rs 200.

1 William smoking bang
“I brought this bang from Kathmandu and sent it for a white. It is basically a bamboo water pipe. It got me so stoned that I forgot what day of the week it was. So I gave it up.”

2 William and Susan in a marijuana patch
“We got marijuana seeds from a friend and for a while we grew weed. But then the landlord requested us to stop. Not because he didn’t like it but because there is this law in Nepal that says if you grow cops on a piece of land for more than two years you can go to jail.”

3 Trip to Tatopani
“One day we took this bus to Tatopani and stayed there for a few days. We made good use of the hot spa, stopped on Tibetan soil and smoked chillums.”

5 William and Susan at Swayambhunath
“For karmic reasons we felt attracted to the energy of a power place like Swayambhu.”

7 William in the sky with diamonds
“I thought I was going to return to the US. Came for a few years, got all the wisdom and share it. But I am a slow learner so I never got to the point where I can say, now I’ve got the message and I can share it.”

8 Nepal Picture Library aims to set up a hippie archive and recently published Magic Days, featuring photographs by William Forrester and Susan Barnes, and a portrait series by Ira Cohen. Available at Kathmandu bookshops Rs 200.

Another Gothic Party by Swayambhunath Temple

—

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NEW YEAR SPECIALS

A selection of the choicest places and activities in, around and outside Kathmandu to celebrate your New Year’s Eve and Day.

Give away.
On the occasion of New Year’s Eve give away old clothes, shoes, food, chocalates and more to street children to keep them warm this winter.
31 December, 6 pm onwards. Bag Pokharu, In Nepal, Monsoon, 9861048127, shoshiya9597@yahoo.com

Movie screening.
Attend the screening of The Legend of Shrunkhashur, the first animated feature film in Nepali and Nepali with English subtitles on New Year’s Eve. All proceeds will go towards the education of children.
31 December, 1 to 2.15 pm, 2.30 to 3.45 pm, 4.30 to 5.30 pm. Microvision Innovation Center, Kathmandu, 9814510029, 9864548494-9865137486; Rs. 100

KJC Winter camp.
A fun filled winter camp with various activities and a find trip for your children. For children between 5 to 17 years.
31 December, 9 am onwards, KJC Academy, Bhandari Nagar, Kathmandu, (01) 4589596, Rs. 5,000 (Registration), Rs. 3,500 (Unregistered), www.kjcow.com

Korean classes.
Email for Korean language classes and start your New Year on a good note.
Special discounts till 15 January.
January (Closed camp), HappyLand Academy, Syedband, Bhaktapur, 9841974921

Lively New Year.
Enjoy live music featuring artists Ananda Khaki, Anil Shahi and Sunita Rani and celebrate the last day in 2016.
31 December, 6 pm onwards. Hotel Bhanumati, Bhanumati, Rs. 2,500 only (including a buffet dinner with a dance and snacks)

Critical mass.
Ride with fellow bike enthusiasts in the last Critical Mass Kathmandu event for this year.
Make it even more special by decorating your ride with lights and reflectors.
31 December, 5.30 pm onwards, Boudha Durbar Square, http://kcyclyk.org.np/

Film screening.
Don’t miss the screening of Blue Gate Between the Clouds, a film by Francois Germain. This New Year’s Eve.
31 December, 5 pm onwards, Cafe Kama, Kirtipur, Ghaut, (01) 4559208

Getaway

Green 2017.
Celebrate the New year responsibly. Get together with Nepal Connection and brainstorm with the team on how to make your parties fun and environment friendly.
31 December, 4 pm onwards, Nepal Connection, Mandala Street, Thamel, 9871797796, info@nepalconnection.org.np

Arbitrary Experience.
Spent a musical New Year’s eve with Sunita Shrestha, Swoopna Saman, Neeraj Jang Kunwar, Alpha Bhakuni, Shweta Singh HM, SMS band, and 24X7.
31 December, 7 pm onwards, Hotel Annapurna, Dharan Marg, 9843636100. Rs. 1,000 (Ticket available in the Cafe Shop Annapurna or Hotel Annapurna, Boudha, near Swastik, Nepal, 9814582302 or www.annapurna.com)

Shangrila Village.
Enjoy unlimited snacks followed by a lavish gala dinner with complimentary drinks. Also stand a chance to win an air ticket to Hong Kong.
31 December, 8pm onwards, Shangrila Village, Patan, 9865522922/9841602127, Singer: Rs. 5,000, Couple: Rs. 10,000

Highland Food.
Celebrate this New year’s eve with some lip smacking Nepali, Newari and Indian delicacies.
31 December, 5 pm onwards. Highland Food, Deewan Restaurant & Bar, Lopnag, (01) 4441622

Om Adhay Retreat.
Escape Kathmandu’s New Year traffic and spend one night at the Om Adhay Retreat.
Om Adhay Retreat, Phoksundo, Tribhuvan Highway, 9841370746

Dwarka’s Resort.
Reserve (and smash in Dwarka’s) with a two-night one-day package including food and live music on New Year’s eve.
31 December, Dwarka’s Resort, Bhaktapur, Rs. 65,000 (Couple)

Hotel Shambala.
Take a trip and visit Shambala New Year’s Eve and relish a lavish buffet dinner with friends and family.
31 December, Hotel Shambala, Basantapur Market, (01) 4400253. Rs. 3,000 including one complimentary drink (Only for dinner). Package with room and dinner: Rs. 10,000 (Single), Rs. 12,500 (Couple)

Le Sherpa.
Cafe and wine at Le Sherpa for New Year’s eve.
31 December, 8pm onwards, Le Sherpa, Lopnag, For reservation: 9814400483/9861287777

The Last Resort.
Spend your New Year’s Eve away from the bustle of the city with friends, family, live music and food at Last Resort. Package includes three meals and transportation.
31 December, 7pm onwards. Departure from Kathmandu, Thamel. Rs. 7500 (Departure from resort). (01) 4400249/4400243, info@theholidays.com.np, 9814091019 per person (Nepali). 50% per person (Foreigners)

Nagarjun hike.
End 2016 with a scenic six to seven hour hike through the forests of Nagarjun.
31 December, 7 am onwards. Meeting point: Bablu Hayagyu, 9861793186, 9814526849, 9867979049
No restrictions on Chinese tourists

The Chinese embassy in Kathmandu has denied rumours of official restrictions on the travel of Chinese tourists to Nepal, refuting media reports that the Chengdu Tourism Bureau had suspended group tours to Nepal and India.

An informal message about the supposed ban was reportedly sent by some Nepali media, but it turns out no such order was issued either by the Chengdu Tourism Bureau or any other agency in China.

“Everything is normal,” a customer service staff of China International Travel Service (CITS) told Nepal Times over the phone from Chengdu.

The news of China has imposed restrictions on tourists travelling from Tibet to Nepal may have been triggered by speculations that they may be on their way to Bodhgaya where the Dalai Lama is supposed to be speaking at the Kalachakra Ceremony next month.

The Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu has also denied there was any official restriction on Chinese tourists to Nepal. No formal notice has been released by the Chengdu Tourism Bureau so far. And embassy of China in Nepal didn’t receive any relevant notice neither, according to a consulate official.

Ironically, Kathmandu and Chengdu signed a sister-city agreement two days after the supposed ban on travel. Online travel bookings for the Chinese New Year holiday next month are open as normal. Tuantu, one of the most popular online travel booking platforms in China, directs visitors to nearly 100 package tours in Nepal. However, there seem to be some restrictions on Chinese nationals entering Nepal. According to a Chinese tourist Mo Mo who wanted to travel to Kathmandu from Lhasa two days ago, the Korang (Gojong) checkpoint is closed for Chinese citizens, and the only way to go to Nepal is by flight from Lhasa, Chengdu or other Chinese cities.

Qiao Tian and Pan Luan
SULLY

Clint Eastwood, the prolific director who is now 86-year-old, tells the most measured, well-calibrated story of his career with Sully. This is a film about the extraordinary events of 15 January, 2009, when US Airways Captaine Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger (Tom Hanks) was able to make a forced landing onto the Hudson River in the event of his Airbus A320 experiencing double engine failure as it was hit by a flock of birds three minutes after it took off from LaGuardia Airport in New York.

Often, this kind of film indulges in the cheesiest possible thrills by dwelling and hyperbolising the particulars of the plane crash and all of the possible, most gruesome scenarios surrounding it. Sully, instead, is a methodical but far from piddling procedural that examines the mechanics behind the event, but also subtly surveys the emotional fallout of having experienced such a deeply dramatic life and death situation in which you are the person who holds the lives of one hundred and fifty five souls, quite literally, in your hands.

Hanks, with his usual unerring skill, plays the everyman who finds himself in a very peculiar circumstance where one is viewed as a hero by the public, even while he is being examined closely by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), which is trying to determine whether he made the right choice in landing on the Hudson instead of trying to return to LaGuardia as he was directed.

The film flashes between Sully dealing with the days and nights immediately after the crash, cutting back and forth to the moments leading up to the plane landing in the Hudson - scenes which are shot so viscerally that you will find yourself frantically gripping whichever surface you are currently sitting on as the passengers themselves brace for impact.

The stories of the people on the plane, Sully himself, his wife Lorraine (played the absolutely wonderful Laura Linney) as she struggles to help him from miles away on the phone, and the reactions of the people around the world who are moved to tears by Sully’s actions are portrayed through a particularly sensitive lens, guided by Eastwood’s unerring sense for quiet drama.

This is a film about a man who did his job quietly but exceptionally, day after day for forty-two years until an instance forced him to concentrate all of his skills into a few seconds of absolute precision, moments highlighted by the talents of an actor like Hanks, really the only person who could have done justice to Sully’s dignity and grace.

Before watching the film I thought I knew exactly what I was in for. Instead, I came away with a newfound understanding of how to make good, quiet cinema, along with an asking about the character of a good man.

nepaltimes.com

NATIONAL DISCORD: Speaker OmPratap Gharti Magar holds a meeting with major political parties on Monday in yet another unsuccessful attempt to break the political stalemate.

EX-COARDEES: CPN (Maoist Centre) Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal shares a light moment with his ex-co-arare Baburam Bhattarai at an event in Kathmandu on Monday.

TUNNEL OF HOPE: Two of the three sections of the 7.7km Mechi tunnel bringing water to a parched capital are finally completed on Wednesday.

ADIEU: Senior Infirmitarian and Chairman of Modan Purakar Guli Kamal Mani Datt has passed away at the age of 87. He was cremated at the electronic crematorium in Pashupati on Thursday morning.

AFTER THE FIRE: A man nervously surveys his fire-destroyed clothing store in Kathmandu on Tuesday.
Swimming out of the rubble

Girish Giri in www.aestrapati.com, 23 December

When the earthquake struck Nepal on 25 April 2015, Ramesh Khatri was having lunch at a Gondaha guest house where he was a waiter for two years.

Unhappy with his meagre income and burdened with the responsibility to look after younger siblings back home, Khatri, who was just 16 then, had quit his job, and bought a bus ticket to return to his village in Bulikey. He had bought new clothes for his mother, brother and sisters.

Khatri had just begun eating when the narrow eight-storey building started shaking violently. Before he could figure out what was happening, a huge concrete pillar fell, and he was trapped under the rubble. He cried for help, spitting out the food that was stuffed in his mouth. He realised two of his friends were also trapped there. One of them, 14-year-old Pumba Lama, was miraculously rescued alive after six days. The other was rescued four days later, but died soon afterwards.

Khatri was lucky to be rescued after 24 hours, but both his legs were amputated at the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital. “When I regained consciousness, I felt my feet were icy,” he says. “I had no idea they were no longer with me.”

When his aging father and mother came to see him, he did not cry and tried to be strong so they would not lose hope, but he was worried about his younger siblings.

Five months later, while attending a training program conducted by the National Disabled Fund (NDF) in Bhakti Mandap, he befriended Sandesh Bantam, who had also lost his legs in the earthquake. Bantam’s father, a policeman, was killed by the Maoists. He took Khatri to Mahendra Police Club, which lies just across the Bhakti Mandap road.

When Khatri saw the blue water in the swimming pool of Mahendra Police Club, he remembered fondly how he used to swim in the river near his home when he was a child. The club authorities initially did not allow an amputee to swim, but they finally gave in.

“When I jumped off the wheelchair into the swimming pool, I found it difficult to float without legs, and nearly drowned,” he recalls. “But it did not take me long to learn to swim with just my hands.”

Back in the wheelchair, he realised that the earth’s gravity discriminates against amputees, but because of the buoyancy water does not. “You cannot walk if you lack legs, but you can float even if you do not have them,” he says.

One year after the earthquake, Khatri enrolled in Khagendra Newajiban Kendra, a school in Kathmandu for physically disabled students. When Spinal Cord Injury Sports Association announced the fourth national swimming competition for physically disabled persons in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Nepal Paralympic Committee, he signed up.

After one month of training, Khatri was ready for the championship on 17 June. He came first by crossing 25 m in just 23 seconds, much ahead of other contestants. President Bidya Bandari handed over the prize to him.

Khatri’s life changed after becoming the champion, and he spent one week in December in Japan where he took more swimming training. Before the earthquake, he had no goal, and was only worried about future of his younger siblings. He now has a goal – to live, he wants to win the gold medal in the next Paralympics in Japan.

Khatri is aware of the bitter truth that Nepal lags far behind other countries in infrastructure. In Japan, he could swim in warm water even when it was cold outside. In Nepal, all swimming pools remain shut in winter, and he can practice only in summer.
Federalism is the talk of the town

KRISTINA SHPERLIK
in JANAKPUR

Last winter this city that serves as the de facto capital of the Madhes was reeling from violence, and shortages created by the five-month border blockade. There is little in Janakpur today to remind visitors of those terrifying times; the streets are calm and busy. But listen in on men wrapped in blankets sipping tea in the fehree morning sun on the sidewalks, and the conversation is all centred on negotiations in Kathmandu about the future of federalism under the Second Amendment to the new Constitution. Although there is still simmering anger over last year’s violent suppression of protests, there is no stomach here for another prolonged agitation and accompanying hardships.

“There was not one sector that did not go down – education, businesses, industries, health, transportation, trade, agriculture — everything was seriously affected,” economics professor Surendra Lahk remembers the trying months last year.

The violence started with the lynching of nine policemen by protesters in Kailali, and more than 55 people were killed as the agitation spread across the Tarai. Police conducted house-to-house searches and beat people randomly on the streets. Social worker Anju Mishra remembers two children who were beaten up so badly they had to be hospitalized.

“One evening, we heard the noise from the street and saw the police attacking some motorcyclists who were not even taking part in the protests, they took away their bikes and declared a curfew,” Mishra recalls.

As the violence escalated, the India-Nepal border was blocked with New Delhi’s tacit support, devastating the economy of not just border cities like Janakpur, but the whole country. Economist Yogendra Jha, who is also a former member of the State Restructuring Committee, says: “The official GDP growth is 6.77% but in reality it is minus, population is growing at 3.3 to 1.5% and inflation is at 9.5%. It is not hard to see that Nepal’s economy is in serious trouble.”

Across the Tarai, it is clear that what is sustaining people’s livelihoods are remittances from young men working in the Gulf, Malaysia or India. It is the money they send home that gives families here an income, and keeps the small businesses and shops afloat. However, the demonstration of Indian notes has once more impacted the local economy, with many losing their savings.

Surendra Lahk says the blockade was a result of the Madhes Movement, which in turn was caused by the slow economic development of the plains, and the failure of the central government in Kathmandu to address Madhesi concerns.

Although Parliament has been stalled over a dispute over the transfer of five hill districts from Province 5 to Province 4, the real concern in Janakpur is about whether or not the watermost Tarai districts of Jhapa, Morang and Sursari will be included in Province 3. The demand here is for all plains districts to be a part of the two Madhes provinces.

“Our geography and identity are not taken into account, and this Amendment is a ruse to perpetuate the internal colonisation of the Madhes and to exploit our resources. The government caused deforestation and dehydration and ruined our environment,” says Vijay Kumar.
Green Janakpur

A year after the blockade, Janakpur seethes silently as Kathmandu debates constitutional amendments

Soviet legacy

The Cold War was at its most frigid in the 1950s when King Mahendra had just ousted an elected government in a coup, went on a nation-building spree, playing off regional and global powers to industrialise Nepal and improve infrastructure.

Starting the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union provided thousands of Nepali students with scholarships to go to university, started work on the Janakpur Cigarette Factory and the Pathaya-Dharai section of the East-West Highway.

The factory made popular Nepali cigarette brands like Yak and Devalax, but has been dormant since it closed down three years ago. The closure and 6,000 jobs a popular Janakpur football club as well as a hospital, bank and school that the factory supported. Thousands of farmers in surrounding districts who supplied the factory with tobacco lost their cash crop.

The factory was built by Soviet engineers in 1955, and in the 1980s was upgraded by Indian technicians. Today, rusting machinery, abandoned warehouses and dilapidated buildings are all that remain of the premises in the heart of Janakpur.

“Allegations things in Janakpur, the temple, railway, university campus, were built by foreign governments, mostly Indian or Soviet. All Kathmandu ever did was open a tax office and police station here,” says economist Pramod Surendra Shrestha.

The factory used to hum with activity producing around 30 million cigarettes a day in three shifts. Sethi San operated the power house and fondly recalls the friendly atmosphere in the factory. “We did not need any trade union, our Russian Chief Engineer was a very honest man and hardworking person, he united the employees by joining us in our work and being our role model,” recalls Sethi, who looks after the electric supply in the factory premises.

“The government talked of it for a long time, and never discussed the closure with the local people,” says Vijay Kumar Singh of the Tarai Madhesh Democratic Party.

The other Soviet project was the 120 km section of the East-West Highway in the eastern Tarai. There are still signs that say ‘Soviet Nepali Cooperation’ along the highway from 40 years ago.

Although the highway improved connectivity and made it possible for people of Janakpur to go to other parts of Nepal without having to cross into India, it is also blamed for demarcation and destruction of wildlife habitats.

Kristina Upreti
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We extend our best wishes & hearty congratulation to Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal on its glorious 18th anniversary.
Swimming out of the rubble

Girish Rail in www.aestopati.com, 23 December

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