

Take time to see when you look

At a glance, pilgrimages.com is about trekking in the Himalaya, as portrayed by map-based virtual tours of various trekking routes featuring my images and observations. At this superficial level I hope you derive enjoyment and useful information about Himalayan trekking options. But the superficial pursuit of looking at pictures, no matter how beautiful they might be, only scratches the surface of what Himalayan trekking can offer. Since first stepping onto the trail at Lukla, in the Everest region of Nepal in April 1988, I've been drawn back to the Himalaya again and again. And with each visit new insights have emerged and crystallised. Not all of them are as serene as the images I set out to capture.

I'm in good company when awed by the unique magic of the Himalaya, coupled with profound concerns about whether this magic will be lost. Even before international tourism reached the Himalaya, leading alpine explorers to the region, such as Eric Shipton, Bill Tilman and Edmund Hillary, had expressed concerns about what international exposure would mean for the region. That was back in the 50's. Since then, pretty much everything that worried them, plus developments that even they couldn't have foreseen at that time (like guided climbs to the summit of Mount Everest) have occurred. Indeed, the story is still unfolding, both good and bad.



Uli Biaho, Baltistan



A beggar
in Lhasa

It's futile to say now that it would be better if the Himalaya never received a single international tourist. The fact is that it now receives many thousands every year and the numbers are going to keep growing. And what if tourism hadn't come to places like the Solu Khumbu in Nepal? Are high child mortality rates, prematurely shortened, physically harsh lives and very limited choices better for the people than the results of international tourism and the even more profound impact of Westernisation? We can all have opinions about this, but who are we to make judgments? We don't live there and most of us will never spend long enough there to fully understand all the issues, pros and cons and cause-effect domino relationships. Edmund Hillary is one who can rightfully claim that depth of understanding and he was astute enough to focus on improving the education of the local people so that they could make their own well informed judgments and decisions.

By the time the Himalaya cast her spell on me, mass tourism had already had dramatic environmental and social impacts there. Concerns that I was beginning to feel at the end of the 80s had already been eloquently expressed in the 70s by informed people like Galen Rowell, in his book "Many people come; looking, looking."

Since my first wonderful but, in hindsight, naïve and un-informed encounter with the Himalaya back in 1988, a combination of subsequent personal experiences and knowledge gained through reading, has led me to understand the importance of two ingredients - awareness and respect, through education. If every international tourist who visits the Himalaya has some awareness of the issues and is respectful of the local people and their environment, then I believe that a positive, sustainable outcome from international tourism for the Himalaya is possible.

As tourists, we can be part of the problem, or part of the solution. Every one of us holds this power and this responsibility. If you haven't read "Many people come; looking, looking" and you intend to visit or revisit the Himalaya, then I urge you to get hold of a copy! Or at least read something that addresses the same issues covered so accessibly by Galen Rowell. The tiny investment of a few hours of your time will open your mind to what's going on around you in the Himalaya. And with that you'll have an ability to choose – "am I going to be a contributor or an exploiter"?



Tourists congregate on Poon Hill in the Annapurna region at dawn to enjoy the sunrise



Pensive glance, Namche Bazaar

For instance, if, back in 1998, I'd read "Many people come; looking, looking" prior to setting forth from Lukla, I wouldn't have so ignorantly enjoyed that hot shower at Namche Bazaar. Back then the hot water came from fires stoked by already seriously depleted forests. That said, next time I return to Namche Bazaar, I may well enjoy a hot shower, because the water will likely be heated by hydro-electricity, or even better, solar power. Good lessons are being learned as international tourism expands in the Himalaya but, as the sayings go, "it takes two to tango" and "every little bit counts".

Galen Rowell constructed his account of the Himalaya around a characteristically insightful comment made by a Lama at Thyangboche Gompa, who said "Many people come; looking, looking, taking picture. Too many people. No good... Some people come, see. Good!" The Himalaya will never again be as it was before international tourists began arriving. That can be said for all places inhabited by man. But this doesn't mean that its magic has to become a distant memory. In future let's make sure that we do see, so we're able to show due respect and conduct ourselves accordingly. Then perhaps everyone can continue to enjoy the magic of the Himalaya. As a father of three boys that is certainly my hope.

So, if you enjoy these Himalayan images, please keep in mind that they're all selective snapshots in time. Their existence gives no assurance that the magic they were intended to capture will live on.