



In the footsteps of rebels

The wounds left by Nepal's civil war remain raw but its people are embracing the future, discovers Julia Horton

'Hello, I'm a Maoist! Welcome to Thabang!" The man shakes my hand in the middle of the dusty street, beaming at me delightedly from beneath a bright red bobble hat which matches his long shorts. They are almost the colour of the communist flag fluttering behind him above the village water tap, the iconic hammer and sickle printed in white.

Just down the road some elderly women dance to the hypnotic rhythm of drums beaten with passion by a group of men sitting cross-legged in the bright winter sunshine. It is the final day of a Hindu funeral, and the atmosphere is more

carnival-like than mournful as relatives and friends mark the loss of an old man who died of cancer.

After 10 years at the heart of the bitter conflict in Nepal between Maoist rebels and the government, villagers are used to grieving more violent deaths. In remote communities like this one, thousands were killed by rebels and soldiers alike, often deliberately, sometimes in the crossfire. As the cradle of the insurgency, Thabang suffered among the worst devastation as army helicopters rained mortar bombs down in deadly night raids on the guerrillas' powerbase.

Today, four years after war finally ended,

the damage is still visible with teenagers playing volleyball beside piles of rubble which were once people's homes. But while the red flag suggests that Thabang remains Maoist, a new poster displayed on a guesthouse wall illustrates people's desire to use their revolutionary past to secure a share of their country's growing tourism industry. It advertises Nepal Tourism Year 2011, a government drive aimed at doubling the number of international tourists to a million by opening up lesser known areas.

I am on the Guerrilla Trek, a 13-day hike "following in the footsteps of the rebels" from Myagdi to Rukum created by Kathmandu-based firm, Swiss Nepal

Traditional farming of buckwheat, rice and mustard seed is the main industry for the area
PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY

Family Trekking. It starts at the town of Beni, a day's bus ride west of Kathmandu, where dozens of people were killed in 2004 in one of the conflict's bloodiest battles. Sporadic violence continues to this day in Nepal and I jump when we hear a distant boom in the dense forest where rebels once took cover. It is only hunters shooting goats, my guide Mangal Tamang says.

Later on the trail four figures carrying guns emerge silently from the shadowy woods on to the path behind us. They too are only shooting animals in what is now a hunting reserve. But they look alarmingly like the guerrillas who once demanded "taxes" from trekkers on Nepal's main trails. Maoist slogans are still daubed in bright red writing on boulders beside the path. There are also signs of change, however, including solar panels and satellite dishes.

Traditional farming remains the main industry here. We pass fields of bright green rice, yellow mustard seed and pink buckwheat, before slowly climbing up steep tree-covered hills to reach mountain meadows. The highest point on the trail is 3900m – almost four Scottish munros, but still a molehill beside mighty 8000m-plus Himalayan peaks such as Dhaulagiri which

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appear above us in tantalising glimpses. These giants now lure so many trekkers to Nepal that its world-famous Annapurna Circuit and Everest Basecamp routes are both mobbed in high season.

Yet few visitors have ever trodden the path we are following. I do not see a single fellow tourist. Instead, slight men pass by wearing flipflops and hefting huge sacks of rice weighing 60kg, which must equal or exceed their own bodyweight. Occasionally what appears to be a walking haystack materialises as a few young women carrying towers of straw along the path. Others lug vast piles of dried dung on their backs in large baskets attached to headbands to take the strain.

The porter, Anik Lama, is carrying my rucksack and a tent (which we never need) in similar fashion. Despite the load, he still has the breath to sing cheerily for hours, or teach me Nepali words. It is easy to remember "namaste", the Nepali greeting chorused by groups of children on their way to school. A generation of youngsters were denied an education during the conflict, but today most get a chance to learn. One boy demonstrates a curious knowledge of vocabulary, yelling out "Hello darling!" as I pass. ▶

LATE DEALS

Barrhead Travel (www.barrheadtravel.co.uk, 0871 226 2673) has seven nights in **Madeira** from £419pp. Price includes B&B in a five-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing March 5.

Cruise Thomas Cook (www.cruisethomascook.com, 0800 916 6070) has an 18-night **Los Angeles and Hawaii** cruise from £1599pp. Price includes three nights in a four-star hotel in LA, 14 nights on board the cruise and flights from Edinburgh or Glasgow departing April 8.

Ebookers (www.ebookers.com) has three nights in **Paris** from £277pp. Price includes room-only in a three-star hotel and return flights from Edinburgh departing March 21.

Airtours (www.airtours.co.uk, 0844 871 6636) has seven nights in **Tenerife** from £432pp. Price includes half-board in a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing March 16.

Direct Holidays (www.directholidays.co.uk, 0844 879 8173) has seven nights in **Turkey** from £325pp. Price includes all-inclusive at a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing March 14.

Jet2holidays (www.jet2holidays.com, 0800 408 5599) has three nights in **Budapest** from £199pp. Price includes room-only in a four-star hotel and return flights from Edinburgh departing March 8.

► When we arrive at our destination, Mangal calls out to anyone he sees, requesting food and lodging. Staying in local people's homes is a world away from the teahouses on Nepal's established trekking routes with their extensive Western menus, hot showers and private rooms. Here, the only meal for lunch and dinner is the staple Nepali daal bhaat – huge helpings of rice with lentil soup and vegetable curry served on large metal trays. It can be very tasty, while tea, spiced or lemon, fresh popcorn and deep-fried bread for breakfast are all delicious.

At Nisi Dhor village, Jasmata Siris, a grandmother aged 72, her face worn by years of hard graft, sun and cigarettes, soon has me peeling spuds while her daughter sits nearby on a mat on the dirt floor, nursing her newborn. Like many young mothers here, she says her husband is seeking better-paid work in the Middle East.

As darkness falls and the temperature plummets we huddle around the flames, talking and listening to music on someone's mobile phone. The wooden door stays open almost constantly, letting the chill air in, because closing it causes choking smoke to fill the room.

I pay around 300R to 600R (£3 to £6) for dinner, bed and breakfast, giving the cash direct to the people we stay with. It is a lot of money compared to the national minimum wage of around £1.30 a day. Most guesthouses here accommodate other locals such as sheep herders heading to market. Some have a separate bedroom for guests but many are simply one room where everyone eats together before crawling beneath blankets to sleep on the floor.

At one lodging Mangal points out a couple of dead rats suspended above the fire, which I hadn't noticed in the growing dark. I suppose it's preferable to seeing live ones. I am only ill once, and it isn't here.

Further on, the village of Gurjaghat, at just over 3000m, is like a ghost town when we arrive. Most people have left to see out the harsh winter at lower altitudes. A young family takes us in and as we sit clutching mugs of delicious steaming spiced tea their dog suddenly barks furiously outside.

"Maybe leopard, or bear," Mangal says. The wife says their neighbour was taken to hospital recently after being attacked by a bear, and people apparently see tigers here too. Cleaning my teeth outside suddenly seems on balance to be potentially pretty hazardous to my health. It's bitterly cold and the next morning small streams near the water tap have frozen solid.

The style of villages changes along the way. There is a mediaeval feel to Tallo Sera, where a layer of straw covers narrow paths between houses, and piglets and chickens scurry about. People live here year-round but there are no guesthouses so we wander around, children following curiously.

By the time someone offers us shelter the whole village seems to have decided that our arrival is a good excuse for a party. As we eat dinner more people appear and as an older man gets to his feet to dance they start singing and clapping. Next, inevitably, it is my turn. I seem to be pleasingly amusing as I accidentally bump my head



Staying with local people helps them receive much more than the minimum wage, which is about £1.30 a day

PHOTOGRAPH: INTERFOTO/ALAMY

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TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE

Return flights to Kathmandu from Scottish airports (via London and Abu Dhabi) start from around £500. Visit www.cheapflights.co.uk. The 13-day Guerrilla Trek with Swiss Nepal Family Trekking costs around £540 for the home-stay version. A camping alternative costs about £820. Visit www.trekking-in-nepal.net.

WHERE TO STAY

A double room with ensuite at the Tibet Guest House in Kathmandu starts from £13 plus 23% taxes per room per night. Visit www.tibetguesthouse.com. The same at The Castle Resort in Pokhara, the city nearest the trekking routes, cost from £25 plus 23% taxes per room for bed and breakfast. Visit www.pokharacastle.com.

on the low ceiling while trying local moves. It's not even 8pm when things wind down, but in trekking terms that's a late night.

The village was another Maoist base during the war, and like almost everyone we meet on the trek, these villagers lived in fear. Bramaji Budhamagar, 39, who farms sheep and cows, says: "Everyone was Maoist here – because they had to be, regardless of their actual view. The rebels would come to my house demanding food and money and say 'Why do you support the government?'"

"Then the army would ask why you supported the Maoists. There was a lot of fighting. People were killed. It was a very hard time. We're happy now we're living in peace. I've never seen a tourist before. I think tourism will benefit people here. We have a strong culture with many festivals. You should come back." ■