Nepal is getting back on its feet following the earthquake, discovers Meera Dattani

"I guided 14 tours between September and April before the earthquake," says Satya Kumal, a long-time guide based in Kathmandu. "This season, seven."

For all Nepal's beauty and diversity, the earthquake naturally dominates conversation: villages crumbled, temples tumbled and an estimated 9,000 people lost their lives when a 7.8-magnitude quake at Barpak, Gorkha, on April 25 last year triggered an avalanche on Everest. "But the media misrepresented things," he says. "They didn't show how much was left."

His wide smile in the face of adversity epitomises everything about the Nepalese. A year on, government funds may be slow to deliver, but tourism is playing a key role in the recovery effort, and the injection of energy from responsible tourism providers such as Intrepid Travel - which chose Nepal as the host country for its first 'Intrepid Loves Agents' fam trip - is making all the difference.

It's not rocket science as to why Nepal is such a centre for adventure travel: mere thoughts of the Himalayas stir even the jaded traveller, so for trekkers, it's the holy grail. Yet Nepal caters equally to the cultural tourist, and this is a growing strand of travel to this diverse country.

Towns such as Kathmandu and Bhaktapur are as intoxicating as any in Asia, while striking indigenous Newari architecture, Tibetan monasteries, Hindu and Buddhist temples and terraced rice fields span the country. Lakeside Pokhara attracts visitors seeking relaxation and adventure, and Chitwan National Park tempts tiger-seekers, while the Nepalese themselves - humble, resilient and kind - top the experience everywhere you go.
ROAD TO RECOVERY

Industry and media support have been key to Nepal’s tourism recovery and recent visits by Prince Harry and David Beckham were also well-received. Intrepid Travel worked with engineering company Mymoto International to assess its trekking routes, and reinstated its full programme even before the Foreign & Commonwealth Office changed its advice in October 2015.

Intrepid’s UK managing director, Michael Edwards, says: “As the largest operator in Nepal, the country is incredibly important to us. After the earthquake, we pledged to donate all 2015-16 season’s profits to local projects, and to date, we’ve raised £380,000.”

The operator works with grassroots projects such as Seven Women in Kathmandu, which provides employment, skills and support to marginalised women, and cooking classes and crafts to visitors.

As one Nepalese tourism professional told me: “We need trade, not aid.” This is a sentiment echoed by many, underlining the need to bring tourists back to the region.

Edwards adds: “Travellers are starting to return, but it’s a long way before it reaches pre-earthquake levels. Tourism is vital. That’s why we wanted to show agents that Nepal is open for business, and as magical as ever.”

Those who visit are richly rewarded. Town after town, trek after trek, temple after temple, proud Nepalese welcome visitors with open arms and big smiles.

Be it for culture, food, Everest the peak or Everest the beer, this mountain kingdom is ready and waiting.

KATHMANDU

In the historic, capital, UNESCO World Heritage Site Durbar Square is the main attraction for locals and visitors. While many structures were damaged, plenty remain, with monastery compounds (bahal), the Old Royal Palace, museums and courtyards alongside Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas (places of meditation). North of here, Asian’s markets and alleyways characterise Old Kathmandu, before morphing into the lively tourist centre of Thamel. Close by is the Royal Palace, site of the 2001 royal massacre, which marked the beginning of the end of Nepal’s monarchy, and the landscaped Garden of Dreams.

Other spots worth visiting include the hilltop Swayambhunath temple, which is renowned for its stupas, monkeys and views. Patan, four miles south of Kathmandu, is less hectic, with the main square its key attraction.

As a base for expats and NGOs, Patan has some outstanding restaurants and craft shops.

Accommodation includes the historic Kathamandu Guest House in Thamel, with its garden haven, and the central Hotel Barahi. Pick up souvenirs directly from the artists in Pottery Square, or at woodcarving and papemaking workshops.

At Boudha, reconstruction work is ongoing on the white Buddhist stupa, one of the world’s largest, while nearby Shivapun National Park offers excellent walking and birding.

Spanning outwards into the Central Hills are towns such as Nagarkot, which has expansive Himalayan views, Tibetan Buddhist site Namjo Bodha, and hillside Nuwakot. Badly hit by the quake, Nuwakot has Nepal’s most evocative palace complexes and the beautiful Famous Farm, a renovated guesthouse run by Rural Heritage, whose mission to revive countryside tourism includes funding some of the town’s reconstruction.

POKHARA/WESTERN HILLS

The views, the Buddhist-Sherpa culture, teahouse stays and promise of personal achievement remain the big pulls for trekking here. By travelling with a reputable company, you know you’re contributing to fair wages for Sherpas and porters, so the local community also benefits from tourism.

The 15-day visa-on-arrival itinerary starts at £1480, excluding international flights. It takes in Kathmandu, Chitwan National Park, a boat ride across Nepal’s Phewa Lake, Bandipur and Bhaktapur. Jet Airways flies from Heathrow to Kathmandu, via Delhi, from £439. intrepidtravel.co.uk

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