

Mark Liechty. 2017. *Far Out: Countercultural Seekers and the Tourist Encounter in Nepal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Far Out is an interesting book that narrates the early developments of tourism in Nepal. The book begins with the advent of Nepal as a new adventure destination following the first ascent of Mt. Everest in the early 1950s, and examines the role of the global countercultural phenomenon in the development of tourism in Nepal. It also highlights the linkage between the spread of Buddhism in the Western world and its role in the positioning of Nepal as a “Dharma” destination during the 1980s. The period covered in the book was an early phase in Nepal’s tourism for the following reasons: 1) tourism was in the hands of the ruling elites of Kathmandu and the participation of the general public in the tourism business was limited, 2) the number of tourists was less than one-fifth of a million and tourism activities were confined to very limited destinations, and 3) Nepal was still a niche destination. As such, the book must be read keeping in mind the Nepali socio-political context and the international scenario of the time.

The book is divided into three sections: The Golden Age (early 1950s–1965), Hippie Nepal (1965–1975) and Adventure Tourism (1975–1980s). Section One explores how the development of Western, particularly British, imagination was captured by Nepal (Chapter One) after the opening of mountaineering expeditions. It also discusses the cultural politics of tourism initiated by King Mahendra and the allure of Yeti (Chapter Two and Three). Section Two, mainly relies on the ethnographic data on Kathmandu’s hippie tourism of the 1970s (Chapter Six, Seven and Eight), and provides interesting discussions on the legacy and implications of the hippies in Kathmandu. However, in doing so, it romanticizes the hippie era. The author also shows how uncontrolled tourism growth due to hippie counterculture itself became one of the reasons for the downfall of hippie tourism. There is a good discussion on hippie sexuality (Chapter Nine) and the contributions of hippie tourists to the literary scene (see pp. 252–258). Both these topics warrant a more detailed study from future researchers. Section Three discusses the implications of the de-radicalization of global popular culture and its corresponding impacts in Nepal. For example, the arrival of trekking tourism and the establishment of Thamel as a new tourism district, and the emergence of religion, mainly Tibetan Buddhism, as a fundamental part of Nepal’s tourism imagery (Chapter Eleven and Twelve).

Far Out is in part a historical account of tourism in Nepal, however, it is written by an anthropologist and as such covers the long-standing theme in tourism anthropology—the dynamics of the interactions between “hosts and guests” (Smith 1989). The book makes an argument that tourism in Nepal was essentially an *encounter* between Nepal and the Western world that subsequently played a major role in shaping Nepal in the modern world. The argument is interesting; however, the frame of reference used in the book is dominated by the narratives from Kathmandu, and parallel developments happening outside Kathmandu is rarely discussed.

Liechty situates the evolution of Nepali tourism within the wider global context of China-U.S. relations in the 1950s. Similarly, he appraises the role of international actors in the cannabis ban and the ebbing away of hippie tourism. This is an important point because the role of geopolitics or international agencies is not adequately studied in Nepal or in tourism scholarship. However, this is an important area for Nepal. For example, Nepal’s post-1990 tourism policies have been formulated within the larger discourse underpinned by neo-liberal and neo-structural theories advanced

by its international development partners. Recently Lumbini became the subject of geopolitical power struggles when a Chinese NGO proposed an investment project.

The author's argument in Chapter Ten that foreign visitors' dislike for the filthy environment of Freak Street provided the condition that bred another tourist district in Thamel is interesting. However, I do not think it was a rejection of "authenticity." Tourism is essentially a quest for authenticity, wherein tourists are attracted by a set of different scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary. However, the subject of tourists' interest, or what Urry (2006) terms a "tourist gaze," is socially organized and systematized and varies by society, across social group and historical periods. Thus, it is essential to note that as the 1970s progressed, there was a shift in the type of visitors to Nepal from travellers to tourists. A traveller wishes to explore a destination's real culture and customs and would not consider himself a tourist as captured in the response by a visitor in the book, who remarked, "we didn't think of ourselves as tourists...we were living here" (p. 211). Tourists, on the other hand, are more interested in recreation and sightseeing. These two groups have different travel expectations and accommodation preferences, and as a result the structure of tourism operations was changing. This was instrumental in changing the locus of tourism to Thamel in the 1980s.

Liechty makes some important observations which the Nepali tourism agencies and planners should reflect upon. For example, he argues that because of tourism Nepal has become a surrogate Tibet (p. 207), and this has developed Nepal's reputation as a "Buddhist country" (p. 350). The question of misrepresentation of identity has become an issue in tourism scholarship. For example, the reviewer's study of Scotland has shown that tourism played a key role in the formation and manifestation of Scottish identity that is focussed on the imagery of tartan, whisky and the Highlands (Bhandari 2014). However, whether this is an appropriate Scottish identity is a highly debatable issue. It would have been helpful to provide some discussion around the implications of similar misrepresentation of Nepali identity in tourism, especially when there is a larger discussion that Nepal's Tarai-Madhes has largely been left out in its tourism imagery. Similarly, Liechty also takes note of Nepal's success with repeat visitors. However, tourism scholars have argued that the high number of repeat visitors is an indication of a declining destination and is not always considered a good

choice. Additionally, repeat visitors tend to concentrate their activities in a small number of already established tourist areas and this is not helpful to tourism agencies' goals of dispersing tourists and benefits widely throughout the country.

The book, except for a brief discussion of Karna Sakya, does not discuss the role played by Nepalis in the development of tourism in Nepal. Chapters Four and Five on Boris Lissanevitch and John Coapman could have been shortened. Boris's stories have already been told by Michel Peissel, and the account of John includes more description of him than his contribution to Nepal. The author himself acknowledges that John's version of his story is questionable. Most importantly, the book fails to make note of other emerging tourist destinations during the period. For example, Pokhara had begun to appear in the tourist itinerary by the 1960s when trekking tourism was introduced. Similarly, stories from Chitwan's early tourism could have provided additional narratives from the southern plains during the period. Readers who are interested in recent developments in tourism, especially after 1990, may find the book unhelpful. There are also some minor spelling errors on page 197 and 221.

Despite the above notes, I have high praise for *Far Out* in terms of its contribution to the study of the evolution of Nepali tourism vis-à-vis the global countercultural movement and its influence in Nepal. In doing so, the book highlights the different aspects of three niche forms of tourism in Nepal: 1) the beginning of mountaineering adventure, 2) the rise and fall of hippie sub-culture and tourism, and 3) the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism inspired "Dharma" tourism in Nepal. The book should also be commended for its historically situated discussion on the socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Nepal, mainly the impact of hippies on food, literature, music, etc. in Kathmandu. The book is elegantly written and is easy to follow. I strongly recommend it to scholars and students across all academic disciplines who are interested in the cross-cultural nature of tourism, and the intricacies of Nepalis' interaction with Western countercultural movements. I hope that *Far Out* will encourage scholars to look further into Nepal's early exposure to the outside world through their respective disciplinary platforms.

Reference

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