


 **Editorial**

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# *A Proposition for Re-Configuring Tourism and Hospitality Industry*

 **Prof. Arhan Sthapit, PhD**  
*Editor-in-Chief*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2799-4936>

The year 2022 witnessed stronger indicators of tourism recovery as international tourist arrivals set to return to pre-pandemic levels around the world, more particularly in Europe and the Middle East. It also holds true with the inbound tourist arrivals in Nepal as the official data show. As the tourism is set to make gradual recovery, the need for re-configuring tourism and hospitality industry should also be mooted, so that this service sector will not be beset with such disasters in the future.

## **Indicators of Revival**

In its forward-looking scenarios for 2023, UNWTO predicted that international tourist arrivals could reach 80 percent to 95 percent of pre-pandemic levels this year, depending on the “extent of the economic slowdown, the ongoing recovery of travel in Asia and the Pacific and the Ukraine war” (UNWTO, 2023a), *inter alia*.

As the harbinger of a stronger year approaching in the offing in 2023, the number of tourists travelling internationally—the new data indicates— has doubled in 2022 compared to its previous year. UNWTO reports that more than 900 million tourists travelled internationally in 2022 – double the number recorded in 2021: yet it is only 63 percent of pre-pandemic levels (UNWTO, 2023a). The first UNWTO World Tourism Barometer of 2023 also analyses performance by region and looks at top performers in 2022, including several destinations which have already recovered 2019 levels (UNWTO, 2023 January). According to the UNWTO data, every region around the world recorded notable increases in international tourist numbers. The Middle East enjoyed the strongest relative increase, as inbound tourist arrivals soared to 83 percent of pre-pandemic numbers while Europe welcomed 585 million visitors in 2022 resulting in nearly 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Africa and the Americas both recovered about 65 percent of their pre-pandemic tourists (UNWTO, 2023a).

Asia and the Pacific also witnessed a rise by 23 percent. The recovery rate in this continent is less strong than other regions; it may be attributed to a stronger pandemic-related restrictions which have started to be removed only in recent months in Asian countries.

### **The Nepalese case**

Nepal has been no exception to the global trend of tourism recovery. In what could be construed as a strong recovery in its tourism business, Nepal's inbound tourist arrivals rose to a three-year high in 2022, as the data of Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) showed that a total of 614,148 international tourists visited Nepal in 2022 (NTB, 2023) putting an end to a two-year downward spiral that started in early 2020 when the coronavirus outbreak wreaked havoc across the world.

The number of inbound tourists entering Nepal increased by 306.82 percent in 2022 compared to 2021 (NTB, 2023) posting a stronger recovery rate than regional averages of the world as mentioned above. Nonetheless, the growth rate of tourist arrivals to Nepal is still 48.70 percent lower than the pre-pandemic levels: Nepal had recorded 1.19 million arrivals in 2019.

Earlier, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism, hospitality, and aviation industries in most parts of the world were hit hardest, and Nepal also suffered a big blow as it had to suspend its Visit Nepal Year 2020 campaign, an ambitious drive to bring in one million tourists to this small, beautiful country of Mt. Everest and the birthplace of Lord Buddha (Sthapit, 2020 May; Sthapit, 2021 March).

Nepal carries a tremendous potential to push forward another Visit Nepal Year some time in future to attract multi-million tourists, again branding Nepal as “Naturally Nepal, Once is not Enough.” The campaign will carry requisite credibility and impact, because “heaven is a myth, Nepal is real,” as they say. Nepal's flora and fauna, cultural and heritage products, ethnic diversities, and neutral-ground status all add substantial value to Nepal's potential as a favourite destination for visitors from all around the world for varied purposes (Sthapit, 2021 March; Sthapit, 2020 March; Sthapit, 2012).

With two new international airports—Gautam Buddha International Airport in vicinity with Lumbini in Siddhartha Nagar (Bhairahawa) and Pokhara Regional International Airport in touristic city of Pokhara—coming into operation, the Nepalese tourism sector has been buoyant about the footfalls of international visitors in the country in 2023.

### **Lessons from the pandemic**

As the COVID-19 pandemic presented tourism with the biggest crisis in the industry's history, the businesses and workers associated with the tourism and hospitality industry

had to bear the brunt of the public health disaster, and the sector's contribution to national economies of almost every country in the world substantially dwindled down.

In countries at all development levels around the world, several millions of jobs and businesses are dependent on a strong and thriving tourism sector. Tourism has also been a driving force in protecting natural and cultural heritage, preserving them for future generations to enjoy. The damage and far-reaching impact caused by the pandemic to the tourism sector has come as a big lesson. Therefore, we cannot afford anymore setbacks in this industry due to the disasters like COVID pandemic in the future.

### **Reconfiguring the industry**

Hence, in view of the developments, it will be relevant to emphasise on the need for reshaping and restarting tourism in a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient way. In the same line has the UNWTO also initiated a campaign to restart tourism business *afresh*, as the UNWTO Global Tourism Crisis Committee has tried to unite the tourism sector to formulate a sector-wide response to the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. UNWTO has called for a move from 'crisis to transformation' envisaging a path for supporting the tourism sector through the worst crisis in its history while also laying the foundations for sustainable recovery and lasting change (UNWTO, 2023b).

There should be proactive management measures based on well concerted plans to re-configure the entire tourism and hospitality industry not only to mitigate the impact of such disasters as coronavirus pandemic and other health-emergencies but also to make the industry resilient and sustainable. The reconfiguration process requires macro-policy and systemic support which, in turn, will entail promoting a globally coordinated approach to sustainable recovery through cooperation and collaboration among the stakeholders. Such wider and deeper cooperation and collaboration should also embrace the private sector as well as communities (Sthapit, 2021 March).

In Nepal, a couple of initiatives taken recently should be guided by the vision of executing the reconfiguration of tourism industry. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation has prepared a strategic framework for the Nepal Tourism Decade 2023-2032 while Nepal Tourism Board has worked out plans targeting 1 million foreign visitors for 2023 (NTB, 2023). The framework developed by an expert panel has set ambitious targets of increasing tourist spending to \$125 daily from the existing \$48, creating 1 million direct jobs in the tourism sector, and increasing the tourism sector's contribution to national GDP to 10 percent. The plan also aims to bring the tourist numbers to pre-pandemic levels by 2024 and increase arrivals in each subsequent year by 15 percent. It is in these plans and programmes where effective coordination among the policymaking and implementing agencies as well as the private sector and other stakeholders is indispensable. The effort of reconfiguring the tourism sector should also be well guided

by four key trends: *Demand Evolution, Health & Hygiene, Innovation & Digitisation, and Sustainability* as identified by WTTC on the basis of its assessment of the stakeholders concerning the impact of COVID-19 (WTTC, 2020 Sept).

Last but not least, the industry should be reconfigured by keeping in perspective the sustainable development goals (SDGs), as tourism has the potential to contribute, directly or indirectly to all the SDGs, and has been included as targets in Goals 8, 12 and 14 on inclusive and sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption, and production (SCP) and the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources, respectively (UNWTO, 2021).

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