

Strategic Location of Pokhara: The Perspective of Tourism

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Cite this paper

Poudel, K.R., & Oli, L.B. (2025). Strategic location of Pokhara: the perspective of tourism. *The Journal of Development and Administrative Studies*, 33(1), 41-46.

<https://doi.org/10.3126/jodas.v33i1.80792>

Abstract

Pokhara has emerged as one of Nepal's most significant tourism destinations, with its development deeply rooted in historical milestones, strategic geography, and infrastructural growth. Since the 1950s, key events such as the first climb of Mt. Annapurna I by Maurice Herzog and the introduction of commercial trekking tourism by Colonel Jimmy Roberts have established Pokhara as a gateway to the Annapurna region. Its central location has further enhanced its role as a connecting hub for major tourism circuits like the Golden, Silver, and Adventure Triangles. Supported by contributions from notable national and international figures, Pokhara has grown to offer diverse tourism experiences ranging from nature and culture to adventure-based activities. Empirical data from 2020 indicates that Pokhara received 38.5% of Nepal's international tourists, contributing 21.2% of tourism income and 17.5% of direct employment. Despite possessing 38.3% of the country's accommodation capacity and 43.8% of tourist-standard hotels, tourist stays remain short, and daily expenditures relatively low. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to enhance visitor engagement, extend stay durations, and diversify tourism services. With strategic planning and sustainable development, Pokhara holds strong potential to further strengthen its position as a leading destination in Nepal's tourism landscape.

Keywords: Tourism hub, Historical development, Tourism strategy, Destination

Introduction

Nepal is largely regarded as a perfect destination for mountain tourism, with a comprehensive range of tourism activities. These activities include gentle hiking, mountain watching, trekking, mountaineering, community-based tourism, rural and village homestays, ecotourism, and adventure sports. Pokhara, in central Nepal, most popular tourist attractions due to its natural beauty and picturesque charm. As a result, it has developed one of the world's ultimate prevalent tourist attractions, offering a one-of-a-kind combination of spectacular natural landscapes and a rich cultural legacy (Upreti et al. 2013).

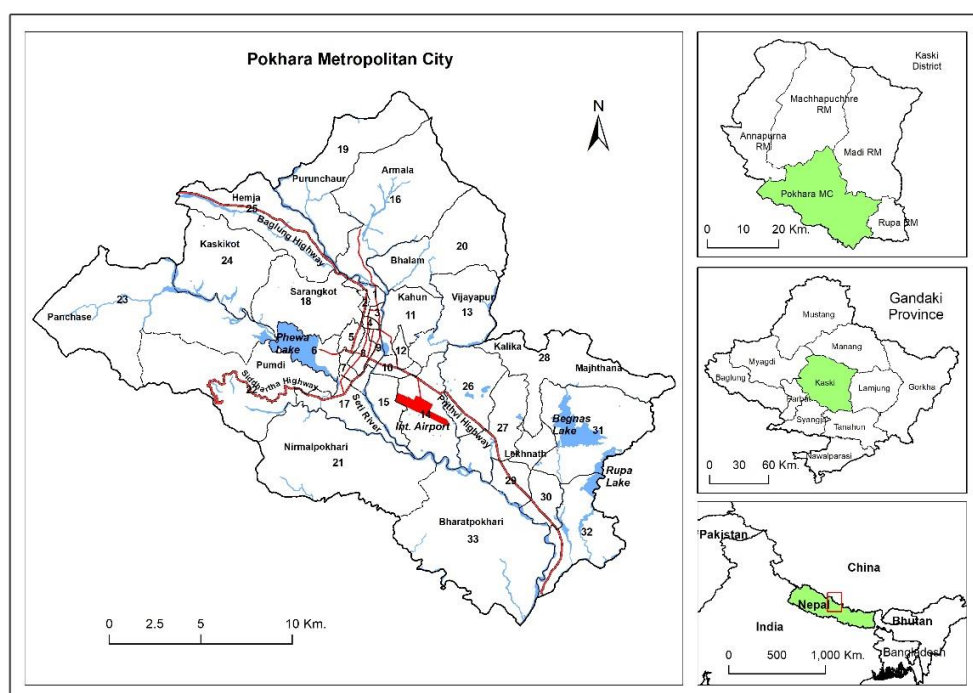
Pokhara stands touristic capital city of Nepal apart from the tourism business due to its abundance of natural attractions, cultural richness, and biological diversity, making it a renowned and proud site in Nepal. The panoramic views of the Annapurna Himalayan range, the closeness of snow-covered mountains particularly Mt. Machhapuchhre, which is only 28 kilometers away - the harmonious blend of dramatic mountain scenery and picturesque lakes, and the reflection of Mt. Machhapuchhre on the surface of Fewa Lake are all notable features that attract thousands of international visitors each year.

Pokhara is situated approximately 200 kilometers west of Kathmandu, 75-80 kilometers east of Baglung and Beni, 150-180 kilometers north of Butwal and Bhairahawa, and one hundred kilometers south of Besisahar. The city is situated between latitudes 28°04'10" and 28°20'30" North, and longitude 83°48'40" East. Pokhara Metropolitan City covers 464.24 square kilometers, or 23.02% of Kaski District and 0.31% of Nepal's total land area (see Fig. 1). Pokhara has a diverse environment that includes alpine slopes, terraced hills, flat valley floors, and breathtaking river gorges. This diversity in geography contributes to its appeal as a tourist destination, allowing for a wide range of outdoor and cultural tourism experiences.

The flat area was mostly utilized for agriculture and pastoral activities prior to the 1960s. But since malaria was eradicated, the city has experienced a sharp increase in urbanization (Adhikari, 2000). The Population of Pokhara city population and land area have grown significantly during the past 50 years. There were 20,611 people living there in 1971, spread over 18 wards that occupied 27.38 km² of the Pokhara region's level land. It grew to become a Metropolitan City by 2021, with 33 wards, 513,504 residents, and an area of 464.24 km² (CBS, 2012; NSO, 2021).

The main objective of this article is tourism significance of Pokhara as a strategic position. This study is based on secondary data sources such as reports Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil (MoCTCA), data from Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) other books of academic journals etc. Map and table are described through descriptive method.

Figure 1: Location Map of the Pokhara Metropolitan City



Historical Background

The growth of Pokhara as a tourist destination has a long and significant history, beginning in the mid-20th century. In the 1950s and 1960s, Pokhara was mainly recognized as a transit location for mountaineers traveling to the Annapurna region. During this early period, the number of tourists was very low, with only a few thousand international visitors reported in 1962. A key event that helped promote Pokhara on the global stage was the first successful climb of Mt. Annapurna I (8091 m) by the French mountaineer Maurice Herzog and his team on June 3, 1950. This achievement not only made history in the world of mountaineering but also introduced Pokhara as the main entry point to the Annapurna Himalaya (Upretti et al., 2013). Another major turning point of tourism history in Pokhara was beginning of organized trekking tourism in 1966, led by British Colonel Jimmy Roberts. He is often credited as a founder of trekking tourism in Nepal. Roberts worked with the British travel company Thomas Cook, one of the early pioneers in international package tourism. This collaboration marked the start of commercial trekking in the Annapurna region and introduced adventure tourism that brought more visitors to Pokhara and nearby areas.

Historically, Pokhara also served as an important trading route between India and China in the 18th and early 20th century. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf (1978) noted that Pokhara played a role in trans-Himalayan trade between India and China. During the 18th century, Newar traders from Bhaktapur and Kathmandu settled in Pokhara and opened businesses, especially in the old town. Later, in the 20th century, the establishment of a British recruitment camp helped increase the population of ethnic groups such as the Gurung and Magar communities. Tibetan refugees, reported that four of the twelve Tibetan refugee settlements in Nepal, located in Pokhara to accommodate the large number of refugees arriving from Tibet in the 1950s and 60s. Between 1959 and 1962, nearly 300,000 Tibetan refugees entered Nepal, with some settling in Pokhara. These communities built Buddhist monasteries and established cultural practices that have since become tourist attractions, particularly within refugee settlements.

According to Frechette (2002), since 1989, around 2,500 Tibetans have entered Nepal annually, often using Pokhara as a transit point to India.

In terms of tourism development, the founding of a tourism information center in 1961 and the preparation of a basic physical development plan were key steps. The completed of the Siddhartha Highway in 1968 linked Pokhara to the southern plains and Kathmandu, which led to a gradual increase in tourist arrivals. Over the years, several important interventions have contributed to the development of Pokhara's tourism sector. The Tourism Master Plan of 1972, Nepal's first such document, emphasized Pokhara's potential and recommended guidelines for maintaining traditional building styles, height limits, and regional planning. Tourism has always been seen as a critical driver of Pokhara's socioeconomic development. Because of the concentration of tourists surrounding Fewa Lake, the Lakeside region has steadily developed into Pokhara's core tourism hub. During the Panchayat period, tourists were required to spend at least 20 USD per day and present official money exchange receipts to extend their visa, which further regulated and formalized tourism activities in the area.

Similarly, development of Pokhara as a tourist destination is closely linked to the contributions of several influential national and international figures. Notable among them according to NTB (2010) are Ekai Kawaguchi (1899), Maurice Herzog (1950), Tony Hagen (1955), Colonel Jimmy Roberts (1957), M.S. Kohli (1961), and Western hippies during the 1960s and 70s. National personalities such as Harka Gurung, Chandra Gurung and Jhalaka Thapa, also played key roles in endorsing Pokhara's natural and cultural appeal. Ekai Kawaguchi and Tony Hagen, in particular, were among the earliest foreign visitors to admire and praise the scenic beauty of the region. Dr. Harka Gurung, a native of Lamjung, made significant contributions as Nepal's first tourism minister, actively supporting the growth of tourism in Pokhara (NTB, 2011).

Tourism Significance of Pokhara as a Strategic Position

Pokhara has an important position in Nepal due to its central location, which makes it a key travel hub. Its accessibility by air and road, along with the availability of essential infrastructure such as an airport, bus terminals, hotels, restaurants, electricity, water supply, drainage, and sanitation systems, makes Pokhara a convenient gateway for visiting several popular tourist destinations in western, mid-western, and far-western Nepal. These include national parks, wildlife reserves, and conservation areas.

In addition to being geographically central, Pokhara has historically served as the administrative center of the Western Development Region, according to Nepal's regional planning policy. From a tourism point of view, it acts as the central node for 3 major touristic circuits:

- The Golden Triangle: Pokhara-Kathmandu-Chitwan
- The Silver Triangle: Pokhara-Chitwan-Lumbini
- The Adventure Triangle: Pokhara-Manang-Mustang

Each of those circuits promotes a mix of cultural, natural, and adventure tourism, with Pokhara at the heart of the travel experience (NTB 2011).

In 2010 alone, Pokhara welcomed 230,799 international visitors, making up 38.28% of Nepal's total tourist arrivals for that year (MoTCA 2012). This highlights its role as a major tourism center not only for the Pokhara Valley but for all of Western Nepal. Pokhara's scenic beauty, cultural richness, and its role as a starting and ending point for many adventure tourism activities such as trekking, paragliding, ultra-light flying, mountain expeditions, skydiving, rock climbing, rafting, and zip-lining further enhance its appeal (NTB 2008; Thapa 2010).

Tourists visiting Pokhara can enjoy a wide variety of experiences, including nature-based tours, cultural events, heritage exploration, traditional rituals, and outdoor sports (NTB 2011). It is the main gateway for treks to the ACA, ABC and MBC, and serves as a popular place for rest place of trekkers and relaxation (Tripathi 2008).

Pokhara is surrounded by several scenic villages and hill stations that offer excellent opportunities for village tourism and cultural immersion. Well-known nearby destinations include Sarang kot, Kaski kot, Naudanda, Dhikur pokhari, Kahun dada, Kalikastha, Sundari danda, Armalakot, Hemaja, Austrian hill, Dhampus, Mattikhan, Nirmalpokhari, Bharatpokhari, and Kristee. Surrounding villages such as Sirubari, Ghalegaun, Bhujung, Tanahunsur, Damauli, and Nuwakot are also well-known for their rich culture and warm hospitality, making them attractive rural tourism sites (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Tourism Spots Around Pokhara

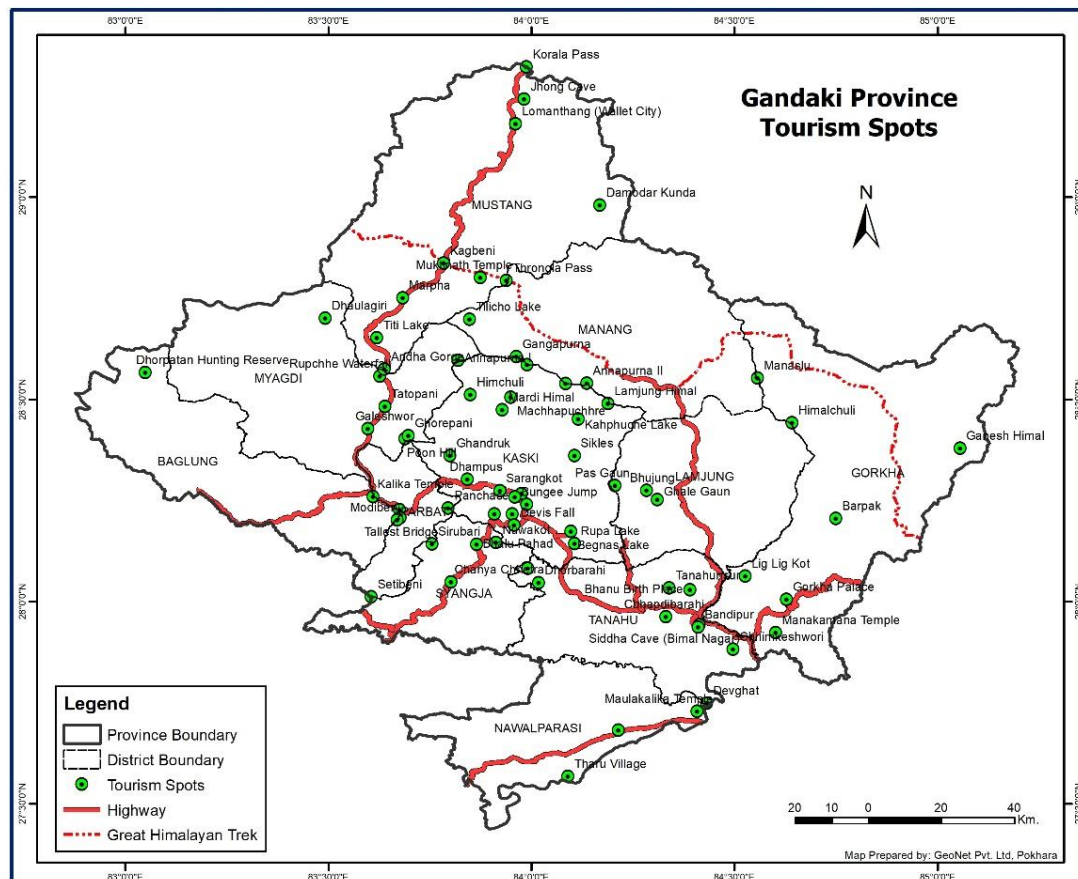
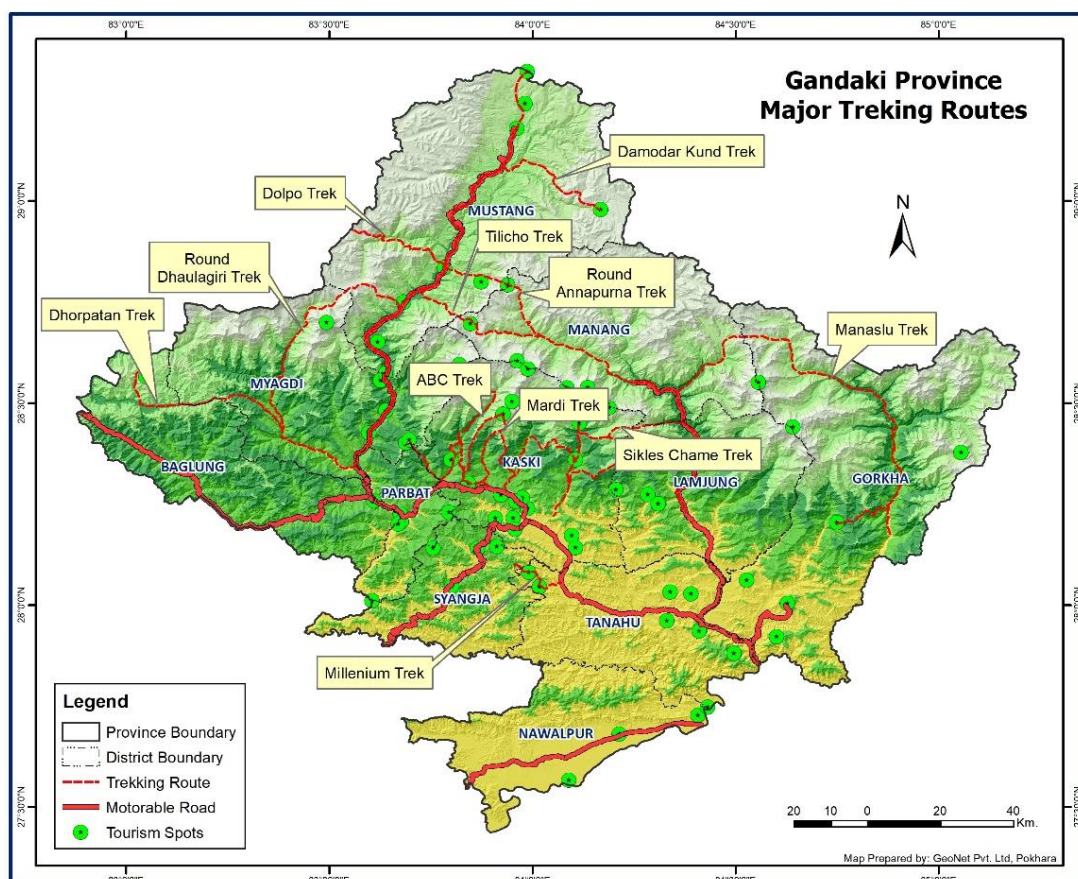


Figure 3: Major Trekking Routes from Pokhara Tourism Hub



In terms of trekking, Pokhara is the starting point for many short and long treks. Some of the popular short treks include (Figure. 3):

- Royal Trek (1,720 m)
- Ridgeline Trek via Bharatpokhari-Kristi (1,114 m)
- Millennium Trek (1,279 m)
- Mardi Himal Trek (4,100 m)
- Machhapuchhre Model Trek (3,682 m)
- Other major multi-day treks include:
- Annapurna Sanctuary (4,200 m)
- Jomsom–Muktinath Trek (3,800 m)
- Ghorepani–Poonhill Trek (3,120 m)
- Karpuche Glacial Lake Trek (3450 m)
- Kori Trek (3800 m)
- Upper Mustang (3,950 m)
- Nyagi Trek (3,210 m)
- Manang Region Treks (3,450 m)
- Manaslu Circuit (5,100 m)
- Dhaulagiri Circuit (5,710 m)
- Dolpa Trek (5,115 m)
- Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve Trek (3,940 m)

These treks offer a wide range of experiences—from cultural encounters in traditional villages to high-altitude mountain adventures appealing to all kinds of tourists, whether they are casual travelers, adventure seekers, researchers, or nature lovers. Pokhara's wide diversity in tourism products, along with its convenient location and beautiful surroundings, makes it one of Nepal's most important tourism destinations.

Association of Tourism Activities Pokhara with National Scenario

The comparative data highlights Pokhara's significant role in Nepal's tourism sector. In 2010, Pokhara received 460,918 international tourists, making up 38.5% of Nepal's total arrivals, indicating its status as a key destination. However, while Pokhara attracts a large volume of tourists, its contribution to national tourism income (21.2%) and employment (17.5%) is proportionally lower. This discrepancy is due to shorter average stays (3.2 days compared to the national average of 12 days) and lower per-day expenditure (\$48 versus the national \$65), suggesting that tourists spend less time and money in Pokhara. Still, Pokhara holds 38.3% of the national accommodation capacity and 43.8% of tourist standard hotels, reflecting its strong infrastructure.

Table: 1: Comparison of Tourism Activities in Pokhara with the National Situation

Tourism Activities and consequence	In Nepal	In Pokhara	Part of Pokhara (%)
Arrival of Intl. Tourists	1,197,191	460,918	38.5
Income from Touristic Business	Rs 120 billion per year	Rs 25.47 billion per year	21.2
Direct Employ	250,000	75,000	17.5
Length of Stay	12 days	3.2 days	26.8
Per Day Tourist Spending	\$65	\$48	87.3
Invest in Tourism	Rs 1.6 trillion	Rs 500 billion	31.3
Accommodation Capacities	40,856	15,642	38.3
Average Tenancy	65%	52%	-
Major Tourism Businesses:			
Tourist Hotel	1,254	550	43.8
Travel Agency	3,508	181	5.2
Trekking Agency	2,649	159	6.1
Restaurant & Bar	NA	100	-
Registered Homestay Village	324	32	9

Source: Source: MoCTCA, 2020; NTB, 2020; MoITFE, 2077 BS

Despite this, the occupancy rate remains lower (52% against the national 65%), showing under-utilization of available services. The city's share in travel (5.2%) and trekking agencies (6.1%) is relatively low, indicating potential for growth in these segments. Meanwhile, only 9% of registered homestay villages are in Pokhara, suggesting an opportunity to expand community-based tourism. Overall, Pokhara is a major tourism hub with vast potential, but enhancing tourist stay durations, spending, and business diversity can further strengthen its economic impact within Nepal's tourism industry.

Conclusion

The development of Pokhara as a major tourism hub in Nepal has evolved through a rich historical, geographical, and infrastructural trajectory. Beginning in the 1950s and 60s, Pokhara first gained attention as a transit point for mountaineers heading toward the Annapurna Himalaya. The landmark ascent of Mt. Annapurna I by Maurice Herzog in 1950 and the introduction of commercial trekking by Colonel Jimmy Roberts in 1966 were foundational milestones in positioning Pokhara as a global destination for adventure tourism. Over the decades, Pokhara has become known not only for trekking and mountaineering but also for its unique blend of nature, culture, and adventure-based tourism offerings. Contributions from national and international figures like Ekai Kawaguchi, Tony Hagen, Dr. Harka Gurung, and others played crucial roles in highlighting Pokhara's potential on both national and international platforms. With its strategic central location, Pokhara serves as a departure point for various tourist destinations across western, mid-western, and far-western Nepal. Tourism triangles such as Pokhara-Kathmandu-Chitwan (Golden), Pokhara-Chitwan-Lumbini (Silver), and Pokhara-Manang-Mustang (Adventure) further reinforce its role as a vital tourism gateway. The area has developed a strong tourism infrastructure with a variety of accommodations, transport services, trekking routes, and tourism activities. Empirical data from 2020 highlights Pokhara's substantial contribution to Nepal's tourism sector. Of the 1,197,191 international tourists visiting Nepal, 460,918 (38.5%) came to Pokhara. However, the region only accounted for 21.2% of tourism income and 17.5% of direct employment, reflecting shorter stays (3.2 days) and lower daily expenditure (\$48) compared to national averages. Despite having 38.3% of Nepal's accommodation capacity and 43.8% of its tourist-standard hotels, occupancy remains underutilized (52%). In conclusion, Pokhara holds immense potential to strengthen its position as Nepal's premier tourism destination. To realize this, strategies should focus on lengthening visitor stays, increasing spending, expanding tourism services, and promoting rural and cultural tourism. With balanced development and conservation, Pokhara can lead sustainable tourism growth in Nepal.

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