

Development of Tourism in Surkhet: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The main thrust of this paper is to discuss on the prospects and challenges for tourism development in Surkhet district, emphasizing the need for infrastructure improvement, capacity building, and people participation to create sustainable and inclusive tourism industry that benefits both government and local community. Surkhet district is culturally rich, linguistically homogeneous, and ecologically diverse area with massive potential for tourism development. Its rugged terrain, picturesque landscapes, and unique cultural heritage, offers opportunities for eco-tourism, sports tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism and community-based tourism. Despite its natural and cultural assets, tourism in the district has remained developing in the face of incomplete infrastructure and promotional efforts. This paper follows the qualitative method of research in descriptive and interpretative research design using field observation and focus group discussion (FGD). However, recent initiatives by both the government and local communities aim to enhance the development of tourism sector, focusing on preservation of local traditions, culture, and natural resources projected towards sustainable tourism development, employment generation and empowerment of community homestay.

Keywords: tourism development, communities, prospects, challenges, initiatives

Introduction

Tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the movement of people from place to place. The purposes of People's physical movement from origin place to a destination is vary; including cultural exploration, holiday pleasure, entertainment, education, business, and experiences (Hunter & Green, 1995). To meet the needs of travelers a wide range of activities and services designed and contribute to the infrastructure and economic development of the destination place. Defining the tourism Mathieson and Wall (1982) show how complex the concepts of tourism is and indicate “tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal place of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs”. Gilbert (1990) suggest that tourism embraces various supplementary trades and industries that are directly related to the activities and actions of the people. Focusing tourism, Goeldner et al. (2000) stressed that it is a composite activities, services and industries that delivers a travel experience undertaken during their stay in destination,

Tourism is a smokeless global industry that involvement of travelling people to various distinctive destination for various purposes (Kuseni, et al, 2024). It plays significant role in national economy by providing opportunities for job creation, infrastructure development, organic food production, cultural exchange, and awareness enhance activities and actions (Hunter& Green, 1995). As a multifaceted sector, it encompasses diverse activities and actions from visiting archeological, historical, and natural wonders to engaging in local tradition, ancient artifacts, health and sports. It helps global brotherhood connectivity and understanding (Hunter& Green, 1995).

Community-based tourism in Nepal has become a powerful way to empower local communities while creating meaningful connections between visitors and the places they explore. This approach ensures that tourism directly benefits the people who call these areas home, allowing them to share their rich traditions, culture, and way of life with travelers (Puri, at al., 2022). In remote villages and indigenous communities, travelers can experience unique activities such as homestays, cultural tours, and locally guided treks, all while supporting the livelihoods of those who might not typically benefit from mass tourism. At its heart, community-based tourism emphasizes the importance of preserving natural resources, protecting cultural heritage, and maintaining local customs, offering a more sustainable alternative to traditional tourism. Involving communities in the planning and management of tourism boosts their economy and fosters mutual respect and understanding between visitors and hosts (Kunwar, 2017).

In regions like Annapurna, Langtang, and Mustang, community-based tourism has taken off, offering locals new opportunities for economic growth and development (Kunwar, 2017). This model has created jobs, improved local infrastructure, and brought awareness to the need for sustainable tourism practices (Dhakal, 2024). By involving communities in the tourism process, it offers travelers a chance to experience Nepal in a more authentic and impactful way, all while contributing to the preservation of the country’s natural beauty and cultural heritage

(Puri, at al., 2022). Community-based tourism is becoming an essential tool for balancing the needs of tourism with the preservation of what makes Nepal unique, proving that sustainable travel can also be enriching for both visitors and hosts alike (Kunwar, 2017).

Tourism in Nepal has significantly reshaped the country, bringing both economic benefits and challenges (Dhakal, 2022). Its stunning landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and historical landmarks have made Nepal a sought-after destination for adventurers, spiritual seekers, and culture enthusiasts alike (Dhakal, 2024). As tourism has grown, the country's infrastructure, with the government and private sector working together to improve roads, airports, hotels, and transportation systems. These efforts have made it easier for visitors to explore Nepal's many treasures, from trekking in the Himalayas to visiting ancient temples and bustling cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara (Kunwar, 2005).

The rapid growth of tourism has also presented challenges (Kuseni et al. 2024). The environmental impact and sustainability of the industry have become key concerns. In response, Nepal has been taking steps to promote responsible tourism (Kunwar, 2017). This includes eco-friendly hotels, waste management initiatives, and community-based tourism programs that help preserve local traditions while boosting local economies. The tourism boom has also created new job opportunities across sectors such as hospitality, guiding, and travel services, offering rural communities a chance to participate in and benefit from the industry (Kuseni et al. 2024). Moving forward, Nepal is focusing on balancing economic growth with environmental and cultural preservation, ensuring that its tourism industry continues to flourish while supporting both its natural beauty and the well-being of its people. By embracing sustainable tourism practices and diversifying its offerings, Nepal is working towards a prosperous future for both the tourism sector and the communities it serves (Dhakal, 2022).

Tourism growth has been driven by enhance the contemporary components; use of digital platforms for information sharing and destination booking (Hall, 2002). Over time, tourism has become, more inclusive, catering to wide range of interests, and personal budget (Dhakal, 2022). However, Kuseni et al. (2024) advised that the tourism industry also faces some challenges like over tourism, environmental sustainability, preservation of local culture, sanitation and security. There have to be a growing emphasized on responsible tourists travel practice prioritizing sustainability and protection mechanism for future generation (Kunwar, 2005).

Tourism plays a valuable role in Nepalese economy, contributing to GDP and employment generation particularly in semi-urban areas. With its UNESCO World Heritage Sites, trekking routes, sacred temples, culture, and diverse ethnic communities (Hall, 2002). This paper discusses the existing tourism development in Surkhet, explores the prospects and challenges in tourism sector into consideration.

Table 1

Total number of tourist arrival in Nepal in 2024

Month	Number of tourist	Percent
January	79100	6.89

February	97426	8.48
March	128167	11.16
April	111376	9.70
May	90211	7.86
June	76736	6.68
July	64599	5.62
August	72719	6.33
September	96305	8.39
October	124393	10.83
November	114501	9.97
December	92034	8.01
Total	1147567	100

Source: NTB 2025

The table provides a month-by-month breakdown of tourist arrivals in Nepal for 2024, totaling 1,147,567 visitors for the year. Seasonality plays a significant role in shaping the tourist traffic in Nepal, with some months consistently attracting more tourists due to favorable weather conditions for trekking and other activities. Peak tourist months March (128,167 arrivals - 11.16%) and October (124,393 arrivals - 10.83%) are the two highest months, with March leading. These months are known for good weather, especially for trekking, hiking, and exploring the cultural sites of Nepal, making them high season for international tourists. November (114,501 arrivals - 9.97%) also stands out with a high number of visitors, likely due to the tail end of the autumn season, which is another prime period for tourism.

July (64,599 arrivals - 5.62%) stands out as the month with the lowest number of tourists, which can be attributed to the monsoon season in Nepal. This period is less favorable for outdoor activities due to heavy rainfall, leading to lower tourist arrivals. June (76,736 arrivals - 6.68%) also sees a dip in tourism, as it is right before the monsoon starts, further affecting travel conditions. The months of February (97,426 arrivals - 8.48%), April (111,376 arrivals - 9.70%), and September (96,305 arrivals - 8.39%) show relatively stable and moderate levels of arrivals, making up ‘between 8% to 9%’ of the total. These months may not be peak season, but they still see solid tourist activity due to favorable weather or cultural events.

There is a clear pattern of high season in spring and autumn (March, October, November), likely driven by trekking and outdoor adventures. Low season in summer (June, July) suggests that the monsoon dampens the flow of tourists. Stable months like February, April, and September reflect a balance between peak and off-peak travel periods. Tourism in Nepal is highly seasonal, with peaks during the spring and autumn months, which are ideal for outdoor activities like trekking, mountaineering, and cultural tourism. There is a sharp drop in arrivals during the monsoon season, which may prompt the tourism industry to focus on promoting indoor or cultural tourism activities during these months. The total figure of 1,147,567 tourists reflects a solid recovery or growth in Nepal's tourism sector, potentially influenced by global travel trends or specific initiatives to attract tourists to Nepal. This analysis provides a

comprehensive look at Nepal's tourism trends in 2024, showcasing how seasonality and weather conditions heavily influence tourist flows.

Nepal is a country that has captured the imaginations of travelers worldwide (Kunwar, 2005). Its richness cultural heritage, diverse geography, spiritual significance, it has become a hotspot for cultural, religious, trekkers and adventure visitors (Dhakal, 2019). Despite its immense potential, Nepal's tourism industry has faced various challenges over the decades. As the world gravitates towards more sustainable and responsible tour, tourism development must adapt to evolving demands while safeguarding its unique environment and culture (Dhakal, 2022).

Tourism in Nepal traces its roots back to the 1950s, after the country opened the doors to the foreign. Successful adventured journey of Mount Everest in 1953 by two climbers named Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa. Nepal has gradually improved tourism infrastructure with the introduction of quality service, accessible trekking routes, and luxurious hotels (Kunwar, 2005). After the restoration of democracy, in 1990s, Nepal has boosted cultural tourism, homestay tourism. Tourism has become one of the cornerstones of Nepal's economy, contributing to its gross domestic product (GDP), earning foreign exchanges; enhance entrepreneurs, and employment opportunities (Kunwar, 2005). In 2023, NPR 68.07 billion revenue collected from foreign tourists visiting in Nepal (Economic survey, 2024). During the staid tourist spends at 13.2 days and daily average expenditure of \$41.0 per tourist. Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, in 2023 recorded that 62.5 percent of the tourist visited for entertainment/ pleasure/leisure, 15.2 percent visited for adventure/mountaineering, 13.1 percent visited for pilgrimage, remain 9.2 percent travel Nepal for other purposes. Among the tourist arriving to visited Nepal in 2023, Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, recorded that 31.5 percent were Indian, followed by USA 9.9 percent, China 6.00 percent, 5.2 percent from UK, 3.8 percent from Australia, 3.6 percent from Bangladesh and 40.00 percent from others nations (Economic survey, 2024).

Physical infrastructure, communication and transportation have played the great role to enhance the tourism activities and actions. They also help to social and economic development of the country. To meet the target of tourism policy and strategies focused on physical infrastructure. Economic survey (2024) stated that by the Mid-March of 2024, 'a total of 18,241 kilometers of blacktopped road, 7,697 kilometers of gravel, and 8,329 kilometers of earthen roads had been constructed'. This evidence shows that the physical infrastructure and transportation are developing continuously; it brings the increase in tourism activities and actions of the country. In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of the need for sustainable tourism development practices in Nepal in to consideration (Kunwar, 2017). The country's natural beauties and cultural heritage are its prime assets, but they are also fragile and vulnerable to destructive effects of over tourism.

In recent years Nepal has gained popularity in water sports, attracting adventure enthusiasts from around the world (Dhakal,2022). Despite being known for its majestic mountains, Nepal is also home to several fast-flowing rivers and lakes that offer exciting opportunities for water-based activities. The most popular water sport in the country is white-water rafting, with rivers like trishuli, Seti, Bhote koshi, and kali Gandagi offering thrilling rapids for both beginners and

experienced rafters (Bhandari, 2022). These rivers wind through picturesque landscapes, providing a mix of adrenaline-pumping excitement and serene natural beauty, making it a sought-after experience for tourists. Nepal also offers opportunities for stand-up paddle boarding and fishing in its rivers and lakes, attracting both adventure seekers and those looking to enjoy the tranquility of nature. With the country diverse geography, water sports in Nepal provide a perfect blend of adventure, relaxation, and natural beauty, making it an emerging destination for water enthusiasts.

Moreover, Nepal's commitment to sustainable tourism is evident in its policies aimed at conserving its ecosystems. The establishment of conservation areas like the Sagarmatha National Park, home to Mount Everest, and Chitwan National Park, known for its biodiversity, showcases Nepal's dedication to preserving its natural heritage while providing tourists with the opportunity to experience its environmental wonders. Regarding the development of tourism sector Dhakal (2024) stated that "The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation prepared a national strategy plan (2016-2025) for the balanced development of tourism sector in the country". This strategic approach to tourism infrastructure development can help Nepal established itself as a leading destination for both nature lover and adventure enthusiasts alike. Tourism development is directly related to natural attractions (Kunwar, 2017). Natural attraction plays a pivotal role in tourism development, offering a unique opportunity to display the beauty and diversity of a region's landscapes, wildlife, and natural resources (Dhakal, 2022). Natural wonders offer both relaxation and adventure, catering to a wide range of interests from eco-tourism and wildlife safaris to hiking and water sports.

Furthermore, the development of tourism can foster environmental awareness and conservation efforts. By promoting sustainable tourism practices, communities can be empowered to protect their natural heritage while benefiting economically from its preservation. Responsible tourism initiatives encourage tourists to respect the environment, while local communities can engage in activities like eco-guides, nature walks, and organic farming, helping to create a sustainable balance between development and conservation. With the right management, natural attractions can serve as powerful drivers of economic growth while ensuring the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources for future generations.

Methods and materials

This paper based on the field research marked with the descriptive research design combined with interpretative methods of data interpretation and analysis, employed Qualitative method. This paper utilized primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through key informants interviews, focus group discussion (FGD) and field observation. Secondary data were used national report and previous related research and works. Key informant interviews were conducted through interview schedule from the municipality and rural municipalities of the Surkhet district. Collected information and data were presented through tabulation, and description. The data and information had collected and analyzed in February and March 2025.

Table 2

Methodological parts of the study

SN	Methodological unit	Activities
1	Methods	Qualitative
2	Research design	Descriptive and interpretative
3	Sources of data	Primary and secondary
4	Primary sources	Key informant interviews and field observation
5	Secondary sources	Government publication and related research
6	Data analysis tools and techniques	Simple statistical tools; table
7	Number of key informants	9 key informants member (one from each municipality; 4 from rural municipalities and 5 from municipalities)
8	Field observation	Major destination sites of each municipalities
9	Focus of research	Natural, cultural and contemporary activities and actions

Results

Tourism is more than just a way to see new places; it's an exciting and constantly changing industry that connects people from all over the world. Whether it's a relaxing vacation, a business trip, or an adventure abroad, tourism allows us to discover new cultures, explore different landscapes, and create unforgettable memories. From the ancient wonders of the world to vibrant, modern cities, tourism opens doors to new experiences while supporting local communities and economies. It helps build bridges between people and places, promoting understanding and personal growth. As a key player in global economies, the tourism industry keeps evolving, offering endless opportunities for discovery, connection, and adventure.

Surkhet district, located in the mid-western region of Nepal, is a hidden gem that showcases the rich natural beauty of the country. The district is surrounded by lush forests, rolling hills and river valleys, making it an ideal destination for nature lovers. The valley is nestled between the Majestic hills of the mid-hills region, in greenery, with dense forests of sal trees, pine, and other species that provide a serene and peaceful environment. The beautiful terrain is also dotted with small lakes and rivers, creating a perfect blend of natural beauty and tranquility can easily attract the tourist.

The Bheri River, which flows through the district, adds to the area's charm. Its crystal-clear water meanders through fertile plains and rugged terrains, creating picturesque landscapes that are perfect for photography and relaxation. The river valley is a key attraction, offering visitors a peaceful retreat amidst the surrounding hills. Surkhet's moderate climate especially during the spring and autumn seasons, enhances its beauty, making it a wonderful place to explore year-round. The district's trekking routes offer panoramic views of the surrounding mountains, including distant glimpses of the mountains. Surkhet also has several historical and cultural sites that are deeply connected to the natural landscape, further enriching the experience for

visitors. Whether it's hiking through its hills enjoying a riverside picnic or simply soaking in the science views, Surkhet district is a tranquil paradise, offering a peaceful escape into the heart of nature.

Information Obtained Through Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with local community members, youth groups, and cultural leaders provided valuable insights into the current status and potential of cultural, natural, social and religious, and adventure tourism activities and actions in Surkhet.

Cultural tourism

Participants emphasized that Surkhet's diverse ethnic and cultural heritage is a strong asset for attracting tourists. Traditional festivals like Dashain, Tihar, Maghi, Tihar, and Holi were highlighted as key events that could be promoted as cultural tourism attractions. These festivals not only showcase local customs but also offer opportunities for visitors to participate in traditional dances, music, and rituals. They said that Deuda dance and song is gradually popular in Birendranagar. Deuda song and dance is perform every month in Surkhet.

The FGDs also revealed that local handicrafts, food, and dress are unique aspects of Surkhet's identity that can appeal to tourists if properly marketed. However, participants noted a lack of training and resources to present these cultural assets in a tourist-friendly manner. Many expressed interest in establishing cultural villages and homestay programs, where visitors can stay with families and experience local lifestyles. Concerns were raised about the gradual decline of traditional practices, especially among the younger generation. Participants suggested that tourism could help preserve and promote these traditions if local youth are involved and supported through training and incentives. They also stressed the need for government and NGO support in organizing cultural events, improving infrastructure, and promoting Surkhet's culture through media and tourism platforms.

Natural and scenic attraction

During the discussion, participants agreed that natural beauty plays a big role in attracting tourists to Surkhet. Many shared that the lakes, rivers, and surrounding hills are not just beautiful to look at but also offer a peaceful escape for visitors. People come here to relax, breathe fresh air, and enjoy quiet moments in nature. Whether it's a calm boat ride on a lake or a slow walk by the river, these simple experiences create strong emotional connections for tourists. Local residents mentioned that visitors often talk about the tranquility and refreshing environment, saying it's a much-needed break from city life.

Participants also pointed out that Surkhet's natural scenery has long-term value. It gives the region a strong identity and could be a major selling point for both Nepali and foreign travelers. Activities like nature walks, photography, bird watching, and simply exploring untouched landscapes were highlighted as key attractions. The group agreed that with proper promotion and sustainable management, Surkhet's natural beauty could help boost the local economy and place the region more firmly on Nepal's tourism map. As people are now looking for destinations that feel authentic and close to nature, Surkhet has a real chance to grow as a sustainable and peaceful getaway.

Adventure activities and action

During the focus group discussions, participants shared that Surkhet has untapped potential for adventure tourism, thanks to its diverse landscape of rivers, hills, forests, and caves. The FGD expressed interest in developing activities like rafting, kayaking, hiking, paragliding, mountain biking, and rock climbing. The Bheri and Karnali rivers, in particular, were highlighted as ideal for water sports, while areas like Gothikanda, Ratanangla, Chhapre, Gumichuli, Majhigaon, Baraghar and Chinggad offer exciting opportunities for trekking and camping. Participants felt that adventure tourism could be a powerful way to attract thrill-seeking tourists and create more jobs for local youth, especially with proper training and safety measures.

However, the discussions also brought up several challenges limiting the growth of adventure tourism. These include a lack of trained guides, safety equipment, and emergency services, as well as poor promotion and limited infrastructure in remote areas. Participants emphasized the need for government support, private investment, and training programs to build the necessary foundation for safe and sustainable adventure activities. They also stressed that awareness campaigns and partnerships with adventure travel agencies could help to Surkhet an exciting alternative destination for adventure in Nepal. The participants also mentioned that Surkhet's natural scenery could help define its identity as a tourist destination. They noted a growing interest among travelers in outdoor activities like nature photography, hiking, and exploring untouched landscapes. With the right kind of promotion, they believe Surkhet can attract more eco-conscious tourists who want a genuine connection with nature. Terrain with its forests, hills and valleys, it is perfect for trekking and hiking, offering various routes that allow visitors to explore the untouched wilderness and local villages while enjoying stunning views of the surrounding mountains and rivers.

Eco-tourism prospective

During the discussion, participants shared that Surkhet is a great place for eco-tourism. They said the forests, rivers, and lakes are home to many plants and animals. Tourists can enjoy bird watching, nature walks, and wildlife photography in these peaceful natural areas. People often spot deer, wild pig, monkeys, leopard and different bird species, which makes it exciting for nature lovers. Participants felt that eco-tourism can also help protect the environment. It raises awareness about the need to care for wildlife and natural places. They said that if done responsibly, eco-tourism can bring income to locals and protect nature at the same time. As more tourists look for green and quiet destinations, Surkhet can be a perfect spot for those seeking real, nature-based experiences.

Water based activities

The FGDs conducted with local youth groups, rafting guides, tourism entrepreneurs, and community leaders provided insightful information regarding the potential and challenges of developing water sports tourism particularly rafting, kayaking, river crossing, fishing and boating in the Bheri and Karnali rivers. Participants noted that both Bheri and Karnali rivers have strong potential for water sports due to their natural flow, rapids, and scenic beauty. Local youth, especially those in areas like Chaukune, Gurvakot, Lekbesi and Barahatal, expressed interest in being trained as professional rafting guides. They shared that small-scale rafting and

boating activities have already been informally initiated by some local businesses and adventure enthusiasts, particularly during the tourist season.

However, several challenges were also discussed. A major issue highlighted was the lack of proper safety equipment, trained personnel, and rescue mechanisms. The absence of formal water sports training centers or government-supported programs was seen as a significant gap. Participants also mentioned poor infrastructure around riverbanks, such as rest stops, and waste disposal facilities, which discourages long-term tourism development.

Tourism Infrastructure

The FGD exposed that while daily air services and road transportation are available in major municipalities of Surkhet, the situation in rural areas remains challenging. Participants acknowledged that Birendranagar has become a central hub due to its airport and highway connectivity, it makes easier for tourists to access nearby attractions. However, they emphasized that many rural tourist destinations lack of proper road access, regular transport, and basic infrastructure, such as community resting place and rest areas, and sanitation facilities. In areas like Chinggad, Simta, and parts of Chaukune, transportation is irregular and often affected by weather conditions and poor road maintenance. This limits the flow of tourists and discourages private investment. Participants also expressed concern about the lack of accommodations, trained guides, and emergency services in remote areas. They strongly recommended that infrastructure development be prioritized equally in rural municipalities to ensure balanced tourism growth across the district. Enhancing tourism infrastructure also involves promoting sustainable tourism activities and actions. Proper waste management systems, eco-friendly accommodations and responsible tourism programs also help to environmental conservation.

Community-based tourism

One of the most promising developments in Nepal's tourism sector is the rise of community-based tourism (CBT). This approach focuses on empowering local communities by involving them directly in the tourism process. By supporting local businesses, cultural exchanges, and sustainable practices, CBT not only enriches the visitor experience but also ensures that economic benefits remain within the community. For instance, the “Home Stay” programs in rural areas allow tourists to stay with local families, offering a unique cultural experience and generating income for host communities. Additionally, many trekking areas are increasingly adopting sustainable tourism practices, such as waste management and eco-friendly lodges, to mitigate the environmental impact of tourism. Through these initiatives, tourism in Nepal is shifting towards a more inclusive and responsible model, benefiting both visitors and local populations.

During the focus group discussions, participants expressed strong interest in promoting community-based tourism (CBT) as a way to involve local people directly in tourism activities. They mentioned that Surkhet's diverse culture, traditional lifestyles, and natural beauty offer the perfect setting for CBT. Local homestays, village tours, cultural performances, and traditional food experiences were identified as key attractions. Participants shared that tourists are increasingly looking for authentic and meaningful experiences, and staying with local

families gives them a chance to connect with local life. Many communities are already offering basic homestay services, and with proper training and support, they believe this can grow even more.

The discussion also highlighted the benefits of CBT for rural areas, especially in terms of income generation, women’s participation, and cultural preservation. Participants said that CBT gives local people a sense of ownership and pride in their culture and environment. However, they also noted the need for better facilities, marketing, and coordination with local governments and tourism boards. They recommended more training in hospitality, hygiene, and basic language to improve guest experiences. Overall, the FGD reflected a strong belief that community-based tourism can lead to sustainable rural development and local empowerment.

Table 3

Major tourist destination of Surkhet

S N	Municipality	Potential Destination
1	Chaukune Rural Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Bheri Karnali Dovan b) Ghat Gaon c) Sahasra Mul (water source) d) Rato Darbar (Red place) e) Vindrawan Bihar f) Sahid Park (Martyr’s Park) g) Surpal Tal (Pond)
2	Panchapuri Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Jajura Daha b) Chamere Gufa (Cave) c) Gupti Tal d) Panchatale Gufa (Five Story Cave) e) Shivaram Gurukul shikshya (Gurukul Education) f) Bageshwari Mai (Temple) g) Chhapre Lekha (forest)
3	Barahatal Rural Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Barahatal (Lake) b) Kummikot c) Kalyankad d) Chamere Gufa (Cave) e) Ranighat- Taranga Rafting f) Karnali U Mode g) Batu Bhairab Temple (God)
4	Birendranagar Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Kankrebihar b) Bulbule Park c) Shuva mandir (Temple) d) Deutai Bajai (Temple) e) Sahid Park (Martyr’s Park)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> f) Ratanagla g) Gothikanda Gadhi h) Baraghar Village i) Mangal Gadhi j) Province Stadium k) Ghantaghar Park l) Bhiuchula m) Jarbuta
5	Chinggad Rural Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Malika (Sacred Place) b) Buruse (forest of Redodendron) c) Buruse Jharana (Waterfalls)
6	Lekbesi Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Agriculture Research Centre b) Bakhrekot Village c) Timmurkot d) Khand Devi Temple e) Rupse Village
7	Bheri Ganga Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Deuti Temple b) Baraha Temple c) Chamere Gufa (Cave) d) Gidde Danda (Eagle Mountain) e) Harre f) Kalidamar Village
8	Gurvakot Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Shubba Ghat b) Deuti Temple c) Khatang d) Malarani Gufa (Cave) e) Bhote chuli (mountain) f) Ramrikanda Daha (Pond) g) Dhage Chari Jharana (Waterfalls)
9	Simta Rural Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Kotko Thumko b) Koteswar Temple c) Rajkanda Darbar Area d) Ranipakha Gufa (Cave) e) Tamadhari (water tap of Copper) f) Jante Dhunga (Wedding Stones) g) Bhote Chuli (Mountain) h) Lapu village (Birth Place of Deuti Bajai)

Source: KII. 2025

The table outlines key natural, cultural, and religious tourism sites in Surkhet District, categorized by local administrative units (municipalities and rural municipalities). These

destinations reflect the district's rich diversity in terms of geography, history, spirituality, and ecological significance. The table demonstrates that Surkhet District is endowed with a wide variety of tourism assets, ranging from caves, lakes, temples, and rivers to historical forts and sacred villages. Each municipality contributes uniquely to the district's overall tourism appeal, suggesting strong potential for developing integrated tourism circuits (e.g., religious circuits, adventure trails, nature escapes). However, unlocking this potential requires better infrastructure, promotion, and community involvement to transform these destinations into well-managed tourism products.

Chaukune offers a blend of spiritual, natural, and historical sites. The Bheri-Karnali Dovan, where two major rivers meet, holds both religious and ecological importance. Sites like Sahasra Mul, a sacred water source, and Surpal Tal, a pond in a serene setting, promote eco-tourism. The Rato Darbar (Red Palace) and Vindrawan Bihar add historical and religious value, while Sahid Park commemorates local heroes. Known for its caves and lakes, Panchapuri is rich in natural wonders. Chamere Gufa (Bat Cave) and Panchatale Gufa (Five-Story Cave) are significant for adventure and religious tourism. Lakes like Jajura Daha and Gupti Tal provide opportunities for eco-tourism. Temples such as Bageshwari Mai and educational sites like Shivaram Gurukul highlight cultural and spiritual traditions. Barahatal is a promising area for nature-based tourism. It includes Barahatal Lake, Chamere Gufa, and Ranighat-Taranga rafting on the Karnali River. Religious places like Batu Bhairab Temple and historical bends like the Karnali U Mode enhance its appeal.

As the district headquarters, Birendranagar serves as the tourism hub of Surkhet. Major attractions include historical and religious sites such as Kakrebihar Temple, Deuti Bajai, and Shuva Mandir. Bulbule Park and Ghantaghar Park attract domestic tourists for recreation, while places like Gothikanda Gadhi and Mangal Gadhi offer archaeological interest. The Province Stadium adds a sports tourism aspect. Chinggad features Malika, a sacred place, and Buruse forest, famous for its rhododendrons. Buruse Jharana, a local waterfall, offers scenic beauty and potential for eco-tourism and picnic spots. This municipality is ideal for agri-tourism and cultural exploration. It hosts the Agriculture Research Centre and traditional villages like Bakhrekot and Rupse. Temples like Khand Devi enhance the spiritual atmosphere, while Timmurkot is a culturally rich location. Bheri Ganga blends natural and religious tourism. It includes sacred places such as Deuti Temple and Baraha Temple, as well as natural attractions like Chamere Gufa and Gidde Danda (Eagle Mountain). Kalidamar Village and Harre reflect rural lifestyles.

Gurvakot municipality features a variety of destinations, including Shubba Ghat and Malarani Gufa, suitable for religious tourism. Natural attractions like Ramrikanda Daha and Dhage Chari Jharana appeal to eco-tourists, while Bhote Chuli offers scenic mountain views. Simta is rich in cultural heritage and natural beauty. Sites such as Koteswar Temple, Rajkanda Darbar, and Lapu Village (birthplace of Deuti Bajai) reflect its spiritual and historical significance. Natural features like Ranipakha Gufa and Jante Dhunga (Wedding Stones) enhance its eco-tourism potential.

Discussion

The study district, Surkhet is a nestled in the lap of Bheri and Karnali rivers in a cultural mosaic that offers a unique blend of tradition religions, art and history. Its diverse ethnic communities, old monuments, and vivarant festivals make it one of the most culturally rich Districts of the Karnali Province. Cultural tourism, which focuses on experiencing and understanding the traditional life style of region, history has potential to be a major contributors to domestic and foreign tourism activities and action of tourism industry. Cultural heritage is a captivating blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous making Surkhet District's an attractive destination for cultural tourist. Surkhet is the head quarter and also a gateway to the Karnali Province and is known for its diverse geography, rich cultural heritage, and religious significance. With increasing connectivity and awareness, the district holds immense potential as a tourism hub. However, it also faces various challenges that need to be addressed for sustainable development.

Surkhet District holds immense potential as a growing tourism destination due to its rich natural beauty, cultural diversity, and religious heritage. Nestled in the mid-western hills of Nepal, it serves as a gateway to the remote yet stunning Karnali Province, including famous destinations like Rara Lake and Shey-Phoksundo National Park. Surkhet itself offers attractions like Bulbule Lake, panoramic viewpoints, lush forests, and adventure trekking routes. These natural assets make it ideal for eco-tourism, hiking, bird watching, and nature retreats. With improved infrastructure and promotion, Surkhet could become a central hub for travelers exploring western Nepal.

In addition to natural beauty, Surkhet is culturally and spiritually vibrant. The district is home to ethnic groups like the Tharu, Magar, and Khas Arya communities, whose festivals, traditional dances, and crafts offer unique cultural tourism experiences. Religious sites such as the historic Kakrebihar Temple and Deuti Bajai Temple draw thousands of pilgrims every year, highlighting the district's significance for spiritual tourism. With proper development of accommodations, guided tours, and cultural programs, Surkhet has strong potential to attract both domestic and international tourists seeking authentic cultural and religious experiences.

Despite its potential, tourism development in Surkhet faces several challenges that hinder its growth. One of the major issues is inadequate infrastructure. Many tourist sites, especially in rural areas, lack proper roads, making them difficult to access. Transportation services are limited, and public facilities such as clean restrooms, tourist information centers, and resting areas are often missing or poorly maintained. Additionally, the number of quality hotels, homestays, and restaurants is insufficient to meet the needs of visitors, particularly during peak travel seasons.

Another significant problem is the lack of promotion and professional management in the tourism sector. Surkhet remains relatively unknown to international tourists, partly due to minimal marketing efforts and the absence of a strong digital presence. Local tourism authorities and businesses often lack the resources and expertise to promote the region effectively. Furthermore, there is a shortage of trained manpower, such as professional tour

guides, hospitality workers, and emergency responders, which affects the quality of service provided to tourists.

Environmental and cultural concerns also pose challenges to sustainable tourism development. Unregulated construction, deforestation, and poor waste management threaten the natural beauty of the area. Religious and cultural sites are at risk of being damaged by unplanned tourism activities. Moreover, there is a growing concern that local traditions and lifestyles could be diluted or commercialized in the face of tourism if not preserved carefully. To overcome these challenges, a coordinated effort involving government bodies, local communities, and the private sector is essential to ensure tourism in Surkhet develops in a sustainable and inclusive way.

To promote sustainable tourism development in Surkhet, a focused approach is needed that balances growth with conservation. Infrastructure improvements should be prioritized, including better road access to tourist sites, clean facilities, and the development of eco-friendly accommodations. Investing in digital marketing and partnerships with travel agencies can help raise awareness about Surkhet's unique attractions. Training local youth in hospitality, guiding, and tourism management will improve service quality while creating employment opportunities within the community.

Collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and local communities will be essential in realizing the vision of sustainable tourism in Nepal. Moreover, with global travelers increasingly seeking authentic, nature-based, and community-driven experiences, Nepal is well-positioned to capitalize on these trends, offering diverse opportunities for cultural exchanges and eco-friendly travel. Local governments and communities should work together to preserve forests, religious sites, and traditional villages through responsible tourism practices. Community-based tourism initiatives can empower locals to take ownership of tourism projects, ensuring that the economic benefits are widely shared. By promoting eco-tourism, cultural festivals, and spiritual journeys in a respectful and organized manner, Surkhet can grow into a model destination for sustainable tourism in Nepal.

Conclusion

Surkhet district is a center of attraction for domestic and foreign tourist. The district is a place for spiritual tourism, attracting pilgrims and visitors seeking peace and meditation. Surkhet become a destination for all age group, gender and religion. Many lakes and rivers are considered sacred in the local region's context and these water bodies are often the side of rituals, prayers and ceremonies. It has beautiful landscapes, rivers, lakes, and forests. There are also historical temples and cultural sites. The region is rich in traditions, festivals, and local foods. Adventure activities like rafting, hiking, and cave exploration can attract thrill-seekers. Eco-tourism and cultural tourism are growing interests among travelers. With good promotion and better infrastructure, more visitors can be drawn in. Tourism can create jobs and support the local economy. Surkhet can become a popular and sustainable tourist destination in Nepal. The potential for fishing and swimming along Bheri and Karnali rivers add on another layer to its appeal. These water based activities not only offer enjoyment and relaxation for tourists, but

also encourage a connection to the environment and sustainable practices. By promoting water sports and recreational activities; Surkhet has the potential to attract eco-conscious tourists while contributing to the development for a sustainable tourism industry that respect the natural beauty of the region. Tourism in Surkhet is at a crossroads, with immense opportunities and challenges ahead. Limited access to many tourist destination sites, lack of proper marketing, poor awareness level of the host communities, inadequate training, and lack of tourist information centers are challenges for tourism development in the district. By implementation sustainable practices, investing in infrastructure, and prioritizing community involvement through attentive, collaborative, and destination development strategies, Surkhet district can captivate the warm hospitality and satisfied the tourist and contribute the tourism development.

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