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NEPAL LAUNCHES THE FIRST OF TWO LOCALLY-OWNED TRAVEL-BOOKING PORTALS

Outdoor Himalayan Treks Joins the Ranks of the whl.travel Global Grassroots Travel Network

KATHMANDU, NEPAL. Independent travellers to Nepal and hoteliers in Kathmandu have both celebrated the early-April launch of www.kathmanduhotel-link.com. A locally owned and operated travel-booking portal, it propels Kathmandu-based small- and medium-sized tourism operators into the global e-marketplace.

“This initiation of connecting local hoteliers to the international market will aid in the promotion of Nepal’s beautiful destinations and unique products,” said Mr Prachanda Man Shrestha, CEO of the Nepal Tourism Board. “Nepal Tourism Board applauds...this endeavour that will certainly help the tourism of the country in the long run.”

Mr Prasadha B. Panday, President of the Hotel Association of Nepal agreed: "We are confident the launching of this portal will add further momentum to the Nepalese tourism sector, providing necessary facilitation to both accommodation/service seekers and providers."

www.kathmanduhotel-link.com is the 156th locally managed destination website brought to the public by whl.travel, the global grassroots travel network catering to independent and responsible travellers (www.whl.travel). The Kathmandu website is also the first of two currently planned for Nepal and the 14th travel portal in South Asia, adding to others in India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Outdoor Himalayan Treks (OHT) joins whl.travel as its local partner in Nepal with full responsibility for the website. In operation for five years, OHT organises treks designed to give travellers greater insight into the land, culture and its people. With a friendly, dedicated and professional staff of 18 full-timers and 16 part-time guides, OHT also offers a full range of travel services, including accommodation bookings and airline ticketing.

whl.travel was won over by OHT’s commitment to sustainable tourism. Most of OHT’s trekking clients are taken to remote villages, where they can experience traditional ways of life and develop greater understanding of their culture. Guests are encouraged and often motivated to volunteer on projects or provide financial assistance. OHT goes one step further by supporting volunteer-worker initiatives and even providing donations to promising projects and organising charity treks. In addition, OHT’s Managing Director, Rajendra Prasad Sapotka, once an orphan himself, has founded, and through OHT, continues to support an orphanage home in Kathmandu for displaced kids.

“We are proud to join the whl.travel network and honoured to be the local connection for inbound tourists visiting Kathmandu,” said a spokesperson for the OHT team. “We are

impressed by the whl.travel 'Caring for Destination' initiative. It is indeed very encouraging to find such an active collaborator in our own efforts to promote the destinations in which we operate, while also helping to preserve their environmental, social and cultural values. We hope this partnership will be a milestone in tourism here."

The International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, played a catalytic role in bringing together whl.travel and the Nepal tourism industry. The development of www.kathmanduhotel-link.com received support from IFC Advisory Services in South Asia – the South Asia Enterprise Development Facility – co-funded by the United Kingdom's DFID, European Union, CIDA (Canada) and the governments of Norway and Netherlands. IFC has supported similar whl.travel undertakings in Cape Verde, Madagascar, Senegal, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Tanzania and Vietnam.

Per Kjellerhaug, IFC South Asia Regional Manager, said "Through its support for this project, IFC will help create business opportunities for Nepal, extend support to local operators and enhance income and employment opportunities."

As of mid-April, whl.travel spans 159 destinations in 74 countries on five continents, with a particular emphasis on developing and emerging markets. By the end of 2009, further expansion will reach an additional 100 destinations.

Unique to whl.travel is its franchise model. whl.travel's local partners, called marketplace operators (MPOs), serve as vital on-site lifelines to travellers looking for an often-missing personal touch in online services. The MPOs also espouse values fundamental to the whl.travel vision – care for their destinations' cultural and environmental sustainability. This is made evident by attention to and promotion of the kinds of fun and ethical travel experiences that, until recently, have been largely incidental to travel planning. Now, however, they are increasingly at the core of decisions made by conscientious travellers.

"I am delighted to see the launch of the site for Kathmandu and to be working with the team at Outdoor Himalayan Treks," remarks Len Cordiner, CEO of whl.travel. "The new site in Kathmandu profiles some wonderful local accommodation and tours for the independent and small-group traveller, allowing both to be booked online and secured with a credit card. Outdoor Himalayan Treks was selected from a large number of possible partners for these sites due to their obvious commitment to sustainable tourism and deep knowledge of local tourism experiences. We believe their selection of accommodation and tours will afford travellers a unique insight to this magnificent country."

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