

## REFLECTIONS

### **Running tourism**

*Why are running trails in Southasia not yet a popular form of adventure tourism?*

By Roger Henke

While exploring the promotion of ‘adventure tourism’ in Southasia recently, I came across an impressive number of activities. Apart from obvious candidates – white-water rafting, diving, trekking, mountaineering – one can also go whale watching in Sri Lanka, heli-skiing in India or honey hunting in Nepal. Yet the simple question that kicked off this bout of research was: Why is running not on any of these lists?

I regularly run long-distance trails, and admittedly am thoroughly biased. But the relevance of the question lies beyond this personal interest. Travel and tourism are estimated to account for nearly 10 percent of global gross domestic product, 11 percent of world exports and more than nine percent of overall world investment. Tourism is labour intensive, and thus an important machine for job creation. For most Southasian countries, tourism is an important means of earning hard currency – and for some, such as Nepal and Bhutan, a crucial one. And within this core industry, adventure tourism is said to be an important growth sector, and having a thriving tourism sector requires destinations and their operators to make use of every advantage they have. For a runner like me, the potential for tourism based on participation in running events to Nepal, India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka seems evident. Why, then, do such trails not exist?

A reasonably comprehensive count of events attracting adventure runners to Southasia show that events do in fact take place, mostly in India and Nepal, with about 22 happening yearly. Multi-day stage races are the most common package on offer, while next come one-day events that are only accessible if one buys into an organised itinerary culminating in the run. The internationally known Everest marathons are prime examples of this latter. Outside India, there are just a few races that promote the destination, with the race itself generally the attraction – meaning that participation is open to all who pay the registration fee. India has several regular marathons but, again, none of these are being marketed by its tourism authorities. All the same, considering the existence of these events, the absence of running from the tourism boards’ lists of adventure activities is even more puzzling.

Does the Subcontinent lack something that makes it difficult for the concept of adventure running to take hold here? That hardly seems the case. Every Saturday morning, when I go out jogging in the Kathmandu Valley, I come across other runners, many of them Nepali. The running virus may not have hit Nepal as it has Europe, the US and some Southeast and East Asian countries, but it certainly is around. The same is true for other Southasian countries, where running for exercise has become an increasingly common phenomenon.

Competitive running, on the other hand, remains undeveloped in this region. Even India, which has running clubs in several cities, has a race calendar that reflects its limited number of organised runners, rather than the vast size of its health-conscious middle class. Runners thus

have fairly limited opportunities. Further, the lack of competitive opportunities also means less interest from the youth, a demographic without whom no sport can really take off. In addition, the lack of internationally recognised races also indicates that running in Southasia has a long way to go. In the whole Subcontinent, there is only one large city marathon that features on the international marathon circuit – the Standard Chartered Mumbai marathon. Similarly, the only Southasian trail race somewhat known in international (long-distance) circles are the Mt Everest marathons.

If running trails have potential in this region, it is important to wonder why it is not promoted on the international tourism market as other activities are – think rock-climbing, kayaking, mountain biking and bungee jumping, none of which thrive locally as popular sports. The answer might lie in the near-absence of established ‘adventure running’ operators in Southasia. Among the 17 race organisers of the 22 Southasian events (some do more than one), leaving aside the city marathons, there are only two Indian companies that focus on running, and both these only started operating within the past two years. For all other Southasian packaged running events, organising the races is not the core business of the agencies, who are instead largely trekking and travel agents. This is significant, because rafting, kayaking, paragliding, mountain biking, mountaineering and trekking all have local companies pushing for development and marketing.

Perhaps the simplicity of running, which requires almost no gear, prevents the development of local operators from logistics assistants into service suppliers. This is the usual trajectory of business emergence in the field of adventure tourism: from storekeeper trained in the use of the equipment and guide on the payroll of a foreign company, to local agent handling outside requests, to creating new itineraries and a strong commercial interest in actively promoting the sport. Running tour logistics can be handled as a side business by trekking agents, meaning that the company may create a yearly event – but it will not have the incentive to promote the destination for running.

Will this situation change? As a runner, of course, I certainly hope it will. But I am not particularly optimistic. Though the Indian examples might indicate that change is around the corner, I would intuit that it is the general development of running as a sport in India that is the base for these local companies. And as yet, that base is absent in the rest of the Subcontinent. For the time being, other countries of the region seem destined to rely on outside organisers to bring the occasional group for a running adventure. A real unlocking of the available potential will have to wait for someone visionary and entrepreneurial enough to take that big stride.