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When Nepalis ask Augustus Nasmith Jr. about his family life, he gives an honest reply: "I'm gay."

The 65-year-old Vermont native who has visited Nepal for the fourth time said he has never felt awkward or have had any interactions with the people that has made him discomfited.

"People haven't been awkward in hearing my response [that I'm gay]," Nasmith said, who returns to Nepal because of the country's "diverse people and the expressions of their various backgrounds, cultures and history."

To attract more tourists to Nepal and promote Nepal Tourism Year 2011, the country is focusing on LGBT (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender) tourists who would help the country's economic growth potential, said Sunil Babu Pant, Nepal's only openly gay Constitution Assembly member and a proponent of the LGBT campaign.

"The gay, lesbian market hasn't been welcomed in Asia, and Nepal

The 31 Places to Go in 2010

31. NEPAL

San Francisco, Amsterdam and Provincetown? Been there. Mykonos and Ibiza? Done that. Looking for the next gay destination? How about the Himalayan country of Nepal? Yes, Nepal.

In the roughly two years since the nation's supreme court ordered that gay, lesbians and transgendered people be afforded equal rights, this conservative, mostly-Hindu country appears to be moving ahead full throttle.

Gay friendly clubs now dot its capital. (Go to www.utopia-asia.com for listings.) A "third gender" category is an option on national I.D. cards. Recently, a transgender beauty queen even

got a photo op with the prime minister. And now there's a tourist agency in Katmandu that is promoting gay tourism to Nepal.

Started by Sunil Babu Pant, an openly-gay legislator, Pink Mountain Travels and Tours (www.pinkyatra.com) promises to marry adventure travel with gay weddings. With talk that Nepal may legalize same-sex marriage this year as the country hammers out a new constitution (and, perhaps more importantly, deals with recent bouts of civil unrest), Mr. Pant is offering to hold nuptials at the Mount Everest base camp, jungle safari honeymoons and bridal processions on elephant back. — Aric Chen
The New York Times
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But various social sectors disapprove of promoting Nepal as an LGBT destination.

Arzu Rana Deuba, politician and social activist, denounced the idea, citing that this will give a rise to sex tourism in the country. Instead, she said there are other forms of tourism that the country can endorse.

"As a student of psychology, I respect human behavior and sexual preferences," Deuba, who has a doctorate in organizational psychology, said. "My take is, why are we talking about gay tourism instead of other sorts of tourism, like pilgrimage tourism?"

However, Pant disagrees. He said the LGBT tourists would come to Nepal not for sex tourism but to explore its nature, culture and for adventure activities.

"Specific pockets of tourists shouldn't be prejudiced against," Pant said, referring to the existing, illicit sex market in the capital catering to heterosexual tourists.

Thomas Roth, president of Com-

race and gender-related hate crimes and discrimination, another reason for the LGBT tourists to visit, Khadka said.

"However, the idea is not to promote Nepal as a gay hub but LGBT-welcoming country," he said.

Baral also gave a similar notion.

"We don't discriminate against consumers [tourists] with respect to their castes, creeds or gender," he said. "As long as they come as bonafide citizens of any country and maintain decency without disrupting the social fabric of the country, everyone is welcome from across the world."

But to welcome tourists irrespective of race, gender or sexual preferences, the country should focus on its touristic infrastructures, Roth points.

"It's not good enough to just want gay money [since they have larger disposable income]," he said, stressing that Nepal should have hotels, spas, tour operators and attractions that want to welcome LGBT visitors

Nepal eyes on LGBT tourists

policy
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should take the benefits since it has no competition from its neighbors," Pant said. "We can't compete in import and exports with India and China but tourism is one sector we can compete in."

Referring to the US\$670 million LGBT tourism market worldwide, Pant said that if Nepal were to bring only five percent of that share, it would boost the country's economy. To help the influx of LGBT tour-

ists in the country, Pant—who also heads the Blue Diamond Society, which advocates the rights of sexual minorities—has established a travel agency. Pant said Pink Mountain Travels and Tours will create special packages for LGBT tourists—wedding ceremonies in the monasteries in Mustang and the Everest Base Camp are currently in the roster. Pant informed about the interests from the international community: India's openly gay prince, Manvendra Singh Gohil of the former princely state of Rajpipla, who's planning his wedding in the Himalayan Republic, and a lesbian couple from Massachusetts are among the first clientele of Pink Mountain.

"Gay and lesbian couples can do ceremonies here, honor their relationships, make memorials in an exotic place," Pant said.

A rise in LGBT tourism will also create jobs and opportunities for the LGBT community in the tourism sector, said Pradip Khadka, human rights coordinator for Blue Diamond Society and one of the members of Pink Mountain.

"If it works in travel industry, other sectors will come forward too [in hiring the LGBT community]," Khadka said.

Along with the LGBT community, other tourism sectors are also supporting the move to boost the country's hospitality industry.

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community Marketing Inc., a California-based LGBT market research company, said a large proportion of LGBT travelers are interested in culture, history, cuisine, health, spirituality and adventure.

"Nepal has all these, plus it may become the only Asian country (till now) making an effort to genuinely welcome LGBT visitors," he wrote in an e-mail. "Nepal is also demonstrating leadership when it comes to equal rights for its own LGBT citizens. That's also a strong indicator for LGBT visitation."

Nepal is also safer in terms of

and are well-prepared with policies about their approach.

Nasmith said that Nepal should focus on properly managed tourism, which will benefit tourists and also help Nepal and Nepalis generate income. He reiterated that Nepal's beauty and its hospitable people attract tourists.

"People like myself feel welcome in Nepal. Many people, whether heterosexual or LGBT, are attracted and become attached to Nepal for the same reasons that appeal to me—the people, the cultures, the rich diversity and the natural beauty."

street sense

REPUBLICA



⚡ Semi-casual at its best!



⚡ Let's follow in her footsteps. Let us opt often for more of such Nepali-made trousers.



⚡ Hmm...one needs quite some patience to grow and take care of those locks.



⚡ Faux leather or leather apparels are quite the rage. But leather pants for men are so Guns N' Roses, don't you agree, eh?



⚡ We'll see more of those fringes in the coming days.



⚡ Let's rally in the dhaka style: Ladies participating in a rally organized against ethnic states.