



Background:

In 1951, the Nepalese monarch ended the century-old system of rule by hereditary premiers and instituted a cabinet system of government. Reforms in 1990 established a multiparty democracy within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. A Maoist insurgency, launched in 1996, has gained traction and is threatening to bring down the regime, especially after a negotiated cease-fire between the Maoists and government forces broke down in August 2003. In 2001, the crown prince massacred ten members of the royal family, including the king and queen, and then took his own life. In October 2002, the new king dismissed the prime minister and his cabinet for "incompetence" after they dissolved the parliament and were subsequently unable to hold elections because of the ongoing insurgency. While stopping short of reestablishing parliament, the king in June 2004 reinstated the most recently elected prime minister who formed a four-party coalition government. Citing dissatisfaction with the government's lack of progress in addressing the Maoist insurgency, the king in February 2005 dissolved the government, declared a state of emergency, imprisoned party leaders, and assumed power.

Location: Southern Asia, between China and India

Capital: Kathmandu

Area: 140,800 sq km

Area Comparative: Slightly larger than Arkansas

Climate: Varies from cool summers and severe winters in north to subtropical summers and mild winters in south

Terrain: Tarai or flat river plain of the Ganges in south, central hill region, rugged Himalayas in north

Nepal has fascinated foreigners for hundreds of years. Famous for the Himalayan Mountains, including the world's highest peak - Mt. Everest, this relatively small country is home to an incredible diversity of languages, cultures, and environments.

A hot spot for tourists interested in trekking the Himalayan mountains or the ancient temples that dot the streets of the national capital, Kathmandu - Nepal continues to be one of the poorest countries in the world, where most people live in remote villages, working as farmers, doing the best that they can to raise the standard of living for their families.



Who was the first person to climb Mt. Everest?

While Mt. Everest is famous throughout the world, most Nepalese refer to the world's highest peak as "Sagarmatha". George Everest was a geographer and map-maker who worked with the British government in India during the 19th century. While Everest never lived to see the mountain that was eventually named after him, he was responsible for surveying and mapping a large portion of the Indian sub-continent -- something that certainly helped his government in their effort to colonize the region.



Sagarmatha, which means "forehead of the ocean" in Sanskrit, is the name commonly used for this mountain in Nepal. The Sherpa are an ethnic group, one of more than 60 in Nepal, which have their own unique languages and customs. The Sherpa, whose ancestors migrated from Tibet more than 500 years ago, live at the higher elevations of the country and are famous for their mountaineering skills. Norgay Tensing (a Sherpa) and Sir Edmund Hillary (a mountain climber from New Zealand) are recorded as the first men to reach the top of Sagarmatha in 1953.

Five of the eight tallest mountains in the world are in Nepal in the mountain range known as the Himalayas, but the nation is equally famous for its ecological diversity. In Sanskrit "himalaya" means "the home of the snows". But Nepal isn't just "the home of the snows", it is also home to tropical jungles, arid plains, and more than 400 rivers. The land rises from the Indian plains to the south, called the Terai at about 300 feet above sea level, up to 28,000 feet and higher on the border with Tibet.

Hundreds of species of birds, a tremendous variety of plants and flowers, and a number of mammals like the tiger, elephant, monkeys, and even rhinoceros call Nepal home. While national parks, like Royal Chitwan National Park and Annapurna National Park were established to protect these animals, none have been set up to protect the most famous creature - the Yeti. Like America's own 'Bigfoot', there has been no scientific proof that this legendary creature exists, but that hasn't kept the stories from being told in homes around Nepal and from being published in books around the world.