

Reinforcing Culture: Tourism in Bhutan

by Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

From explorers to mountaineers, from environmental specialists to trekkers, from culture-hungry adventurers to seven-star jetsetters—Bhutan's tourism continues to evolve. Today, tourism planners want to ensure that the kingdom's \$18.5 million industry benefits not only the tour operators, but also the people.

In 2007, just over 20,000 tourists visited Bhutan—a record. But Bhutan looks beyond numbers. Tourism is more than a source of hard currency. It is part of Bhutan's journey toward development, change, and the enlightened goal of Gross National Happiness. "We see tourism as a means by which we can strengthen our values and our identity," said Lhatu Wangchuk, director general of tourism. "We've become more aware of the value of our own culture and our uniqueness because of the positive feedback from tourists."

Based on evaluations from tourists and the experience of the past four decades, the tourism department plans to involve the people, especially those from remote communities. In the past, cultural enthusiasts and trekkers came into contact only with tour operators. The average Bhutanese citizen, apart from the operators and a few handicraft manufacturers, benefited little from the industry. Lhatu Wangchuk talks about "community-based tourism." Even though tour operators have started taking tourists to smaller rural *tsechus*, because travelers complain that the larger festivals have become too "touristy," the department plans to do more. In a promising initiative, it has started to develop new trekking routes and areas in remote Zhemgang and Kheng. Staff are training local people to manage campsites, guide, and cook for trekkers. The communities will also provide cultural entertainment for tourists and sell local handicrafts.

The department is marketing Nabji Korphu, a pristine portion of the Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park. The trail passes through small mountain villages (like Monpa) and broadleaf forests that are home to endangered wildlife, including the golden langur and Rufous-necked hornbill. With clear conservation regulations that restrain forestry activities, tourism is an environmentally sensitive, ideal source of income for the people. "Our people have always depended on the forest for their livelihood," said a village elder from Jangbi village. "With the area declared a national park, many of the inhabitants have to look for new ways to survive. I hope that tourism will give the people additional income to support their daily life." Camping fees and other revenue will support a "community development fund" that will finance local irrigation channels, renovation of monasteries, and organization of *tsechus*. The fund will spread the earnings in a meaningful way.



Bhutan's National Museum is housed in the historic Ta Dzong (watchtower), which is nestled in the hills above Paro Dzong. Its rounded, shell-shaped walls are an impressive accomplishment of seventeenth-century Bhutanese architects and builders. Photo copyright Michael Tobias

Feedback from tourists has inspired the department to issue guidelines for the development of infrastructure, facilities, campsites, and viewpoints. They will be built with traditional aesthetics in mind, use local materials and skills, and offer modern comforts. "The challenge is getting greater," said Thuji Nadik, a tourism planner. "Today, we have close to 250 tour operators, and many more people are building tourism infrastructure with very little understanding of what is required." Progressive planning, training, and education are essential to the new tourism policy. The Hotel Management and Tourism Training School, which will open in 2008, and several other government initiatives will guarantee high-quality service and promote Bhutan's magical aura. The Tourism Act will protect the country's age-old spiritual, environmental, and cultural heritage.

"We will not try to be someone or something else," said Lhatu Wangchuk. "If we lose our culture, our identity, our uniqueness, what do we have?"

Tourism is not just a business. It is a part of the kingdom's journey on the middle path to progress. Tourists are guests of the Bhutanese people. They are asked to come to share, as well as to preserve what Bhutan has to offer.

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