

Then and Now – Here Come the Japanese

An interview with Michiko Wakita who pioneered early journeys of the Japanese tourists to Bhutan and has been the regular visitor to Bhutan since the 1970s.

The Druk Journal: Why did you first decide to organise tours to Bhutan ?

Michiko Wakita: Bhutan was well-known among the fervent but few fans of the unexplored regions of the Himalayas, through Dr Sasuke Nakao's book. He was a famous Japanese botanist who visited Bhutan in 1958. In June 1974, the news about the Coronation of His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck was reported in Japan, and we came to know that Bhutan had opened to tourism.

My first visit to Bhutan was in December 1976 as a tour leader. My travel agency had already sent the first group of Japanese tourists to Bhutan in 1974. My group was the third one. When we passed the colourful Phuentsholing gate after completing the required immigration formality, we felt as if we had slipped into another world.

The Bhutanese tour guide, driver, immigration officials and hotel staff were very polite and welcomed us. We were amazed to see the hotel staff hand over the room keys to us with both hands in almost a reverential manner. We were treated like VIP guests. Most employees of Bhutan Travel Agency were trained at work while preparing for the Coronation of the Fourth King. The hotel staff, guide and driver were trained to offer a warm reception to guests from all over the world.

In the 1970s, the average daily travel expenditure to visit India with four- to five-star hotels was about USD 40 to USD 50, while it was USD 130 to visit Bhutan. Compared with deluxe hotels in India, guesthouses in Bhutan was insufficient, but our members were very much satisfied with the services. My conviction that I could promote tours to Bhutan was confirmed during my first visit.

The Druk Journal: What was most interesting about Bhutan for the Japanese visitors?

Michiko Wakita: In the 1970s and 1980s, tourists were interested in looking for a sense of “Japan in the good old days”, which was already lost in Japan. They enjoyed traveling through Bhutan because of their nostalgia. Many aged tourists were moved to tears when they met Bhutanese children with runny noses and wearing dirty old *gho* and *kira*. They told each other: “We were exactly like them.” In fact, Bhutan was full of Japanese 1930s-1960s nostalgia. But gradually, Bhutan has been developed and this kind of nostalgia became dim.

Japanese tourists are impressed with Bhutanese religiousness as Buddhists too.

The Druk Journal: Did they see any similarities between Japan and Bhutan?

Michiko Wakita: We have a lot of similarities in food, clothing, and personality. Landscape and vegetation are also similar to Bhutan. Our staple food is rice and we are wearing the same type of dress, *kimono*, and we are also particular about the materials of *kimono*. Japanese worry about formalities, especially courtesy, manners, and etiquette very much, too.

Generally, most Japanese do not have a strong faith in any religion because Shintoism and Buddhism are practiced in their daily customs instead of as a religion. But I believe that Buddhism forms the basis of the Japanese moral sense.

The Druk Journal: How has Bhutan changed from a tourism perspective?

Michiko Wakita: The tourism infrastructures, such as air service, road, hotels, electricity, internet and mobile network, were improved drastically. Immigration formality became much easier and it does not take time. Now there are excellent Japanese speaking guides too. The number of international tourists increased a lot: There were only 274 in 1974 but 71,700 in 2018. There were 202,290 regional visitors in 2018. The problem is that these regional visitors are exempted from paying royalty to the government but international tourists must pay a royalty of USD 65 per night/per person.

But the tour price and hotel quality are imbalanced. Tourists who pay USD 250 per night can stay in Three-Star Hotels only. Most of these Three-Star Hotels provide basic services only, so although they pay more than USD 200 per night, tourists are budget tourists in Bhutan. There are luxury hotels, but tourists must pay extra charges for these higher standard hotels. If we need to feel happy as VIP guests like before, we must pay a lot of money.

Compared with the past, Thimphu has become a very ugly town, with too many buildings and cars, and it seems there is no proper town planning.

The Druk Journal: Are the changes positive or negative?

Michiko Wakita: The tourism policy of Bhutan is “high value, low impact”, but if tourists visit only Paro, Thimphu, and Punakha, there are too many tourists, and the hotel facility is not worth USD 200-250. Taktshang monastery is no more a sacred place because the noisy music which regional tourists play disturbs us. Even a small local temple like Chime Lhakhang in Lobesa is overcrowded, and local couples who are carrying babies have to wait outside modestly. Now the tourism policy of Bhutan has changed into “low value, high impact”.

On the other hand, eastern Bhutan has much fewer tourists even during the *tshochu* season. The number of tourists in Bhutan vary widely with the seasons and area.

The Druk Journal: Do you think that the high-end tourists are still interested in Bhutan?

Michiko Wakita: I myself do not understand why high-end tourists pay more than the tourist rate, which is USD 200 in low season and USD 250 in high. If I visit alone, I must pay USD 40 surcharge per night. It is too expensive already, but high-end tourists pay an extra charge, sometimes five to eight times more than the tourist tariff. The difference is only in hotel and food, and they will see the same scenery and visit the same tourist spots as regular tourists. I do not know whether those tourists are really satisfied with Bhutan or not. I can say if I have enough money to spend for these high-end hotels, I will make a contribution for local schools and monasteries.

The Druk Journal: Has tourism benefited the rural parts of Bhutan?

Michiko Wakita: It must depend upon the places. In the early 80s, there were no hotels in Bumthang and we had to stay in tents, but now there are more than 15 to 20 hotels and home stays. These hotels employ local young people as their staff. It must benefit the rural parts. In eastern Bhutan, Merak and Sakteng were opened for foreign tourists on 1st September 2010. Before the opening of the area, I asked the local people what they expected from tourism. Some horse owners said that they may earn by carrying tourists and their baggage. But there were more negative comments, because not every family has riding horses and, according to the TCB rule, tourists had to use horses at Chaling, Merak and Sakteng. Because of this rule, horse owners could not use all the routes, and later became susceptible to bribery.

TCB built tent campsites but tourists do not like to stay there. Most of the campsites are far from villages and toilets, and other facilities are not well maintained. TCB trained local young people as trekking cooks and local guides, but most of the tour operators sent their own guides and cooks. The local young people had no chance to work for tourists and gave up. I recently interviewed a gup of Merak; he said that tourism never benefited his village, and tourists only left waste.

The Druk Journal: What kind of tourism will work now?

Michiko Wakita: I believe in the high potential for tourism in Bhutan. For example, there are countless religious pilgrimage sites, or “*nye*” in Bhutan. In central and eastern Bhutan especially, there are many secret *nyes*. Tourists can enjoy nature and Bhutanese religious culture both at these *nyes*. But so far, most of these *nyes* have no proper car road or walking trails. It is necessary to build some huts for overnight stays too.

In Japan, we have various pilgrimage routes that are hundreds of years old. The local guides escort visitors and they benefit the local economy, such as restaurant, hotels and porters.

The Druk Journal: What would you advise the government to do as it introduces a tourism policy?

Michiko Wakita: Since last year, TCB has exempted the royalty of USD 65 for tourists who visit eastern Bhutan. This idea is highly regarded and I wish this system will continue in the future. I even wondered why they did not introduce this earlier. The Bhutanese mono-tourist tariff system has reached a turning point.

Tour operators must arrange tours with the mono-tariff which was fixed by TCB, but the tariff should be discussed with tour operators, hotel owners, and TCB together. Then tariff should be fixed based on the area, season and purpose of operating tours. If the government aims to develop the local culture and benefit the local community, the rate must be calculated accordingly. If the government wants to encourage local employment, the tour price must include labour costs. I believe that it is necessary to reconsider the tour tariff now.

Regarding the regional visitors, it is a matter of foreign relations with Bhutan and neighbouring countries, so I have no idea what to do. But it is necessary to make some rules for controlling the numbers, specially the number of cars. Instead of royalty, the government can charge them a kind of environmental tax.