

Mindfulness Tourism for Sustainable Prosperity

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Introduction

Bhutan's progression towards sustainable tourism over the past five decades has been a transformative journey. The growth of tourism has become a cornerstone of Bhutan's economy, significantly contributing to national revenue, employment and development.

However, alongside the positive impacts of cultural exchange and economic infusion, a gradual weakening of the High-Value Low-Volume (HVLV) approach led to unregulated tourism, giving rise to significant concerns, particularly in environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, professionalism of tourism service providers, and the viability of tourism as a sustainable economic driver. This undesirable situation was further aggravated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, with the unfolding of a groundbreaking vision of the “Gelephu Mindfulness City – Special Administrative Region”, the tourism sector has the opportunity to align with this world's mindfulness city. This mindfulness city will usher in a paradigm shift in which economic progress, mindfulness and sustainability converge as a global model for mindful prosperity.

Therefore, tourism stands at a pivotal juncture, prompting a re-evaluation of policies and practices to ensure not only the strengthening of HVLV tourism that respects and preserves Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) but also to nurture tourism more mindfully and, in the process, meaningfully contribute to the economic revival of the country.

Necessity for Change

Tourism as a sector was becoming the lowest hanging fruit, offering easy but highly unprofessional and low-paying employment options to

Bhutanese youth. This was leading to the weakening of HVLV tourism, thereby pushing Bhutan to become a cheap travel destination. This situation is further aggravated by slow recovery due to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognising these challenges, the imperative for balanced interventions in tourism has become evident, seeking to protect Bhutan's delicate ecosystems, rich cultural heritage, unique sustainable tourism policy, and increase tourist numbers.

Interventions

For tourism, the launch of a new nation brand "Bhutan Believe" on September 22, 2022, the eve of reopening of Bhutan to tourism after two and half years, can be considered as a landmark change in preparing our tourism to be more sustainable and future focused. Bhutan Believe replaced the earlier tourism brand represented by a blue poppy flower with the tagline "Happiness is a Place".

"Bhutan Believe" as a nation brand serves not only as a soft power tool internationally but more importantly, it serves as an inspiration to foster unity and solidarity amongst the Bhutanese citizens. It strengthens the bond between the people, the nation, and the Golden Throne, which has become so important, to realise the nation's new and ambitious goal – to become a developed mindful nation.

In pursuit of a comprehensive revamping of Bhutan's tourism landscape, the pursuit of cohesive yet innovative intervention became imperative. A unified approach, encapsulated in the concept of a "one tourism" policy, aims to harmonise diverse regulations affecting the sector.

This is being operationalised by recognising tourism as a national strategic asset like any other natural resources, with all Bhutanese citizens, including future generations, designated as stewards and beneficiaries of tourism. This necessitates a paradigm shift in the definition of tourism stakeholders, by recognising all Bhutanese citizens as primary stakeholders, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive tourism landscape.

In the past, primary stakeholders of tourism were narrowly represented by the service providers, viz. the tour operators, hotels, guides, transporters, and souvenir dealers.

This warrants an integrated policy and strategy framework for improved coordination among regulatory bodies, service providers and all Bhutanese citizens.

The increase in the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) is a strategic move linked to long-term sustainability. The increased fee directly contributes to the preservation of Bhutan's cultural and natural heritage, funding conservation efforts, supporting local communities, and mitigating the environmental footprint of tourism activities.

This aligns with the Veblen good principles, avoids mass tourism and contributes to ensuring a sustainable and flourishing future for everyone. It is a small yet important contribution embedded in the journey of our guests, serving as a legacy of positive impact and a way of “paying it forward” for the next wave of mindful explorers.

Veblen good and HVLV Tourism

A Veblen good is a type of luxury item for which demand increases as the price rises, contrary to the usual law of demand in economics. The Veblen effect describes the phenomenon where consumers perceive higher prices as indicative of higher quality or social status, leading them to desire the good even more.

In a way, Bhutan tourism based on High Value Low Volume aligns well with the dynamics of Veblen goods in several ways:

Exclusivity: Bhutan positions itself as an exclusive destination by attracting discerning and mindful visitors requiring them to pay a SDF.

Status Symbol: Visiting Bhutan becomes a status symbol for visitors due to its reputation as an exclusive destination.

Quality Experience: Just as Veblen goods are often associated with superior quality, Bhutan's tourism industry emphasises offering high-quality experiences, including immersive cultural encounters, eco-friendly accommodations, and personalised services.

Cultural Significance: Bhutan's emphasis on preserving its unique culture and traditions adds another layer of value to the tourism experience.

Overall, Bhutan's High Value Low Volume tourism strategy resonates with the principles of Veblen goods by leveraging exclusivity, status symbolism, quality experience, and cultural significance to attract discerning visitors seeking prestigious and unique destinations.

Our guests become voluntary and direct supporters of the nation's sustainability initiative. We facilitate this by encouraging the guest to sign a "Pledge of Friendship" when applying for a visa or permit.

Pledge of Friendship

"To the people of Bhutan, I pledge to be not only a guest, but a friend to the kingdom: To understand and respect its sacred places.

To connect to its living culture.

To preserve its peace and that of my hosts.

To leave its wild spaces, plants and animals undisturbed.

To remove no artefacts that belong to future generations.

And to take actions that preserve its natural beauty for them. I am pleased to contribute the SDF towards Bhutan's preservation and development, and am privileged to act as one of its custodians on my journey and beyond."

Elevating service standards in accommodation and other amenities aims to provide guests with a more comfortable and enriching stay, aligning with the principles of HVLV tourism.

Enhancing qualifications and standards for tour guides plays a pivotal role in improving the visitor experience, aligning with the vision of HVLV tourism by ensuring guests receive informed and enriching guidance throughout their journey.

Introduction of entry fees to selected sites and monuments is rationalised in preserving and respecting sacred sites and contributing to an exclusive experience for guests. This ensures that the preservation of sacred sites takes precedence over unchecked visitation, aligning with the ethos of HVLV tourism.

Streamlining the process for visa application and internal route permits marks a significant improvement in the overall travel experience for guests, contributing to a seamless and positive perception of Bhutan as a guest-friendly destination, despite ongoing challenges with visa procedures still being cumbersome. The earlier inconvenience of the mandatory requirement for route permits for travel within the country has been lifted except for a few restricted areas.

To facilitate easier access, a 24 hours visa/permit service is being introduced.

The deliberate intent to replace the conventional word “tourist” with “guest” reflects the mindfulness perspective of the HVLV approach. Viewing tourists as guests emphasises hospitality and fosters a sense of belonging and respect within the community. This shift is being implemented in marketing and promotional communication to foster stronger relationships with visitors by using “guest” when referring to “tourist”.

Insights and Way Forward

A cornerstone of the strategy is the unwavering commitment to staying dynamic, responsive and collaborative, exemplified by recent adjustments and interventions. Such as the introduction of a 50% discount on SDF for visitors from countries other than India until 2027. A multi-stakeholder committee has been established to work specifically on government pledges to increase arrivals to 300,000 annually. Embassies, missions and consulates are also being fully engaged in realising the enhanced arrivals targets.

Conclusion

The insights gained from this transformative journey can serve as valuable lessons for other destinations grappling with similar challenges. As Bhutan paves the way for mindfully sustainable and high-value tourism, it not only secures its own future but also contributes to the global conversation on responsible travel.

The way forward involves a collective effort, with stakeholders, communities and guests alike playing a crucial role in ensuring that the principles of sustainable tourism become the norm rather than the exception.

Bhutan's journey is not just a transformation for itself but an inspiration for a more regenerative tourism development for both the destination and guests. Thereby ensuring a harmonious future for tourism worldwide. It is possible that Bhutan's time-tested tourism policy and practice of HVLV could become the global mantra for mindfulness tourism.