

Then and Now – Adventurers Lead the Way

An interview with Brent Olson, Managing Director of Business Development at GeoEx, a San Francisco based travel company that for the past 35 years has been a long-time leader in adventure travel and in introducing American travellers to Bhutan.

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

Brent Olson: I consider my deep connection to Bhutan as one of the great blessings of my life and it all started with my first visit to Bhutan in 1985 to visit my sister and brother-in-law, Deanna and Edward Kelley. My sister was a paediatrics nurse in Thimphu, and her husband taught at YHS and then worked for the Royal Government under the Social and Cultural Division. During my first stay of nearly four months, I was continually aware of how fortunate I was to experience Bhutan in this way and to travel as extensively as I did.

Meeting new Bhutanese friends, visiting remote villages and temples (often we were the only visitors) and driving the national highway, sometimes for an hour or more without meeting another vehicle, I realised that, while not Shangri La, Bhutan was a very special place that fascinated me. I was also struck by the limited number of international tourists visiting Bhutan (I think the number was less than 2,500 at that time) and the lack of expertise and knowledge of the Western guides leading Americans around the Kingdom.

Back then, it was very difficult to learn anything about Bhutan, as there were no guidebooks, not many books or magazine articles (apart from a few National Geographic pieces) and of course, no internet. The only way to educate oneself about Bhutan was to spend time in the country and learn directly through your own experience and from the Bhutanese people.

After staying for several months and travelling quite extensively throughout the Kingdom, I realised that I had developed a unique insight and perspective that I could offer American visitors. With the encouragement of my friend, Dago Beda, then the head of Bhutan Tourism, I decided to find a way to continue visiting Bhutan.

When I returned to the US, I landed a job with InnerAsia Expeditions (now Geographic Expeditions) in San Francisco, and led my first group to Bhutan in the fall of 1986. Since then, I have made around 50 visits to Bhutan over 35 years.

The Druk Journal: What was the profile of the average tourist then?

Brent Olson: They were hardy, adventurous travellers, who were deeply curious about the remote corners of the world. They were good sports (mostly) about the basic level of accommodations (there were only a few governmentally owned and operated hotels and guesthouses, with simple cuisine), as they were well travelled enough to recognise just how truly special and unique Bhutan was at the time, and how lucky they were to be able to visit such a (then) little known country with such a rich culture, little affected by the outside world.

The Druk Journal: How did they react to Bhutan?

Brent Olson: I think they were amazed by the natural beauty of the Kingdom, impressed by the stunning architecture of the temples and *dzongs*, and were moved by the gracious hospitality and kindness of the people they met.

Everything moved much slower at that time, and each traveller felt like an honoured guest. In marketing, they say that “word of mouth” is the best form of advertising, and I think these early travellers came away with such wonderful memories and unique experiences that it created a “buzz” in the travel world, as Bhutan slowly became more exposed to the outside world.

The Druk Journal: How do tourists react now?

Brent Olson: While much has changed since those early years of tourism, with some tremendous improvements (hotels, food, transportation), along with some less wonderful aspects (like overcrowding, traffic and urbanisation, etc.), I still hear a recurring comment from my guests after they leave Bhutan: “I’m so glad that I was able to visit Bhutan before it really changes....”

I think that is an important perspective to remember. While those of us in the travel industry might bemoan the rapid changes facing Bhutan, those guests who are visiting for the first time are inevitably still “wowed” by the wonder of Bhutan. Of course, it now takes some careful curation of their experience to make it a very positive one, but the underlying beauty of the landscape and richness of the ancient culture and Buddhism is not lost on these visitors. I think it is vitally important to travel outside of the tourist circuit to expose travellers to the more traditional Bhutan, and to avoid the overcrowding experienced in Paro, Thimphu and Punakha.

The Druk Journal: What is your opinion of Bhutan today?

Brent Olson: Bhutan continues to experience exponential change. As an unabashed Bhutan-o-phile, I have watched this pace of change with a mixture of wonder and concern. The things I love about Bhutan -- the pristine natural beauty, the traditional culture and the vibrancy of Buddhism -- are all being affected by this rapid modernisation.

Likewise, thanks to greater exposure through social media and world-wide press, Bhutan is attracting more and more visitors each year. I think Bhutan faces great challenges in how to preserve and protect the priceless aspects of the country and culture, while moving forward economically and socially. I am impressed by the leadership of Their Majesties, the current Prime Minister and the government in addressing these concerns, and I trust that those who are truly concerned for the country’s welfare and the goals of GNH will find a way through these thorny challenges.

Speaking specifically about tourism, I think that competing forces are wrestling for the control and direction of policy. On one hand, Bhutan promotes the ideal of “low impact, high value” tourism that is in line with the philosophy of GNH, while at the same time, there are many other stakeholders who want their piece of the tourism pie, and yet the only avenue open to them involves catering to the exploding regional tourist market.

For example, the dramatic increase in the number of guesthouses and hotels that have been built in Thimphu and Paro in the past few years is staggering. I wonder -- given the realities of occupancy in the face of such a glut of properties -- if the lending institutions are putting themselves

at risk, potentially endangering the entire Bhutanese economy? Once the guesthouses and hotels are built, the owners have to desperately fight for occupancy, and the only viable occupants for these properties are regional tourists. It is a challenging dilemma with no easy answers but it needs to be addressed if the government plans to maintain their “high value, low impact” tourism policy.

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

Brent Olson: I think a distinction needs to be made. There are three categories of tourists visiting Bhutan:

- There are the regional tourists, travelling in their own vehicles, eating in local restaurants and paying a few dollars for a local hotel. These are budget travellers who are travelling to Bhutan in large numbers, but yet generate little revenue for the government or profit for local businesses.
- Next, you have the international group tours and private tours. These travellers pay a minimum of USD 200 to USD 250 a day (and up, if they opt for better hotels, etc.). These “high-end” tourists are the largest share of revenue generating travellers, and are most deeply affected by the challenges posed by the flood of (mostly unregulated) regional tourists.
- Finally, you have the “ultra high-end” traveller who stays in luxury properties like Aman, Como or Six Senses. I think that the “ultra high-end” tourists are still very interested in Bhutan. With the advent of yet another wave of ultra luxury properties popping up across Bhutan, there will be a continued draw for the wealthy and privileged traveller. The experience of staying in these properties, (which truly are some of the most spectacular luxury venues in the world), and the types of experiences offered to their guests, will remain a draw for high-end guests who are looking for that type of escape. Some of these properties are such destinations in themselves that, apart from a visit to a temple or the hike to Taktshang, these travellers are fairly well “insulated” from the pressures placed on Bhutan by the overcrowding caused by regional tourists.

I think that the real challenge facing Bhutan is how to continue to draw the types of travellers described in point 2 above. These are the travellers who are paying a premium to visit Bhutan, and yet are the ones most likely facing the largest impact by the regional tourist market. If not addressed, the issues facing these travellers will inevitably create a downturn in their numbers due to negative experiences.

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

Brent Olson: Yes, to a small degree, I think tourism has benefited rural Bhutan. However, I think there is a tremendous opportunity for increasing this benefit. Presently, there are some efforts at developing community-based tourism, homestays and creating new tourism product, like rafting in Pangbang. I think there is much room for improvement and coordination with TCB, NGO's and the government, to help support and promote these projects and create others.

Most tourists only visit a relatively small portion of Bhutan, and opening up more rural areas to tourism might help in this endeavour. An analogy that I like to use is my experience of flying in a helicopter from Paro to Eastern Bhutan. As I looked down, I saw the thin ribbon of the national highway, and the few towns in the valleys, but apart from these signs of human habitation, there were mountain after mountain of dense forest, small scattered villages, beautiful alpine regions with lakes and glaciers -- most of which I had never visited.

I thought I knew much of Bhutan, but in reality, I had only visited those places along the national highway, and a number of treks I have taken over the years! There is so much more of Bhutan to explore and experience. While challenging, I think that there is much potential for carefully planned rural tourism projects that could benefit local people and show visitors a truly wondrous and unique side of Bhutan.

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

Brent Olson: I think the question should be: What type of tourism will Bhutan decide is best for the country and the Bhutanese people? Unless a clear and strong message is set forth from the highest levels of government,

tourism will continue to develop reactively organically to market forces (like the large numbers of regional tourists) -- and perhaps in directions that are not beneficial to the goals of the country. As long as I am able, I will continue to encourage people to visit Bhutan in a thoughtful and meaningful way because, regardless of current trends, I think Bhutan has a tremendous amount to offer.

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

Brent Olson: Regional Tourists: I think the major challenge is how to address the regional tourist issue. Thanks to the rise of social media and all of the favourable reports on Bhutan in the Indian press, etc., the proverbial cat is “out of the bag” in terms of the appeal of Bhutan. As India continues to grow its economic power, and the rising middle class start to desire more places to travel, more and more people will come to Bhutan. Given the historical and political sensitivities, it will be challenging to ebb the flow of Indian budget travellers, but I would think of it this way: Everyone wants Bhutan to remain an attractive place to visit. To achieve this goal in the future, some methods of regulation need to be implemented. The only way to slow the rate of growth from regional tourists is to make Bhutan a more expensive destination for them and let market forces determine the flow. I would offer a few suggestions:

Fees

I think a daily fee for regional tourists should be considered. Every international tourist pays a fee of nearly USD 70 per day, and these funds go directly to the government. I think it is only fair that the government should earn some revenue from the regional tourists as well.

All arriving regional tourists should be educated on the rules, regulations and etiquette for Bhutan upon entry. Bhutan should not allow vans or buses carrying tourists from India, but insist they hire Bhutanese vehicles, or a separate “vehicle fee” should be charged on a per day basis. Entry fees should be charged at the most impacted temples and sites in Bhutan. One issue faced by Bhutanese guides leading groups visiting various temples is that they are constantly asked by regional tourists about the history and importance of the site. Perhaps the government could assign guides to escort these tourists and provide some basic information.

Limit Hotel and Guesthouse Construction

I think there needs to be some tighter controls on the construction and permitting of new hotels and guesthouses. I think this glut is creating the demand for occupancy, which is creating the need for regional tourists to fill these properties.

Off-season Travel

Encourage, through education and possibly through financial incentives, more travel during low season, and discourage peak season travel.

More Rural Tourism Development

Continue developing new destinations and activities outside of the current tourist circuit.