

# The Bhutan Brand

*Koh Buck Song*

## The Importance of Brand Delivery

Few countries have as strong a nation brand as Bhutan. Worldwide, there is widespread brand recall for happiness as a key Bhutanese brand attribute. The universality of this brand affinity is something quite rare among place brands around the globe. Happiness is what most people would immediately think of at the mere mention of “Bhutan”. Many visualise this as the world’s happiest country. Bhutan’s own tourism tagline “Happiness is a place” encourages this mental association.

Also, few countries embrace its nation brand as pervasively. Ever since the 1970s, when the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was promulgated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan, Bhutan’s government and people have taken the idea of happiness to heart.

The GNH model has inspired other countries, like New Zealand, to try to adopt at least aspects of it in their own systems of government. The framework for integrating happiness into policymaking has also sparked research, and drawn endorsement among institutions ranging from the United Nations to Oxford University. This is a contribution from Bhutan to the world that is of immense value.

A brand, however, is only as good as its brand delivery. Undoubtedly, Bhutan delivers for most tourists -- its mountainous scenery is stunning, its fresh air exhilarating, its cultural heritage deeply charming. But Bhutan’s tourism amenities can only deliver if the infrastructure can support the demand. When there can only be a finite number of hotel rooms available, when the paths up to Tiger’s Nest are only so wide, there is a limit to how many visitors can be catered to.

Extensive tourism can only be sustained if the local population is also involved in, welcome, and can benefit from, the growth of the industry. Every Bhutanese man dressed in a *gho*, and every woman in a *kira*, is a very visible brand ambassador for Bhutan. There is a powerful involvement of every citizen, seen most overtly through the national dress code *Driglam Namzha*, that symbolises the vested engagement of the ordinary Bhutanese in the state of tourism. Therein too lies the impetus for positioning the centre of gravity of the direction of the industry: it must always be for the greater good -- indeed, the happiness -- of the people.

### **The Impact of Over-tourism**

On this score, Brand Bhutan has come under threat of late. Sustainability has been a keyword in the world's vocabulary for many decades, most often associated with the environmental type of sustainability, more so than the economic and financial varieties. However, sustainability also applies to tourism itself. If too many tourists and their transport vehicles crowd around tourist sights seeking their obligatory selfies along small, narrow roads, and even disrupting residential neighbourhoods or other civic spaces, preventing local people from going about the activities of their daily living, such as buying food, going to work, and enjoying their own recreation, then something has to give over time.

The global phenomenon of over-tourism has been a hot topic internationally in recent months. The city of Venice, Italy, rose to action when large numbers of tourists, including those on day visits from cruise ships, strained local resources and aggravated residents so much that a place that had been lived in for 16 centuries was becoming depopulated, with resident numbers dropping to below 53,000 in a city made for 150,000 people.

To address a similar problem, Dubrovnik, Croatia, imposed a cap on cruise ships, to gain some relief from the hordes that had been cramming the city, while Barcelona, Spain, had to work with the vacation rental online marketplace Airbnb to limit apartment listings only to those with city-approved licences.

As in Dubrovnik and Barcelona, new legislation and stricter enforcement of quotas, caps and other regulations in Bhutan might also dampen over-tourism in the short-term, but any damage to the place brand could have a longer-term impact in putting off high-end tourism, spurring a spiral of decline that would take some effort to reverse.

### **Maintaining a High-value, Low-impact Model**

Bhutan is fortunate not to have suffered yet from what I termed a “brand keloid” in my book *Brand Singapore: Nation Branding After Lee Kuan Yew, In A Divisive World* (second edition, 2017). Like a raised flesh scar, a major negative point about a place could be repeatedly referenced in mainstream and social media so many times that it crosses a tipping point to, as it were, sear itself into the perceptions and memories of a majority of people worldwide. Once that happens, trying to remove such a scar would be certainly troublesome and possibly painful.

Tourism overcrowding -- such as with visitors from the immediate region -- could potentially generate enough negative reports and social media citations to mar what has hitherto been an exceptionally positive image, and this is something Bhutan should try to avoid. A balance should be maintained between regional and international tourism to give preference to visitor segments that support the growth of this vital sector of the economy, without allowing over-commercialisation to hurt its heritage components or overly stress the physical environment and the surrounding human ecosystems of supporting industries and local populations.

Bhutan should do what it can to at least maintain, if not build upon, its high-value, low-impact model. This had been a critical success factor for brand Bhutan in the past and is an approach that other tourist destinations would very much like to implement, if only they could turn back the clock and undo the harm that has already been done to their tourism infrastructure, environment or brand.

Despite recent developments regarding excessive regional tourism, Bhutan's tourism brand is still on the right side of this delicate balance between value and impact. Quick, corrective action targeted at the root sources of excessive regional tourism would go some way towards restoring the full measure of the magic of brand Bhutan.

There is an element of valuable novelty, of something exceptional, about visiting Bhutan that, once lost, is difficult if not impossible to recapture. Bhutan has a quality that many countries have long lost -- a special mystique about the place that is sustained by the relatively low number of people who have actually visited. In the words of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck: "People who make it to Bhutan feel privileged to be our guests." Indeed, what Bhutan offers carries a unique resonance with the deepest human yearning to be closer to culture and to be able to appreciate nature in its glorious, untarnished state. This is something precious and deserves to be preserved.