

PAYING IT BACK

Joni Herison, managing director of Druk Asia — one of the biggest government-accredited travel agencies specialising in Bhutan tours — actively gives back to the kingdom through charity works.

WORDS LESTER V. LEDESMA
PHOTOS DRUK ASIA & LESTER V. LEDESMA

It's been called 'The Last Shangri-la', where national progress is measured in terms of happiness, and where daily life still throbs to the rhythm of the spinning Buddhist prayer wheel. Hemmed in for centuries by the Himalayan mountain range, Bhutan has somehow kept the modern world at bay. It certainly felt this way for Joni Herison on his first trip, in 2008, to the Land of the Thunder Dragon. "This place was like a fairy tale, a lost kingdom," the businessman recalls. "It sounds cliché but I was swept away by the beauty of this land and its culture." So smitten was Herison that he decided to set up Druk Asia, a Singapore-based Bhutan specialist travel agency that would later become one of the country's top tourism champions. "That first visit was life-changing in the sense of finding something special that I wanted to share with others. Druk Asia is how I tell the world about Bhutan."

However, running a tour company there isn't the same as simply guiding foreigners around a tourist-savvy place. In 2019, Bhutan received merely 315,600 foreign visitors, a stark contrast to the millions that regularly visit tourist havens like Thailand or Italy. The kingdom's preference for "high value low volume tourism", which seeks to maintain sustainability by limiting visitor numbers, is done through a system where visitors prepay a daily tariff that incorporates all the travel essentials such as accommodation, transport, food and guide services. This unique scheme also requires bookings to be made through a worldwide list of accredited agencies that maintain high standards of service. Hence, visitors are guaranteed a quality experience — and the revenues generated are returned to the local economy.

Herison takes the industry benefits further by devoting part of the income from each Druk Asia customer to a local charitable organisation. Bhutanese society may revolve around Buddhist values like compassion and kindness, but this does not exempt the kingdom from social ills that affect other more developed countries. "The more I travelled around Bhutan, the more I realised that there were charitable institutions that needed help in one form or another," Herison recounts. It didn't take long for Druk Asia to



become his platform for channelling aid to organisations like the Lapsakha Community School, where Druk Asia sponsored the upgrade of classrooms and water storage facilities. There's also the non-profit Voluntary Artists Studio (VAST), whose young artists are often featured by the company in exhibitions outside Bhutan. Druk Asia has also extended aid to the Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (RSPCA), the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, and even a local football team — the Paro FC — whose sports programme helps keep local kids in the playing field, and off the streets.

For a relatively small company to have such a varied portfolio of charitable works, one can't help but wonder how all this affects Druk Asia's bottom line. "The pandemic aside, we're doing fine," Herison affirms. "To tell you the truth, I'm satisfied if the company makes just enough income to pay the rent and everyone's salaries." He adds, "Bhutan has given me countless memorable experiences, not to mention a different outlook on life. These things are so much more valuable than money." In fact, the King of Bhutan himself, His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, once quipped that Herison was already half-Bhutanese by virtue of his very personal style of philanthropy.

Herison smiles when he recounts that anecdote. "It's a privilege to be in a position to contribute to Bhutanese society, and because of this, I do what I can to return the favour to this country," he concludes. ■

Through Druk Asia, founder Joni Herison (top left) has found a meaningful outlet for his philanthropic work in Bhutan. The company has initiated a wide array of charity programmes, among them a provincial school upgrade, and a blanket donation drive to help keep local monks and disadvantaged people warm during the Himalayan winter.