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## INSPIRATION

# THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN WILL SOON BE MUCH MORE EXPENSIVE TO VISIT. THAT MIGHT BE A GOOD THING

If Bhutan is on your bucket list, start saving for a new daily tourist levy to pay on top of your hotel and other expenses. Here's what to know.



PHOTO BY TRIDIB HALDER/GETTY IMAGES/CANVA



**I** **T HAD TO HAPPEN** sooner or later. For years, players in Bhutan’s travel industry were saying that the country’s “High Value, Low Impact” brand of tourism was long due for an update. Already one of the world’s most exclusive destinations, the Kingdom of Bhutan has announced a round of policy changes including a new tourist levy that will accompany its reopening to foreign visitors on September 23. The revisions are nothing short of drastic—and they prove that this tiny-but-amazingly-scenic Himalayan nation is serious about keeping itself from being overrun by sightseers.



*Punakha suspension bridge. Courtesy of Six Senses*

Unlike (pretty much) everywhere else, getting here is not as simple as buying a plane ticket and packing one’s bags. Until recently, entry rules required would-be visitors of most nationalities to pre-book their entire trip through a government accredited tour operator. There was also a tourist levy, which entailed a minimum expenditure of US\$250 (or US\$200 during low season) per each day in Bhutan. The amount was reasonable enough, considering that it included the expenses for accommodation, food, transportation and guide service. Such procedures were meant to discourage “low-quality tourists”—that’s industry-speak for backpackers and budget travelers—and encourage the

and overall tour experience.

“I’d say the policy worked well for decades, and it played a big role in keeping the tourism industry sustainable”, says Joni Herison who runs DrukAsia, one of the biggest Bhutan specialist tour operators in Asia. “However, the levy hasn’t changed in the last 30 years and inflation has caught up. Decades ago, the daily spending commitment of US\$250 would have been expensive. These days, that amount is comparable to taking a non-budget holiday in some European countries.”



*Punakha Dzong. Photo by Nitish Waila/Getty Images/Canva*

No doubt this is one reason, apart from Bhutan’s natural charms, of course, why more visitors have been coming here in the last decade. Between 2012 and 2019 alone, annual tourist numbers crept up from 105,407 to 315,599; that’s a threefold increase in just seven years. This steady flow of visitors—and the strain they are putting on local infrastructure and communities—is what the “High Value, Low Impact” policy revisions are meant to address.

From September 23 onwards, travelers to Bhutan will now have to shell out a fee of US\$200 per day just for the right to be in the country. Children aged 6 to 12 only pay \$100 per day, while younger ones are exempt. DIY travel is now allowed, giving visitors more options for personalized itineraries. But add the usual trip expenses (airfare, hotels, food



Indians, who are covered by a pre-existing agreement that will expire in 2024.



*Gangtey two-bedroom villa. Courtesy of Six Senses*

This is all part of the plan, though, as Dorji Dradhul, the director general of Bhutan's Tourism Council, reasons. "For some time now, our partners have commented that Bhutan was no longer as exclusive as it used to be. Tourism has become so attractive that more and more Bhutanese are getting into it. In 2019 the country had 3,500 registered tour operators and 4,000 licensed guides, and their numbers are increasing." He adds that this oversupply is accompanied by a glut of hotels in the main tourist areas—and that they want to keep Bhutan as far as possible from devolving into a "lowest common denominator form of mass tourism."

"Bhutanese life is being disrupted by tourism. Grocery stores in our towns are being replaced by handicraft shops and cafes. Monasteries have become crowded, footpaths and scenic viewpoints congested, roads and trails to spiritual sites are often disrupted by loud music and unruly behavior from tourists" Dradhul continues. "Covid-19 was a blessing in disguise in the sense that it gave us the opportunity to reset the industry. We believe that only smaller numbers of premium visitors under a more liberalized tourism model can ensure maximum value and experience for both visitors and locals."





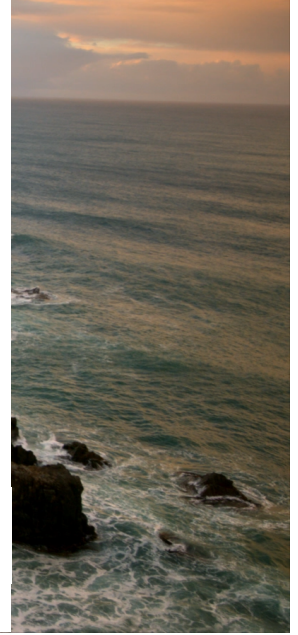
*Yak in the mountain. Photo by Kamchatka/Canva*

Confident as the government decision-makers are of this move, local tourism frontliners can't help but be wary of the new situation. "The playing field has been set wide open and you can expect tour operators to compete more intensely for tourist dollars," says Drukasia's Joni Herison. "I see it as a challenge to seriously improve our service and offerings—not only to stay ahead of other companies, but also to justify the visitors' expense"

"I feel that the changes aren't well thought out," says veteran guide Chunjur Dozi. "Without the requirement to go through accredited tour operators, we don't have a system that will ensure the quality of the tourist experience. They say they will tightly regulate tourism service but I can't see how. In a few months we might start seeing freelance guides hanging outside the airport offering their services – and they'll probably undercut each other. That's not something you would expect from 'High Value, Low Impact' tourism."



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*Sponsored by Tourism New Zealand*

The move to increase travel barriers to aid sustainable tourism is by no means unheard-of. As the worldwide travel industry goes into a “revenge travel” phase, hotspots around the world have pondered ways to lessen the mass tourism load. Perennially overrun Venice has installed its own day-visitor levy, while Thailand and New Zealand plan to refocus their marketing towards “high-quality tourists.” However, only Bhutan has had the guts to implement such a hefty new tourist levy. No doubt the world will be watching to see if these drastic measures work.

“We ourselves are not exactly sure how this will play out. There will surely be teething problems in the next few years, but we will address them as we go along,” says Dradhul. “Yes, some sacrifices will be made in the short term, but in the long run everyone—Bhutanese and tourists—will all benefit if Bhutan is able to preserve its culture and environment.”



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