

BHUTAN TO REOPEN TO INTERNATIONAL TOURISM



The Bhutan Tourism Board announced last week that it will reopen its borders to international tourism on September 23. However, the Himalayan foothill country wants to transform tourism by focusing on three areas: improving infrastructure and services, enhancing tourism experiences, and making tourism sustainable.

"Covid-19 has given us the opportunity to plan how to structure and operate the tourism sector so that it is not just economic, but leaves a small social footprint," said Tandi Dorji, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Bhutan Tourism Board. **"Our long-term goal is to create quality experiences for visitors and well-paying, professional jobs for our citizens."**

Among the many changes are revised standards for service providers, including hotels, guides, tour operators and drivers, who will soon undergo a stricter certification process before they can offer their services to international tourists. Employees will be required to participate in qualification and retraining programs to improve the quality of services.

In view of the growing threat of climate change, Bhutan will also intensify its efforts to keep the country carbon neutral and a green destination for tourists. The country is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and the frequent rains and floods it causes.

To finance this transformation, Bhutan increased the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) on June 20 from the current \$65 to \$200 per person per night. This tax is to be used directly for measures to promote carbon-neutral tourism and to train workers in this sector. Tourists from India will continue to pay the previously set tax of about \$15, which will be increased at a later date.

The reorganization of the tourism sector is part of an overall change throughout the country, from the public service to the financial sector. These changes are aimed at developing Bhutan's human capital by providing the people with better skills, knowledge and understanding.

"Our strategy to reshape the tourism sector takes us back to our roots, "high value, low volume" tourism, where we meet the needs of tourists while protecting our people, culture, values and environment," says Dorji Dhradhul, Director General of the Bhutan Tourism Board. "Tourism is a strategic and valuable national asset, important not only to those working in the sector but to all Bhutanese. Ensuring its sustainability is essential to protect future generations."

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