

TRAVEL

**BHUTAN -- REMOTE LAND STRIVES TO PRESERVE IDENTITY
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REUTERS

659 words

8 September 1985

The Seattle Times

SUNDAY

J11

English

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THIMPHU, Bhutan _ ``Do not give pens, sweets or medicine to villagers," warns a Bhutanese government guidebook for tourists and mountaineers.

For a country described in official brochures as ``perhaps the last of the Shangrilas," Bhutan is not in a hurry to modernize its tourist image.

Called ``Druk Yul" (Land of the Thunder Dragon) by its 1.4 million people, the kingdom welcomed its first tourists in 1974.

Last year just 1,919 foreigners were allowed to see the delights of the mountainous nation sandwiched between China's Tibet region and India. They traveled on tightly controlled package tours that were priced high to discourage all but the five-star visitor.

There has been the same caution about mountaineering and a determination not to compete with Nepal, where climbers swarm over almost every peak.

Bhutan opened its first peak, 23,000-foot high Jitchudrake, to mountaineering teams two years ago.

Jigme Tshultim, general manager of the Bhutan Tourism Corp., said one new peak would be opened to climbers every two years. He said four expeditions had tried to scale Jitchudrake but each had failed. So far this year 19 expeditions have applied, indicating the interest in Bhutan's peaks.

Bhutan issued a number of rules when the first climbers were let in, saying they were imposed to preserve ``ecological balance and cultural and traditional values."

Judging from past experience the rules will be strictly enforced.

In 1970, after a joint Indo-Bhutanese expedition scaled the 23,997-foot high Mount Chomolhari, the king declared the peak off limits.

Villagers had complained that the climbers defiled Chomolhari, which is dedicated to a goddess they believe guards their cattle.

To the tourist, Bhutan is a dazzling kaleidoscope of the modern and the medieval, making it one of the last unexplored destinations of the world.

Imported Japanese cars roar past ancient Buddhist prayer flags flapping in the wind and red-robed monks counting their beads mingle with villagers in the weekly bazaars.

In the countryside, terraced rice fields nestle at the foot of densely forested mountainsides on which are perched white and red fortress-monasteries called dzongs.

Young Bhutanese men wearing colorful traditional robes called ghos, which leave the knees bare, listen to Michael Jackson on portable tape recorders. They sip coffee and eat chocolate cake at the Swiss Bakery in Thimphu, the country's capital of 20,000 people.

Dasho Lam Penjor, deputy minister in the Planning Commission, said tourism was important in terms of Bhutan's image in the outside world. ``But instead of viewing tourism as a sector to earn a few dollars more, we do not wish to prostitute our country and its culture," he said.

Movie and television cameras are banned and tipping is forbidden.



`` Many tourists entered highly respected religious places without permission and took photographs which we consider sentimentally unacceptable," Penjor said.

`` But pictures of our mountains, of Bhutan's scenic beauty, are all right."

Tshultim said tourists were permitted in groups of at least six people, and charged a flat rate of \$130 each a day for bed, food and travel. There are 368 hotel beds in the country and tourist revenue last year was \$1.6 million.

`` Some people think that is too expensive, but we do not want low-budget tourists. In fact we are going to increase our rates by 10 per cent this year," he said

Visitors fly five times a week on state-owned Druk Air's 22-seater Dorniers from the eastern Indian city of Calcutta into a country where the first roads to the outside world were built only two decades ago.

He said Bhutan planned to eventually allow about 5,000 tourists to enter the country annually.

Tshultim said about 73 per cent of last year's tourists came from the United States and Western Europe, mainly West Germany, and 20 per cent from Japan.

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