

Bhutan opens slowly to outside world

by Chaitanya Kalbag

Thimphu, Bhutan (Reuter) — "Do not give pens, sweets or medicine to villagers," warns a Bhutanese government guidebook for tourists.

The writer has ventured to the secretive Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, where less than 2,000 visitors are permitted to visit each year, to report on the country, its people and its young bachelor king.

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

Called Druk Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon) by its 1.4 million people, the kingdom only 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 travelled on tightly-controlled package tours that were priced high to discourage all but the five star traveller.



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

Bhutan only opened its first peak, 7,000 metre (22,965-foot) high Jitchu-

drake, to mountaineering teams two years ago.

Jigme Tshultim, general manager of the Bhutan Tourism Corporation, said one new peak would be opened to climbers every two years.

Tshultim told Reuters 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 ex-

perience the rules will be strictly enforced.

In 1970 after a joint Indo-Bhutanese expedition scaled 7,314 metre (23,997-foot) high mount Chomolhari, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck 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 mediaeval, 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 ricefields nestle at the foot of densely forested mountainsides on which are perched white-and-red fortress-monasteries called Dzongs.

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wearing colourful traditional robes called ghos, which leave the knees bare, listen to US pop star Michael Jackson on hand-held 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, told Reuters 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.

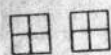
Movie and television cameras are banned and tipping is forbidden.

"Many tourists entered highly respected religious places without permission and took photographs which we consider senti-

mentally unacceptable," Penjor said.

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

Tshultim said tourists are permitted in groups of at least six people, and charged a flat rate of \$130 (about 3,510 baht) 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 east Indian city of Calcutta into a country where the first roads to the outside world

were built only two decades ago.

Every tourist spends an average of \$137 on handicrafts, but we are not going out of our way to create a souvenir industry Tshultim said.

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

Despite the caution, the Tourism Department has steadily grown in importance, increasing its employees from 195 in 1982 to 295 now.

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.

"Dozens of special tour operators are clamouring to get in and the waiting list is long, but we are not tempted. We want to be able to shut off the country again if need be," he said.

**A mountainous nation
sandwiched between
China's Tibet region and
India, it isn't in a
hurry to change**
