

INDIA/NEPAL/SRI LANKA/BHUTAN

Bhutan Turning Its Back on Tourism...

By Rik Fairlie

At a time when most Asian nations are trumpeting their cultural attractions and inviting the world to sample their upgraded tourism infrastructures, one Himalayan kingdom is all but saying no to visitors.

Jigme Tsultim, managing director of the Bhutan Tourism Corp.'s head office in Thimphu, recently outlined changes designed to shift the country's economy from tourism to exports—and whittle away arrivals at the same time.

The tourism official said all Bhutan Travel Service offices abroad, except the New Delhi, India, branch, have been shut down. The Travel Service branches basically served as government tourist offices, distributing brochures and press information, but also offered standard seven-night tours.

Tsultim also announced that effective Jan. 1, non-Buddhist vis-

Bhutan has banned tourists from its temples, including the temple within Paro Dzong.

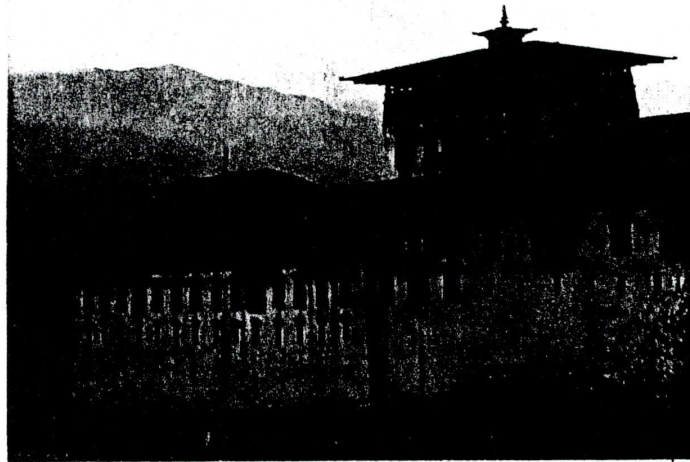


PHOTO: MARIE BROWN

itors will be banned from temples and monasteries. Dzongs (fortified monasteries) will remain open to tour groups, but temples housed within dzongs are off limits. Over-

land entry by FITs will also be prohibited.

He said that the decision to decommmercialize the places of worship was brought on by an increase in tourists tampering with religious artifacts. The country is also limiting the number of tourists attending the annual Paro festivals.

Bhutan, a 16,000-square-mile kingdom tucked between India and Tibet, takes in some \$2 million in tourism annually. Tsultim explained that the government is looking to expand exports, particularly of timber, to make outgoing goods outweigh incoming visitors.

"We don't want tourism to be the No. 1 foreign currency earner," Tsultim explained. "If we could help it, we would like no tourism in Bhutan. We would like to be less known—that way the mystery remains."

These measures, he predicted, will slash arrivals from an estimated 2,600 this year to 1,000 in 1988.

To lure visitors away from the temples and monasteries, Tsultim said the government will push trekking, mountaineering, river rafting and wildlife tours. Tents for single campers will be offered, he said,

...But New Firm Will Still Offer Tours

The former manager of the Bhutan Travel Service's New York branch has opened a private company to fill the void created by the closing of the Bhutan Travel Service's U.S. offices.

Marie Brown, who in 1980 opened the first out-of-country tourism office for the royal government of Bhutan, will head up Bhutan Travel, Inc. in Manhattan. Brown, who first visited the Himalayan kingdom in 1978 on a travel agent fam trip and has returned six times since then, said the new company will offer group and FIT tours.

Because Brown essentially created the now-defunct Bhutan tourism office in New York, she is uniquely qualified to provide travel services. "The thing I have to offer is the fact that I've known Bhutan and the Bhutanese for so long that I can

probably answer questions better than anyone in the country," she said.

She explained that Bhutan Travel, which will offer agents standard 10 percent commissions, will specialize in information on the country, reservations, visa processing and tour payments.

The firm will offer scheduled seven-night tours with three departures weekly from Calcutta and Dhaka, with sightseeing in Paro Valley, Thimphu and surrounding areas. Packages include roundtrip flights on Druk Air, accommodations, meals, transportation and an English-speaking guide.

For additional information, contact Bhutan Travel, Inc., 120 E. 56th St., Suite 1430, New York, N.Y. 10022, telephone 212-838-6382.

—Rik Fairlie