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Tourist arrivals increase

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25 September 2004 - What had been predicted as a bright and promising year for the Bhutanese tourism industry is by and large coming true with tourist arrivals (till September) jumping by almost 25 percent compared to last year.

The risk of SARS and Avian flu in the region near forgotten and the unstable political situation in Nepal have all contributed to increasing arrivals to Bhutan, according to the department of tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry.

The travel advisory issued by the United States of America to its citizens not to travel to Nepal in the wake of fresh violence has diverted tourists to Bhutan, tourism officials said. About 5,357 tourists have visited Bhutan from January - September 2004, up from 3,654 tourists for the same period last year.

"The predictions this time has hit home," said the joint director of the department of tourism, Kunzang Norbu. "With the autumn season just beginning, the overall picture looks good this year."

Tour operators are also optimistic of the numbers that are yet to arrive.

Etho Metho tours and treks, one of the largest tour companies is even forecasting an overflow this year because of the diversion of tourists from Nepal.

The company received 391 tourists till September and are expecting about 590 in the autumn season with 340 visitors lined up for October alone.

Bookings, according to the managing director Dago Bida, is still flowing in. "The flow has been steady although the fall is always expected to bring in good numbers," she said.

The company with its 12 guides, six cooks and 15 Japanese buses are looking forward to



Tourists at the Thimphu tshechu

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hiring more people to meet the demand.

Sakten tours, an upcoming tour company which received 155 tourists last year is positive about the numbers to increase by a third this year.

"We are definitely doing better than last year," said the managing director of Sakten tours, Tsewang Rinzing. The company is hiring about 10 freelance guides to aid its team of six guides and cooks.

Many of the single tour operators that struggled through the last three years are upbeat this season.

"This is a good upward trend where the arrivals of tourists are spread over among all the companies, irrespective of their size," said Kunzang Norbu.

Yudruk tours have 15 treks lined up for the coming months. For the fall, the company is expecting close to 100 tourists and looking into hiring 25 trekking staff for the autumn season.

"We are hoping for a higher turnover this year considering the longer duration of stay of all the guests," said Rinzin Ongdra of Yudruk tours.

With the soaring numbers freelance guides are in demand. An experienced and a specialised guide earns about Nu. 500 a day. A language guide is paid more.

Meanwhile, the hotels in the capital are gearing up for their share of the season. With 50 rooms, hotel Riverview, in Thimphu predicts full occupancy for the autumn season.

However, the usual constraint the tour operators encounter each year is the difficulty in obtaining the flight tickets for the visitors. Despite additional flights, Druk Air finds it extremely difficult to handle the tourists inflow during the peak season.

"Even with more seats on the bigger aircraft, the tshechu period will always be a problem as the tourists are concentrated during this time," said Rinzin Ongdra.

Although the increase in arrivals this year may not reach the high of 7,559 tourists that visited Bhutan in 2000, the tour operators are happy with the rising trend.

"We cannot compare the present scenario with the heydays of 1990s when the business was really picking up," said a tour operator.

By Karma Choden
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