Seeking the middle way to boost tourism in Bhutan

By BHAVAN JAIPRAGAS

P ERCHED high up on a pine-clad valley close to Bhutan's most sacred mountain — the ultra-exclusive 29-room Uma Paro resort is perhaps the most eloquent icon for the kingdom's unique brand of tourism, which welcomes the super-rich with open arms, but shuns materialistic excesses.

The Singapore-owned resort, which has villas that can cost up to US$1,500 a night, has the creature comforts one would expect in a luxurious mountain retreat, including personal masseuses and a hot stone bath.

But true to Bhutan's ethos of Buddhist values, the 14-hectare resort does not exude decadence. Instead, with its organic vegetable farm and austere, monastic architectural design, the resort tries to be one with its natural surroundings.

It is also in sync with the tourism authorities' plan for Bhutan.

Apprehensive about the hordes of backpacker-vagabond travellers who have overrun nearby Nepal, Bhutan has embraced a policy of "high-value, low-impact" tourism since opening its doors to foreign tourists in 1974. The government hopes this will rake in much-needed foreign exchange and lessen the country's dependence on aid from its southern neighbour India, while staunchly protecting the nation's Buddhist culture and pristine environment.

"We are trying to improve the quality of our services so that indeed Bhutan becomes a high-end tourist destination — with fewer tourists who will spend more in ways that will not scar Bhutan or will not impact negatively either on our culture or on our ecology," says Prime Minister Jigme Thinley.

Holidaymakers in Bhutan have to pay a daily high-season fee of US$250 a day per person, which includes tourist-class accommodation, food, transport and a US$65 government tax. They pay a premium for more upscale resorts like Uma Paro.

"The exclusiveness is what makes Bhutan and us here at the Uma Paro special; high-end travellers go to the ends of the world looking for a place like this," says Norman Luxenburg, general manager of Uma Paro, which is part of the COMO chain of luxury hotels and resorts owned by Singaporean hotelier Christina Ong.

Last year, close to 64,000 people visited the kingdom — locally referred to as Druk Yul or "The Land of The Thunder Dragon". This was a ten-fold increase from a decade before. The Tourism Council of Bhutan has set itself the ambitious target of attracting 100,000 visitors this year.

"The numbers will be well within absorptive capacity. We have latent capacity and the base numbers are low," says Tshewo Nadik, the council's newly appointed director.

Others in the government are equally hopeful that the kingdom's famed alternative economic development philosophy of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH), which focuses on key quality-of-life indicators, will not be undermined by more tourists — of the right kind.

"The type of tourists we get in Bhutan tend to be ones who do quite a bit of study of Bhutan and have great appreciation for us," says Karma Tshering, who heads the powerful GNH Commission.

Overstretching?

However, critics worry that a developing country of just 700,000 people has a long way to go. With tourism, even those who have a US$44 million for the Bhutanese economy, of which US$15 million went into government coffers as taxes; Bhutan, the smallest economy among the eight members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), has a gross domestic product of US$3.7 billion.

With national carrier Drukair having started direct flights to Singapore's Changi Airport from Sept 1, expectations are high that the aviation hub will feed more travellers to the Himalayan kingdom and further boost the rising numbers.

Tourists like retired office secretary Adeen Evans, however, hope the world's growing footprint on the erstwhile hermit kingdom will not alter its unique character.

"The 67-year-old Briton: I don't know if I will be back, but I really hope it doesn't change. It's a wonderful place to escape from our very modern lives."