

THE OFFICIAL POLICY GUIDE

BHUTAN

Sustainable Tourism Policy

High Value • Low Volume • Gross National Happiness

2026 Edition • Updated with Latest SDF Rates & Visitor Statistics

70%+

Forest Cover

Constitutional mandate

\$100

SDF/Night

Valid to Aug 2027

209K

2025 Visitors

USD 43.3M SDF earned

Carbon—

Negative Status

World's only nation

1974

Policy Origin

50+ years of vision

The World's Most Principled Tourism Model

Bhutan does not count tourists — it values them. Since 1974, this Himalayan kingdom has pioneered a unique approach to tourism governance rooted in its national philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Rather than maximising visitor numbers, Bhutan ensures every tourist meaningfully contributes to the nation's wellbeing: its forests, its culture, its people, and its future. This document provides a comprehensive guide to Bhutan's Sustainable Tourism Policy for 2026 — what it means, how it works, and how you can travel within it responsibly.

✓ **World's only carbon-negative country**

✓ **Constitutional 60%+ forest cover mandate**

✓ **SDF funds free healthcare & education**

✓ **High Value, Low Volume since 1974**

50+ Years of Principled Tourism Governance

Bhutan opened to tourism in 1974 — and immediately decided to do it differently. 1972

Gross National Happiness (GNH)

In 1972, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, declared that 'Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.' This radical idea became the bedrock of Bhutan's governance: that national progress must be measured not by economic output alone, but by the collective happiness and wellbeing of the people.

The Four Pillars of GNH

- ◆ Sustainable & Equitable Socio-Economic Development
- ◆ Preservation & Promotion of Cultural Heritage
- ◆ Conservation of the Environment
- ◆ Good Governance

Constitutional Environmental Mandate

Article 5 of the Constitution of Bhutan (2008) mandates that the government shall 'protect, conserve, and improve the pristine environment' and that at least 60 percent of Bhutan's land shall remain under forest cover for all time. This is not a policy target — it is constitutional law. Bhutan currently exceeds this mandate with over 70% forest cover, making it one of the world's most important carbon sinks. Forests absorb over 9 million tonnes of CO₂ annually while the entire economy emits fewer than 4 million tonnes, giving Bhutan its extraordinary carbon-negative status.

"Our forests absorb over 9 million tonnes of CO₂ per year — while our entire economy emits fewer than 4 million tonnes." — Tourism Council of Bhutan

GNH Philosophy Born

HM the Fourth King declares Gross National Happiness supreme over Gross National Product as Bhutan's measure of progress.

1974

1974

Tourism Opens

Bhutan cautiously opens to foreign visitors with just 287 tourists, immediately implementing controlled entry.

1991

1991

Tourism Policy

Formal High Value, Low Volume policy codified. Minimum Daily Fee (MDP) introduced to regulate tourism.

2008

2008

Constitutional Protection

The new Constitution enshrines 60% forest cover mandate and environmental stewardship as fundamental law.

2022

2022

Post-COVID Relaunch

Bhutan reopens after pandemic closure. SDF replaces the MDP offering travellers more flexibility.

2023

2023

SDF Reform

SDF reduced from \$250 to \$100/night to increase accessibility while maintaining sustainability principles.

2025

2025

Record Contribution

209,376 visitors generate USD 43.31 million in SDF revenue, directly funding national development.

2027

2027

SDF Review

Current \$100/night SDF rate confirmed until 31 August 2027, with full policy review is expected.

SDF: Much More Than a Tourism Tax

The SDF is Bhutan's primary mechanism for ensuring tourism creates lasting national benefit, not just revenue.

SDF Payment Process

1

Choose a Licensed Operator

SDF can only be paid through

a licensed Bhutanese tour operator or their authorised international partner, such as Gettravelled.

2

Confirm Your Itinerary

Your operator calculates total SDF: \$100 × number of nights × number of travellers.

3

Secure Payment

Payment is made via the Bhutan Tourism Council portal. Credit card or wire transfer accepted. Must be cleared before visa processing.

4

Receive Visa Clearance

Once SDF is paid, you receive a Visa Clearance Letter by email. Present this at Paro Airport on arrival.

5

Travel with Confidence

Your SDF contribution is already working — funding schools, hospitals, and forest protection before your flight lands.

Current SDF Rates (2026)

International adults	USD \$100	Per person, per night
Children 6–12 years	USD \$50	Per child, per night
Children under 6	Exempt	No SDF applicable
Indian nationals	INR 1,200 (~USD \$15)	Per person, per night
Bangladeshi nationals	INR 1,200 (~USD \$15)	Per person, per night
Maldivian nationals	INR 1,200 (~USD \$15)	Per person, per night
Rate valid until	31 August 2027	Guaranteed rate; no early changes

■ **IMPORTANT:** SDF does not cover accommodation, meals, transport, guide fees, or flights. These costs are additional and must be arranged through your licensed Bhutanese tour operator.

How SDF is Allocated



Book via Gettravelled

We handle all SDF payments, visa processing & logistics.
gettravelled.com.au

Biodiversity & Protected Areas

The World's Only Carbon-Negative Country

Bhutan's forests absorb 9+ million tonnes of CO₂ annually

FOREST COVER

70%+

Legally protected; over 60% constitutionally mandated forever

TONNES

9M

Absorbed annually by Bhutan's forests
carbon sink

Jigme Dorji National Park

4,349 km²

Bhutan's largest national park. Snow leopard, blue sheep, takin (national animal)

Royal Manas National Park

1,057 km²

UNESCO World Heritage site. Tigers, elephants, golden langur, one-horned rhinoceros

Jigme Singye Wangchuck NP

1,730 km²

Red pandas, clouded leopards. The 700-year-old Gangtey Goenpa sits within

Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary

278 km²

The only natural sal forest in Bhutan. Chital deer, wild boar, Gangetic dolphins

Biological Corridors

Nine corridors

Connect all protected areas, allowing wildlife to migrate freely across 51% of

Wildlife by Numbers

- 700+

Bird species (10% of world's total)
- 200+

Mammal species including snow leopard & Bengal tiger
- 5,500+

Plant species; 46+ rhododendron varieties
- 700+

Medicinal plant species used in traditional medicine
- ~180

Endangered Black-Necked Cranes (winter in Phobjikha)

Key Environmental Laws & Policies

Constitution of Bhutan (2008)

Article 5 mandates permanent 60%+ forest cover. Establishes environmental protection

National Environment Protection Act (NEPA) 2007

Provides the legal framework for environmental impact assessments, pollution

Biological Diversity Act 2003

Governs conservation of Bhutan's extraordinary biodiversity. Bhutan sits in

Forest & Nature Conservation Act 1995 (Revised 2023)

Regulates sustainable forestry, prohibits illegal logging, and provides legal

Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations

All development projects — including tourism infrastructure — must pass an EIA before

Driglam Namzha: The Code of Etiquette

Bhutan's ancient code of conduct governs dress, behaviour, and respect in all public & sacred spaces.

Core Cultural Preservation Principles



Licensed Guide Requirement

Guides are mandatory for all dzong (fortress) visits, sacred sites, and trekking routes. Guides



Controlled Tourism Zones

Certain regions require special permits beyond the standard visa. The Snowman Trek, Haa Valley, and



Dress Code Enforcement

Modest attire is legally required in dzongs and religious sites. Covered arms and legs mandatory;



Photography Restrictions

Photography prohibited inside most temples and dzong interiors. Always ask before photographing



Plastic-Free Zones

Single-use plastics are banned across Bhutan. Tourists must carry reusable water bottles. Tour



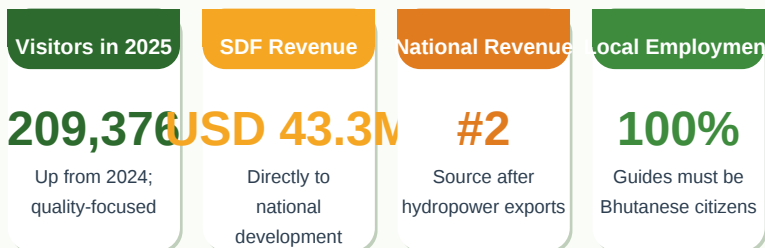
Community-Based Tourism

Policy actively promotes homestays, local guide employment, and village tourism. Revenue must flow

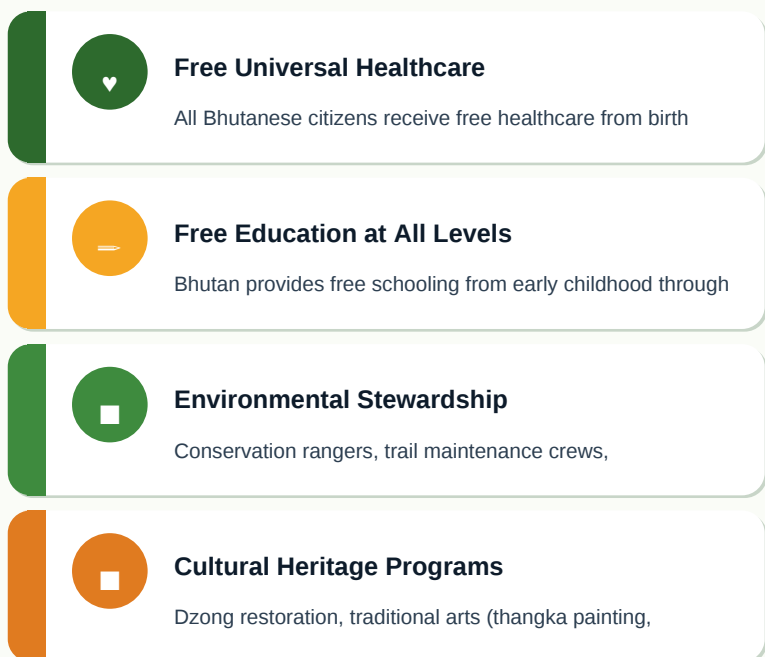
Responsible Traveller Checklist

- ✓ Book through a licensed operator (mandatory)
- ✓ Pay SDF before arrival — via your tour operator
- ✓ Carry only reusable water bottles
- ✓ Dress modestly for all religious sites
- ✓ Walk clockwise around chortens & prayer flags
- ✓ Remove shoes before entering temples
- ✓ Ask permission before photographing people
- ✓ Do not touch religious statues or climb structures
- ✓ Support local businesses — guesthouses, craft shops
- ✓ Use local guides for dzongs and trekking routes
- ✓ Dispose of waste responsibly — pack out what you pack in
- ✓ Do not pick plants or disturb wildlife
- ✓ Respect fire restrictions — no open fires in forests
- ✓ Accept offered food/drink with both hands
- ✓ Leave no trace on trekking routes
- ✓ Share your experience — inspire responsible travel!

2025 Tourism Impact at a Glance



What Tourism Revenue Funds



Stakeholder Ecosystem

Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB)

- Apex regulatory body
- Issues operator licences
- Sets and collects SDF
- Overseas visa clearance

→ tourism.gov.bt

Licensed Bhutanese Tour Operators

- Must hold TCB licence
- Responsible for SDF collection
- Employ local guides & drivers
- Quality-graded by TCB annually

→ gettravelled.com.au

International Partners

- Gettravelled.com.au (Australia)
- Must work with licensed BTO
- Cannot collect SDF directly
- Promote responsible travel

→ gettravelled.com.au

Local Communities

- Homestay host families
- Craft cooperatives & markets
- Village guide programmes
- Farm-to-table tourism

The Future of Bhutan’s Tourism Policy

SDF Rate Review (2027)

The current \$100/night SDF is locked until 31 August 2027. The government will then conduct a full policy

Carbon-Neutral Tourism Ambition

Bhutan has committed to achieving fully carbon-neutral tourism by 2030. This includes

Digital Tracking & Transparency

The Tourism Council is rolling out a digital dashboard showing real-time SDF allocation and

Expanding Community Tourism

New policy frameworks from 2025 encourage village-level tourism enterprises, giving rural

Climate Resilience Planning

Despite being carbon-negative, Bhutan is not immune to climate change. Glacial lake outburst floods

Why Bhutan’s Model Matters Globally

In an era of overtourism crises from Venice to Machu Picchu to Bali, Bhutan’s High Value, Low Volume model offers a compelling alternative. Rather than capping tourism through failure — environmental damage, cultural erosion, community resentment — Bhutan has built limits and values into its tourism DNA from the start. The result: 50 years of tourism that has grown the economy, funded social services, preserved forests, and maintained the cultural fabric that makes Bhutan extraordinary. Nations including Palau, Rwanda, New Zealand, and the Galapagos Islands have studied and partially adopted elements of Bhutan’s approach. Bhutan’s 2025 visitor figure of 209,376 — generating USD 43.31 million in SDF alone — proves quality beats quantity.

How to Travel with Gettravelled

travelled

Australia’s Bhutan Travel Specialists

- ✓ Licensed partner with Bhutanese operators
- ✓ Handle all SDF payments & visa clearance
- ✓ Tailor-made sustainable itineraries
- ✓ 100% local guide employment guaranteed
- ✓ Carbon-offset travel options available
- ✓ No hidden fees — all prices in AUD

gettravelled.com.au/bhutan

Key Official Resources

Tourism Council of Bhutan

→ tourism.gov.bt

Bhutan Immigration

→ immi.gov.bt

Gettravelled Bhutan Tours

→ gettravelled.com.au/bhutan

GNH Commission

→ gnhc.gov.bt

Bhutan Foundation

→ bhutanfound.org

Sources & Currency Note: Data sourced from Tourism Council of Bhutan, GLP Films (March 2026), Young Pioneer Tours (Jan 2026), Silverpine Bhutan (Feb 2026), Found Bhutan, World Bank & JSW Law Bhutan. SDF rate confirmed valid until 31 August 2027. Always verify at tourism.gov.bt.