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DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

Tarayana Center, P.O.Box 126, GPO Thimphu, Bhutan

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STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

SUBJECT: FAM TRIPS TO BHUTAN

Date updated: May 30, 2023

This policy applies to:

- All international travel agents (“travel agent”) who wish to sell and promote Bhutan as a destination with the objective of bringing more business to Bhutan.

Process:

1. Any international travel agents who want to visit Bhutan on a Familiarisation (FAM) trip must fill out [this form](#).
2. The form will be vetted by the Department of Tourism within 7 working days and the person who made the application will be responded to.
3. All Hotels and Tour Operators in Bhutan can apply for a waiver for international travel agents using the form.
4. The maximum number of days allowed to enter the Kingdom with an SDF waiver will be 7 nights for those traveling within the valleys of Thimphu, Punakha and Paro only. Stays for up to a maximum of 15 nights will be considered for those incorporating other valleys into their itineraries such as (but not limited) to Phobjikha/Gangtey, Bumthang and areas east of Bumthang, Haa Valley, Gasa and specialized trekking routes which take longer to complete. *The extension of the Tourism/Trade SDF beyond 7 nights will be granted on a case by case basis after careful vetting by the Department of Tourism and is not guaranteed. Proof of accommodation will be required to approve the longer itinerary.
5. All FAM trips should be hosted / sponsored by a Bhutanese Tour Operator or hotel.
6. The agents will be responsible for their own visa fees and visa applications.
7. All international agents will be required to commit to marketing activities for Bhutan in return for the SDF waiver. It is expected that the agents will agree to do as many activities as possible to promote Bhutan. These activities can be (for example):
 - a. Promoting Bhutan in a prominent way on their website
 - b. An Electronic Direct Mail (EDM) or newsletter to their database
 - c. Social media posts tagging Bhutan Tourism
 - d. A hosted dinner or event about Bhutan
 - e. A webinar to their clients or agents
 - f. Digital marketing spend
 - g. Inclusion in their brochures and other marketing collateral
 - h. And others...** Please note that word of mouth to their database about Bhutan is not enough. All activities must be measurable and visible.
8. Partners or friends of the travel agents accompanying them on their trip to Bhutan will not be eligible for discounted or waived SDF rates.



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9. Monument fees and visa fees will not be waived or discounted for the agents.
10. Agents will be approved and vetted by DOT, based on their profile, the quality and extensiveness of their existing marketing collateral (eg their website and social media profiles), their business profile, their reputation in the market, their previous sales for Bhutan, and/or how much potential they have to generate sales for Bhutan in the future.
11. The Department of Tourism will be responsible and accountable for ensuring that the international travel agents who visit Bhutan are legitimate and are here for genuine business purposes.
12. The hosting hotel or Tour Operator will be responsible for ensuring that the visiting travel agent delivers the confirmed marketing support that they have promised.
13. The Department of Tourism will produce a quarterly report that summarises the visits of the agents, including: the name of the international agent, the name of the local DMC/TO, their country of residence, how long they spent in Bhutan, and their promised coverage in terms of marketing activities.
14. The agents must be from the sales or product department of their company and must be capable of selling holidays to Bhutan. The head of the company will also be entitled to apply for the FAM trip.
15. Any international travel agent, local hotel or Tour Operator / DMC caught abusing this system, even once, will be banned from applying for a FAM trip waiver for a minimum of 3 years, and other penalties may apply.
16. The FAM trips can happen all year round, there is no blackout date.

FOR ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT FAM TRIPS, PLEASE EMAIL: FAMTRIP@TOURISM.GOV.BT

Questions:

Q1. How can we ensure stringent vetting/due diligence to prevent misuse?

Answer: We will have a dedicated person responsible for this task. Intelligent vetting needs to be in place to avoid any corruption of the system. But it also needs to be a trade-friendly approach that doesn't cater to the lowest common denominator. The great majority of these travel agents are genuinely curious about Bhutan and are keen on becoming ambassadors for the country. They will invest back in and deliver an ROI by selling Bhutan as a travel destination to their valued clients with the confidence that only first-hand experience can bring. It is always better to have them experience Bhutan first-hand to be able to sell the destination.

Q2. Should we limit the number of people coming from a particular company?

Answer: This will not be necessary if point one (above) is in place. It is possible for more than one person from a company to sell Bhutan and to be an ambassador for the kingdom and some companies have more than one salesperson selling the destination (for instance, some in the product department and some in the marketing department). But, if more than one person comes from the same company, they will each need to commit to the deliverables outlined above (ie/ point 7 applies per person). Which means that there should be extra marketing efforts from the same company if more than one person visits. All people coming for a FAM trip should be from the sales, marketing or product departments only.



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Q3. Should we regulate the frequency of visits?

Answer: This will be part of the vetting process. It is recommended that agents visit not more than once per year, but exceptions to this will be considered, especially if the person has shown that they are high volume/revenue producers for Bhutan, and/or if the agent will visit other places that they have not previously seen in the kingdom.

Q4. How can we measure the outcome / value addition by FAM visits?

Answer: Bhutan is a niche destination and few tour operators or agents will be able to sell it more than a few times a year to their clients for big value bookings. That doesn't mean that the business they bring isn't valuable and that they shouldn't be allowed to visit as a result. However, the Department of Tourism will be producing a quarterly report that will aim to demonstrate the value of these FAM trips.

Q5. Can Tour Leaders avail the same policy?

Answer: Not at the moment. Bhutan has a lot of highly skilled guides and tour leaders and we wish to create opportunities for Bhutanese to host the visiting groups.