

# **Draft Minutes of the Meeting with Hon'ble Prime Minister and Top 50 Tour Operators**

*Date* : 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2013

*Time* : 2:30 PM

*Venue* : Conference Hall, Gyalyong Tshokhang

*Agenda*: As such no set Agenda

*Attendees*: Top 50 tour operators

## **Opening Remarks by Hon'ble Chairman:**

The Hon'ble Chairman of ABTO apprised the floor about the meeting called by Hon'ble Lyonchhoen to meet the top 50 tour operators, thanked government for giving such opportunity and clarified that ABTO doesn't have any set agenda for submission since the meeting was called by Hon' Lyonchhoen.

## **Remarks by Hon'ble Lyonchhoen:**

The Hon'ble Lyonchhoen thanked ABTO and its members for making it to attend such a meeting within short notice and informed that the meeting is informal with no set agenda. Lyonchhoen mentioned that the purpose of meeting the larger tour operators is because of their stake in the tourism industry and that it was not possible to meet everyone at one shot.

In brief, Lyonchhoen's opinion/views are summarized as follows;-

- Tourism is important for revenue generation (either direct/indirect), strengthening economy, employment and show casing Bhutan's image to the outside world unlike other sectors such a hydropower, cottage industry etc.
- The history of Bhutan, myth, figures, fact that a country that has wise kings, culture that combines spiritual, religion and inclusiveness, reality of having pristine environment and population of little over six hundred thousand are enough to showcase Bhutan's image to the outside world through various media channel.
- Tourism is the most powerful media and the window of Bhutan to the world.
- Tourism in Bhutan is unique, successful, encouraging and PM congratulated tour operators for playing their role as tour operators in building up the country's image.
- PM questioned how could we take tourism forward? As a Chair of TCB, Lyonchhoen's said we should work hand in hand and will be open and accessible to all ABTO members through hotline, SMS, Facebook, email and social network for ideas and to address any issues tour operation related problems like visa, immigration etc and will try his best to address the issues.
- He said that Tourism potential is yet to be tapped to it's fullest and the sustainability aspect should define the limit of that potential.
- Although tourism is considered as an important sector (be it trade, transport, communication, farming) since the formulation of 9<sup>th</sup> FYP, priority has not been

given yet in the central plan of the FYP. It is just a part even in the 11<sup>th</sup> FYP and is up for discussion to be put in the core plan.

- Government doesn't have a tourism plan, nor TCB does have one, and currently no director at TCB and yet the irony is that of the existence of tourism for almost four decades since 1974.
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen requested ABTO and its member to sit together for the development of action plan with set objectives and share with him for directives and implementation through TCB.
- 2014 is an important year for celebrating 40 years of tourism and we should have a committed target to receive 10,000 Thais and 10,000 Japanese tourists in 2014, which is a challenge but could be possible if we work hand in hand. Hon'PM says we should plan accordingly with a set target in mind. ABTO and its members to organize lots of events to achieve the targets for 2014.
- PM said that special attention should be given to resolve seasonality and balanced tourism through out the country. Work to change the image that Bhutan is a year round destination and also improve regional balance of tourism business. Hon PM urged input from ABTO/tour operators to market/promote Bhutan as a whole year destination. And special focus on marketing eastern and southern Bhutan.
- There are different ways to market Bhutan as a tourism destination collectively. youtube, facebook, twitter and various social and print media etc. are some of the great additional options. PM mentioned that tour operator's websites come in all kinds and will ensure rating for better management & performance.
- TCB will be instructed to archive good photographs and video clips, which are to be used freely for the benefit of tourism industry.
- Roadside amenities are either not there and the ones that exist are nasty and need to develop everything urgently.
- Improve the drupath, Jumolhari trails, Manas etc.
- We should harness the potential of Manas and has to be developed as ecotourism destination. Manas is accessible from India, Gelephu, by helicopter, rafting and so on. Develop safari and make best use of the available resources for the benefit of tourism industry and simultaneously protecting the habitat. Government needs ideas from the stakeholders to take off such potential products.
- Focus on 2014: come up with ideas, targets, strategy, actions and assign responsibilities to government/TCB and assign responsibilities of how to address seasonality and then Lyonchhoen opened the floor for discussion.

#### **Open forum deliberation/discussions:**

- Marketing of destination: lack of awareness, PR agencies was key to marketing but the question was about the quality of PR agencies that TCB has identified. Focus on secondary market (eg. Brazil, Switzerland etc.) by inviting journalists and travel writers for effective promotion of destination.
- Taking leads from Uma and Aman that are recognized globally, TCB have to do more on marketing by inviting media & multimedia personnel from abroad.

- The common feedback provided by most of the tourists visiting east was the poor road network and government should intervene for improvement
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen shared the road condition including Thimphu to Punakha stretch beyond Dochula and informed that DoR was instructed to construct road that should last its life time (min 10 years). He informed the floor about the opportunity of using electric car and buses for tourism purposes.
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen informed that his office will be accessible at all times for any tourist or tour operator who would like to meet and talk about improving tourism. He has already met a couple of influential people/tourists and appreciated their idea on marketing through their network.
- Tour operators raised concern on effective marketing requires sellable products, which are currently lacking. Disseminating of wrong information about the destination and product would have adverse effect on marketing so TCB should consult stakeholders periodically and create more products.
- Marketing is a costlier affair and government should provide better incentive (tax) for tour operators to invest on marketing. Existing 2% allowable expenses is not enough and doesn't encourage tour operators to invest, hence needs to be looked at properly. Joint marketing may be useful for effective utilization of resources, which require coordination and collaboration with Drukair, TCB, ABTO and hotels.
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen informed that both tour operators and government should plough back money for marketing. There has to be a middle path for marketing and mutual benefit. We need to hype up and do something for marketing. The website of majority of the tour operators needs to be improved.
- The issues on visiting Manas were raised. Hon'ble Lyonchhoen reiterated that he will be fully involved and responsible for tackling the issues and if need be a person will be appointed full time in TCB for handling the issues. If he/she can't then the ball will be automatically back in his court for him to tackle.
- Inbound travel fare needs to be identified and organized in Bhutan for the benefit of tourism industry during the lean season similar to the PATA adventure travel mart, organized in 2012 that proved to be effective. Hon' PM endorsed the need to undertake such inbound travel fairs and told ABTO to come up with suggestions and proposals.
- On the development and sustainability of roadside amenities, government could identify places and give it to the private/public on lease so that private people would be encouraged to invest.
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen mentioned that as far as possible use private land for investment and development of roadside amenities and if is not at all feasible, government will look into leasing land.
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen shared his experiences on quality and variety of Bhutanese food being served to the tourists. He urged something to be done in 2014 on Bhutanese food and government has agreed to give permit and assistance to businesses that initiate proposals like master chef idea if needed.

- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen reiterated the importance of 2014 in the history of tourism and requested ABTO and its member to think of ideas for attracting visitors. He has shared his commitment to make efforts to receive 10000 tourists each from Thailand and Japan and will discuss similar ambitious target for other countries.
- As part of the inbound travel fair initiative, Hon' PM reiterated the need and ordered the floor to engage in inviting genuine journalists from Thailand and Singapore in January 2014 and followed by Travel Agents from the two countries in February. While we can invite from other countries, the target of Singapore and Thailand would be more realistic since they are nearer and since the time was short to undertake such a thing. Nonetheless, Hon'PM reiterated to go ahead with such a plan.
- The issues on garbage and delay in formation of task force to address garbage related issues were deliberated. Adoption of trekking routes by travel companies, employee responsible person for managing the waste and regularly monitoring the activity was also discussed. Hon PM mentioned to look into the possibility to employ people to take care of the trekking routes and important places on salary basis.
- Tour Operators mentioned that the perception on seasonality needs to be changed through educational marketing awareness. The information provided by lonely planet book for example on monsoon needs to be reviewed. Such information has strong negative connotation in the minds of visitors although the lean season months have its own beauty & charm to attract visitors. For instance, Uma has started using green season for promoting monsoon season. Similarly, tourism industry has to think of alternative catchy names for promoting lean season months.
- Hon'ble Lyonchhoen informed that similar meetings would be called for through ABTO for sharing honest opinions and deliberations on tourism issues in the future.

**Some concluding recommendations/way forward:**

1. ABTO & TCBs to form marketing committee, brain storm and submit proposals
2. ABTO & TCBs to submit tourism plan with set objectives; strategies and action plan for recommendation and implementation.
3. ABTO & TCBs to organize events for 2014:
  - Invite Thai and Singaporean Journalists in January and Travel agents in February.
  - Bhutanese food festival
4. ABTO & TCBs Trail improvement/Development discussions
5. Any innovative tourism ideas and plan for 2014 to be shared with Hon'ble Lyonchhoen by any stakeholder.

Meeting ended at 4.15 PM.

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