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Finding Bhutan, Finding Meaning: A Conversation with Joni Herison

The founder of Druk Asia on slow travel, spiritual connection, and why Bhutan stays with you long after you leave



Joni Herison, Founder of Druk Asia and co-author of Bhutan Travelog, has spent nearly two decades introducing travelers to one of the world's most enigmatic destinations. With more than 40 visits to Bhutan under his belt, he approaches travel not as a checklist, but as a deeply personal encounter with culture, spirituality, and self. In this conversation with Expats Lifestyle, he shares how Bhutan changed his life — and why it continues to transform others.

Could you briefly introduce yourself and share how your personal journey led you to Bhutan and eventually to founding Druk Asia?

Bhutan wasn't a business idea for me — it started as something much more personal.
My background is in Civil & Structural Engineering, and I spent my early career in tech. Not exactly the profile of someone who ends up building a travel company around a tiny Himalayan kingdom. But that's what happens

when a place gets under your skin.
I first went in May 2008, just as a traveler. No agenda. And honestly, I wasn't prepared for what I found — this quiet, unhurried sense of peace that felt completely at odds with the world I'd come from. What struck me most was how Bhutan asked visitors to experience it: slowly, with a local guide, in a way that actually let the culture breathe.
I kept thinking about that long after I returned home.

I didn't see my engineering background and this new obsession as separate things. If anything, the attention to systems and detail I'd built up felt like exactly what was needed to bring other people into Bhutan the right way — carefully, respectfully, without the usual tourist machinery getting in the way. So that's what I set out to do when I founded Druk Asia.

The mission was simple: help people find what I found. We're also proud to serve as the official representative of Drukair, Royal Bhutan Airlines, in Singapore.

Over the years, I've visited Bhutan over 40 times. Each trip teaches me something new, deepens a relationship, or changes the way I understand a place I thought I already knew well. That's what I try to pass on through the journeys we design — Bhutan with Druk Asia is not just a destination, but a genuine encounter with a living culture.



Bhutan is a destination that inspires deep affection among those who visit. What was it about the country that first captivated you?

It's a hard question to answer simply, because it wasn't just one thing.
I think what hit me first was the silence. Not the absence of noise exactly, but a kind of stillness that felt intentional — like the country itself hadn't been in a hurry to keep up with everything happening outside its borders. Coming from Singapore, from a career in tech, that was disorienting in the best possible way.

Then there's the landscape, which is just staggering. But plenty of places have dramatic scenery. What made Bhutan different was how the culture sat inside that landscape — the monasteries perched on cliffs, the prayer

flags strung across mountain passes, the farmers working the same valleys their grandparents did. Nothing felt staged or preserved for visitors. It was just life, continuing as it always had.

And the people. There's a warmth there that doesn't feel performative. The Bhutanese are very genuine and hospitable.

Over the years, Druk Asia has played an important role in bringing travelers to Bhutan. How has your work contributed to promoting Bhutan's unique tourism model internationally?

I'd frame it less as promotion and more as translation.

Bhutan's tourism philosophy — the idea that you measure success not by how many people arrive, but by the quality of the experience and the impact on the country — isn't a hard sell once someone understands it. The challenge is that it runs so counter to how most people think about travel today. Cheap flights, packed itineraries, ticking off landmarks. Bhutan asks you to slow down and pay attention, and not everyone is immediately ready for that.

So a lot of what we do is help people arrive with the right frame of mind. That starts well before they board a Drukair flight. The conversations we have, the way we put together an itinerary, the things we choose to include or leave out — all of it is trying to prepare someone for an experience that doesn't work if you're rushing through it.

We also design a handful of curated journeys for guests who want to experience Bhutan through a specific lens. The Bhutan Insider Experience, our Mindfulness Tours, and Photography Tours are each built around a particular interest or intention — because how you enter a place shapes what you take away from it. These tours are our way of saying: you don't have to experience Bhutan generically. You can come as who you are, and let the country meet you there.

What I'm genuinely proud of is that we've never tried to make Bhutan easier to digest by smoothing over what makes it distinctive. The "high value, low impact" model the country operates on isn't a marketing line for us — it's the actual logic behind every trip we design.

Over the years, that's meant working with a relatively small number of people compared to mainstream destinations. But the relationships that come out of it — guests who come back, who send their families, who feel genuinely changed by what they experienced — that feels like the right measure of what we've built. Bhutan taught me that. The country has always been more interested in depth than volume. We've just tried to reflect that in how we work.



Bhutan's tourism philosophy emphasizes sustainability and cultural preservation. From your perspective, what makes the Bhutanese approach to tourism so distinctive?

Most countries treat tourism as an industry to be grown. Bhutan treats it as something to be managed — and that distinction matters enormously.

The "high value, low impact" model gets talked about a lot, but what's easy to miss is how deeply it's rooted in something Bhutan actually believes, not just a policy position. The Sustainable Development Fee that visitors pay is a good example of this in practice. It's not a tourism tax in the conventional sense — it directly funds free healthcare and education for Bhutanese citizens, and helps ensure that almost 70% of the country remains forested. The fee isn't just a cost of entry. It's a direct line between the act of visiting and the wellbeing of the place you're visiting. I think when travelers understand that, it changes how they feel about being there.

Gross National Happiness isn't a branding exercise either. It's a framework that puts cultural integrity and environmental health on equal footing with economic development. You feel that in how the country operates.

On tourism policy, the question was always: what kind of visitor, what kind of experience, what kind of impact? That kind of restraint is almost unheard of.
And because of that, the culture hasn't been hollowed out. The monasteries aren't museums. The festivals aren't performances staged for cameras. People aren't playing a version of themselves for visitors — they're just living, and you happen to be there to witness it. That authenticity is extraordinarily rare, and it exists precisely because Bhutan protected it before it had a reason to.

After more than 40 visits, that's what I keep coming back to. The country made a deliberate choice about the kind of place it wanted to remain. Not many places have had the courage — or the clarity — to do that.

As someone who has spent significant time in Bhutan, what aspects of the country do you personally find the most fascinating or meaningful?

For me, it's always come back to the people — and what I'd call their living spirituality.

You can read about Buddhism, study its philosophy, understand it intellectually. But watching it actually woven into the fabric of daily life is something else entirely. It's not practiced on weekends or reserved for special occasions. It's just there — in the way people move through their days, the way they treat each other, the small rituals that happen without any fuss.

Over the years I've been lucky enough to build precious friendships — with families in local communities, with spiritual leaders I deeply respect. Those relationships mean a great deal to me personally, and they've also quietly shaped what Druk Asia is able to offer. Because of the trust that's been built over time, we can sometimes arrange things that aren't in any guidebook — a private blessing from a revered monk, a homestay where a guest isn't just observing a family but genuinely welcomed into one.

That kind of access isn't something you can manufacture or package. It comes from years of showing up, being present, and caring about the country beyond what it can offer you as a destination.

And that's honestly what I find most rewarding — not the logistics of running a travel company, but those moments when a guest comes back from an experience like that and struggles to put it into words. Because Bhutan does that. It gets into you in ways that are hard to explain.



Druk Asia has evolved over the years. What experiences or offerings are you currently focusing on for travelers interested in visiting Bhutan?

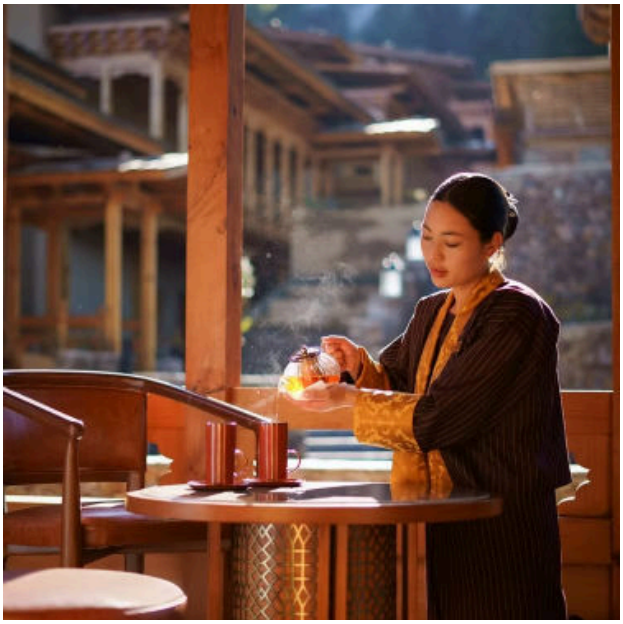
We're always listening, and what we're hearing has shifted quite a bit.
Travelers today aren't just looking for a well-run trip. They want to come back feeling like something has changed in them — a deeper connection to themselves, to a place, to something larger. That's the space we're designing into.

One unique tour that we offer is our Neykor spiritual retreat. It takes guests into some of the most sacred sites in the Himalayas — not as sightseers, but as participants. Meditation, mindfulness, genuine engagement with the spiritual landscape. It's a profound experience, and it tends to attract people who are ready for something that asks a little more of them.

We're also launching fixed-departure small-group tours, including the Bhutan Insider Experience. I love this format because something interesting happens when you bring a small group of like-minded people into a place like Bhutan together. There's a camaraderie that builds naturally, and the best moments are often unplanned — stopping to share butter tea with a local artisan you happen to meet along the way, or a conversation that goes somewhere unexpected. You can't script that, but you can create the conditions for it.

And then there's the corporate side, which has genuinely surprised me with how much it's grown. More companies are discovering that Bhutan is extraordinary for MICE — meetings, incentives, conferences, events. It makes sense when you think about it. If you want to inspire a team or shift how people are thinking, bringing them somewhere that operates on an entirely different set of values tends to do that rather effectively.





For someone planning their first trip to Bhutan, what would you recommend they prioritize to truly understand the country?

The thing I always tell first-time visitors is: prioritize being over doing.
There's a natural instinct to want to see everything — the Tiger's Nest, the dzongs, the festivals. And yes, see them. But the real understanding of Bhutan doesn't come from the landmarks. It comes from what happens in between.

Walk slowly through a valley with your guide and actually talk to them — not just about the history or the itinerary, but about their life, their family, what they think about. Those conversations tend to go somewhere you don't expect.

Bhutan rewards presence. It doesn't give itself up to people who are rushing.
When we build itineraries at Druk Asia, one of the things we're most deliberate about is leaving space — unhurried time that isn't accounted for, where something unplanned can happen. That's not laziness in the planning. It's actually the most important thing we do, because Bhutan's best moments tend to arrive quietly, when you're not chasing them.

I've seen it happen dozens of times over the years. Someone sits down somewhere ordinary — a monastery courtyard, a farmhouse kitchen — and something shifts for them. They go a little still. And afterward they struggle to explain exactly what happened. That's Bhutan doing what Bhutan does. You just have to give it the room.

You also co-authored Bhutan Travelog. What inspired you to document Bhutan, and what do you hope readers take away from it?

The Bhutan Travelog came from a feeling that had been building for years — that Bhutan deserved something more than what most travel books give a place.
The typical guidebook format — facts, logistics, a list of sites — felt completely wrong for a country like this. Bhutan isn't really a place you can convey through information. It's a place that gets under people's skin in ways that are deeply personal and often surprising. So the question became: how do you capture that?

The answer we landed on was stories. Real ones, from a wide range of travelers who'd each had their own encounter with the country. No two experiences in it are the same — because Bhutan meets different people differently.

Photography matters too. We were deliberate about that. There's a quality of light in Bhutan that's hard to describe, and we wanted images that did justice to it rather than just illustrating the text.

My hope for anyone who picks it up is simple: that they feel something before they've even booked a flight. That the book creates a kind of longing — not just curiosity about a destination, but a genuine pull toward a place. And then, when they eventually do come, they arrive already a little bit open. Which, as I've learned over the years, makes all the difference.



Finally, what keeps you personally motivated to continue sharing Bhutan with the world?

Honestly, it's simple — it's the people.

Not the awards, though we're genuinely proud of recognition like being named Best Luxury Travel Specialist in Bhutan. That kind of thing is meaningful, and I don't want to dismiss it. But it's not what gets me up in the morning.

What does is hearing from a guest who came back with a clarity they didn't have before. Or a couple who told me that something shifted between them somewhere in the Himalayas — that the trip gave them back something they'd been missing.

I think what I find most humbling is that Druk Asia gets to be the bridge. We're not the destination — Bhutan is. But we get to open the door, and sometimes what's waiting on the other side for someone is genuinely life-changing. That's an extraordinary thing to be trusted with.

It keeps me and my entire team motivated. What we've always cared about is doing this well — making sure that every person who travels with us arrives in Bhutan ready to receive what the country has to offer, and leaves having actually found it.

After nearly two decades, that still feels like enough reason to keep going. More than enough, really. I started this because Bhutan changed my life. At some point along the way, helping it change other people's lives became the whole point. That motivation hasn't faded. If anything, it's grown.

[PHOTO: Courtesy of Druk Asia]

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