

**STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES
FOR
TREKKING AND PILGRIMAGE TOURS
UNDER THE NEW NORMAL**



**TOURISM COUNCIL OF BHUTAN
KINGDOM OF BHUTAN**

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Background

With the closure of the country for international tourists due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of domestic tourists visiting different parts of the country for trekking and pilgrimage tours. To facilitate domestic tourism, the Tourism Council of Bhutan has developed a national guideline for the domestic tourism operation and shared with Dzongkhags and relevant agencies for implementation.

Furthermore, based on the directives received from the National Task Force for COVID-19 vide letter no NC19TF/01/337 and NC19TF/01/349 dated May 14, 2021 and May 20, 2021 respectively, TCB has also developed the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for conduct of trekking and pilgrimage tours under the new normal with focus on health and safety of visitors and service providers including waste management.

Objectives

1. The objectives of SOP are to:
 - a) Facilitate trekking and pilgrimage tours in compliance with the health and safety protocols;
 - b) Maintain a database on domestic tourists for easy contact tracing in case of COVID-19 outbreak; and
 - c) Designate roles and responsibilities of the relevant agencies and service providers for effective implementation of SOP.

Scope

2. The SOP shall apply to domestic tourists including resident expatriates (package tour only), undertaking pilgrimage and trekking tours to sites provided in the Annexure, which shall be reviewed from time to time.

Trekking and pilgrimage tour

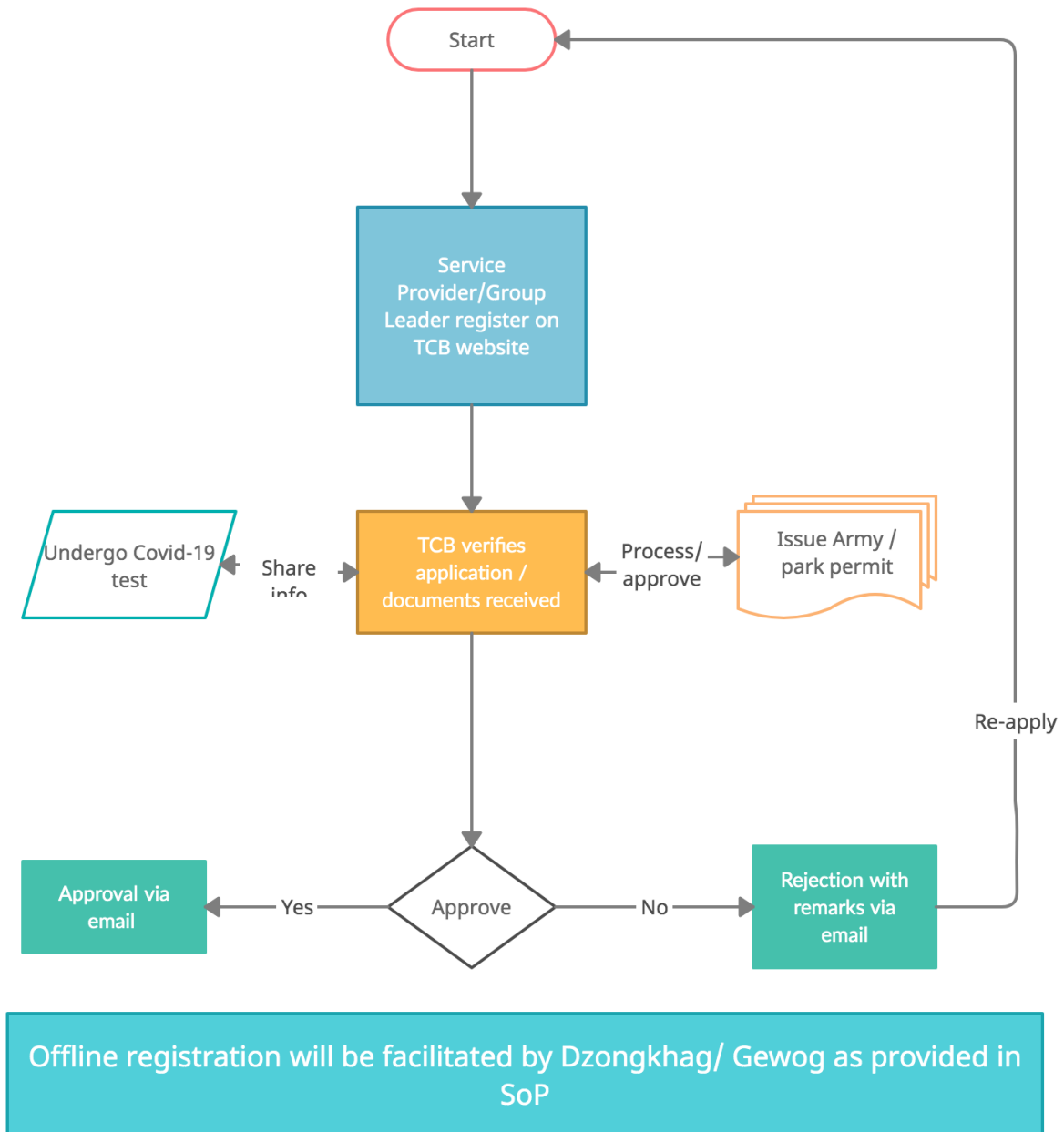
3. Trekking and pilgrimage are usually conducted through:
 - 1) Package tour arranged by the service providers, which include tour operators, hoteliers, guides or trekking cooks, licensed and registered with the Tourism Council Bhutan to promote domestic tourism; and
 - 2) Self-organized tour undertaken by individuals or groups on their own.

Online registration

4. Service providers or group leaders, in case of self-organized tours, shall register the visitors undertaking trekking and pilgrimage tours to the identified sites before the start of the tour through the online registration system at <https://drukkora.tourism.gov.bt>
5. Permits required for trekking and pilgrimage in areas within army installations and the Protected Areas will be facilitated by the Tourism Council of Bhutan-

6. Number of daily visitors to be allowed in each site or trekking route shall be as provided in Annexure. Each group shall not exceed 20 members including staff of the service providers.

Procedure for registration



Roles and responsibilities

7. Service providers, group leaders and visitors shall:

- 1) Comply with COVID-19 safety protocols and inform the nearest health center if anyone from the group shows signs and symptoms of COVID-19;
- 2) Ensure that the designated vehicle complies with COVID-19 protocols issued by RSTA.
- 3) Maintain a list of emergency contact numbers and share the same with the group;

- 4) Use Druk trace app, wherever applicable;
 - 5) Refrain from mixing with different groups and strangers; and
 - 6) Provide pre-departure briefing to the group;
8. Dzongkhags/Gewogs shall:
- 1) Install Druk Trace QR code in the prominent places and touristic sites; and
 - 2) Conduct sensitization on SOP.
9. Tourism Council of Bhutan shall:
- 1) Develop and ensure that the online registration system is functional at all times;
 - 2) Verify the details and documents entered in the online registration system and approve the application;
 - 3) Facilitate registration for visitors who have not been able to register online;
 - 4) Facilitate the required permits from RBA and the Department of Forests and Park Services for registration;
 - 5) Coordinate with the Dzongkhags/Gewogs and relevant agencies for effective implementation of SOP; and
 - 6) Conduct advocacy and sensitization programmes on SOP;
10. Accommodation providers shall:
- 1) Display Druk trace QR code at the entrance and provide hand washing/sanitizing facilities for the guests;
 - 2) Ensure the staff or family members practice health safety protocols at all times;
 - 3) Ensure the accommodation is clean and adequately ventilated with frequent cleaning/disinfection of 'high touch areas';
 - 4) Ensure there is a provision for isolation of guests with signs and symptoms of COVID -19; and
 - 5) Encourage use of digital payments to discourage physical contact.
11. Pilgrimage sites shall:
- 1) Ensure that visitors adhere to the dos and don'ts issued by relevant agencies;
 - 2) Make hand washing facilities available wherever feasible;
 - 3) Enforce visiting hours and designated entry and exit points wherever feasible to avoid congestion and mixing of visitors;
 - 4) Regularly disinfect or clean high touch areas including prayer wheels, doorknobs, and railings; and
 - 5) Ensure Druk trace QR code is displayed.
12. Royal Bhutan Army and Department of Forest and Park Services shall:
- 1) Provide a list of areas that require a permit; and
 - 2) Approve and provide necessary permits within their jurisdictions.

Procedures during COVID-19 outbreak or lockdown

13. In the event of an outbreak or lockdown, the national standard procedures as issued by the Ministry of Health or Local COVID 19 Committee shall be followed.

Waste Management

14. To help in proper management of waste along the trek routes and in pilgrim sites, service providers, group leaders and visitors shall:

- 1) Ensure that trash is brought back and disposed of at designated places;
- 2) Ensure toilet tents for visitors and staff are pitched away from the water source and camping area to discourage open defecation;
- 3) Ensure that pit toilets and toilet papers are buried properly and camp site is cleaned before leaving the campsites; and
- 4) Extend support and cooperation at the time of inspection by monitoring officials.

Monitoring

15. For effective implementation of the SOP:

- 1) Dzongkhags and Gewogs shall conduct regular monitoring of COVID-19 protocols, waste and visitors management in tourist sites;
- 2) Forest and Park Offices shall conduct regular monitoring of waste management along the trekking trails within their jurisdiction; and
- 3) The Tourism Council of Bhutan shall conduct periodic monitoring in collaboration with the relevant agencies.

Accountability

16. The service providers in case of the packaged tour and the group leader in case of self-organized tour shall be responsible for breach of any provision of SOP and shall be liable for an appropriate action as per the relevant laws.

17. The agencies identified shall be responsible for the strict enforcement of the requirements and responsibilities provided in SoP.

Annexure: List of identified sites

SI No	Dzongkhag	Trek route	Entry/exit point of trek	Maximum daily visitor (carrying capacity)
1	Haa	Nuptshonapatra	Dranadhingka	400
		Rangtse nye	Rangtse village	300
2	Lhuntse	Singye Dzong	Khoma	300
3	Mongar	Aja ney	Sherimuhung	300
4	Paro	Taktshang/ Bumdra	Ramthangka	400
		Druk Path	Damchena	200
		Jomolhari	Shana/Dordena	200
5	Punakha	Kabji Hokatsho	Kabesa, Punakha	300
	Thimphu	Phajoding	Upper Motithang	300
		Dagala trek	Genekha	200
7	Trashi Yangtse	Rigsum Gonpa	Bumdeling	200
8	Wangduephodrang	Baylangdra	Chuzomsa	200
9	Zhemgang	Buli-Tsho	Buli village	400