

ARRIVAL IN Druk Yul, Land of the Thunder Dragon, is a memorable affair. Bhutan, as the country is known to outsiders, is the size of Switzerland, cocooned in the eastern Himalayas between India and Tibet. Its lands rise steeply from leech-infested subtropical jungle at 300m to peaks soaring above 7,300m. The terrain, climate and an airport unencumbered by lights or radar make for exciting landings. Only the national carrier, Druk Air, has landing rights, its fleet consisting of two 72-seater jets.

As we step off the plane into the crisp sunlight and make our way towards a monastery set among rice fields, I am immediately struck by something in the air – incense? butter tea? – and a silence uncharacteristic of airports. The monastery turns out to be the new airport building in camouflage. Karma, our guide, is waiting, dressed in what looks like a plaid dressing gown with deep white cuffs, belted at the waist, and knee-high socks. To add to the cosy reception, 'Paro Airport' is spelt out in flowers alongside the tarmac. We are only an hour from Calcutta.

We drive up the valley past a clump of willowy prayer flags to our hotel, a former palace. It is a more elaborate version of the typical buildings seen in Bhutan: timber frame over a stone foundation, with white-washed walls of compacted earth, and a roof of wood shingle secured by stones. Windows are delicately carved and decorated with painted motifs. Traditionally, no nails are used. The view might have come from the sketchbook of a nineteenth-century Romantic: across the valley to Paro Dzong, one of the slant-walled, fortress-monasteries

and administrative centres that are unique to Bhutan. Only the yak is missing.

Bhutan is the only Buddhist Kingdom remaining in the world. Its history goes back to the seventh century, when the Tibetan form of Mahayana Buddhism was introduced into the Paro Valley. Since then, Buddhism has informed every aspect of life and culture in Bhutan, which was ruled by monks until the establishment of an absolute monarchy in 1907. Jealously guarding its isolation, Bhutan shunned foreign influence until, in 1974, the present king, Jigmi Singye

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Wangchuk, cautiously raised the portcullis. In regulated numbers, tourists began trickling in. They now form the second largest source of revenue for the country – after hydro-electric power and ahead of postage stamps. A daily tariff of \$200 is imposed to cover accommodation, food, transport and guides, of which 35 per cent goes to the government for the development of infrastructure. For the moment, it is necessary to travel with an organised group, as I did.

In town, men are dressed like Karma, in traditional *gho*, except for the shaven-headed monks who tug at the robes that billow in

their wake. Women wear boxy silk jackets over ankle-length strips of woven cloth, the *kira*, secured by two silver brooches at the shoulders. (Curiously, for a land-locked country, they favour coral jewellery.)

The high street is formed of dainty houses, their façades hung with religious accoutrements and old-fashioned suitcases, their open windows serving as counters. The haunting sound of unfamiliar musical instruments draws us across the road, where a ceremony is in progress at Kyichu Lhakhang. This is one of the oldest temples in Bhutan, built in 659 to pin down the left knee of a demon that hovered over the Himalayas. Old women sit in the shade of a sandalwood tree, fingering prayer beads and preparing betel leaves. Entire families circle the temple clockwise, spinning prayer wheels as they go. In a building outside the main temple (so many temples and ancient manuscripts having been lost to fire), rows of butter lamps burn as offerings. The head monk shows us in to the courtyard and, exceptionally, allows us to watch. Rows of ruby-robed monks sit in a square on the floor. Some hold 9ft copper trumpets, which they blow to punctuate with a long, lowing sound the monotone, rap-like chanting. A vertical drum, beaten with a curved crook, marks the rhythm, while bells tinkle and a conch shell adds its mournful note. The effect is hypnotic until, suddenly, ranks of oboe-like jaling burst exuberantly into the proceedings.

One of the most venerated and spectacular sites in the Himalayas perches at 2,950m above the Paro Valley: Taktshang. According to legend, Guru Rinpoche, who introduced Tantric Buddhism to the country and is one of the most revered figures in Bhutan, was

The King knows what is best for us



Bhutan is the last Buddhist kingdom in the world, an isolated nation where the monarch's economic policy is 'gross national happiness'. But now it is cautiously welcoming visitors. Teresa Levonian Cole finds them widening the mountain roads in readiness



Previous page Young monks in the Paro Dzong monastery. Above, from left Rural life in the Phobjikha valley, near Punakha. Local Kyichu man and woman in traditional dress. Ruby-robed monks.

carried there on the back of a flying tigress in the eighth century. Over the cave where he meditated, a complex of four monasteries was built, known as Tiger's Nest. Our own ascent

involved a three-hour climb up a precipitous path through forests of blue pine cushioned with fallen needles and perfumed with daphne and sandalwood. We passed a leather-skinned pilgrim, her gummy smile stained red with betel juice. Elderly monks skipped up the path with basket-loads of provisions, thinking nothing of a three-day walk in a country where distances are measured by time. Eventually, we reached level ground, where prayer flags fluttered on tall poles so their inscriptions might waft to the heavens. For \$20 you could erect your own.

On we climbed, past prayer wheels turning and singing to the momentum of a stream, Spanish moss dripping from the trees as the path grew steeper. Heady with the altitude and forest scents, we reached a spur at the edge of a cliff, and found ourselves looking down over the golden rooftops of the seventeenth-century monastery, its walls flush with the cliff. It is a sight I shall not

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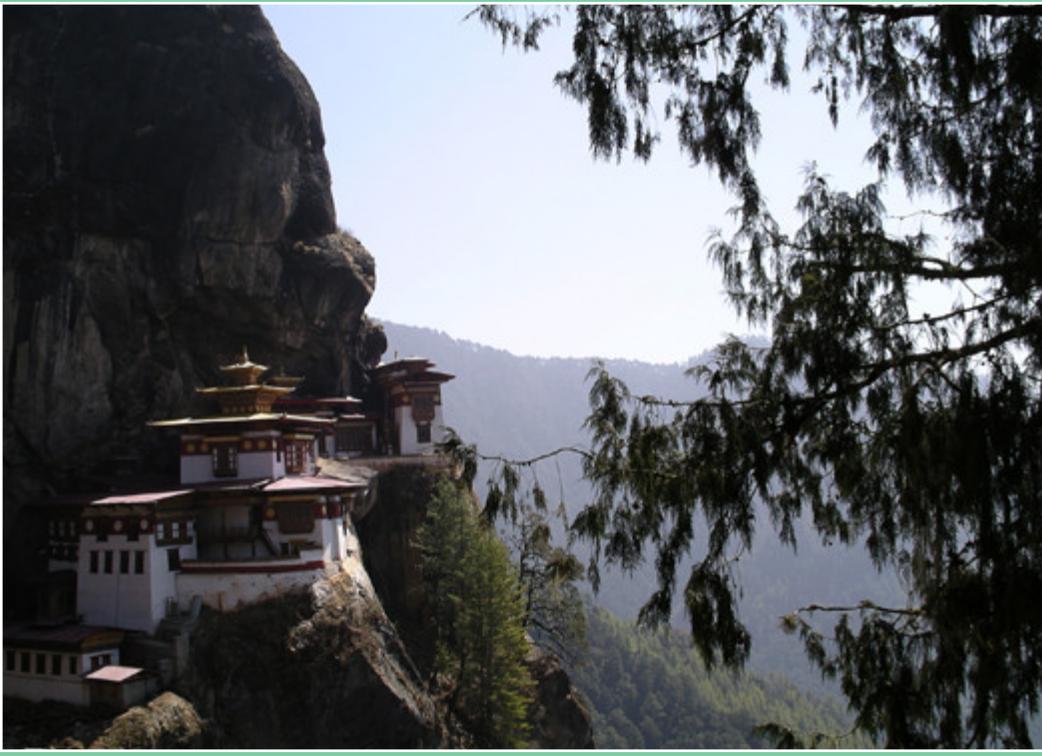
forget. The path continued down the sheer face of the mountain, but we were allowed no further: Taktshang burnt down in a fire in 1998, and its restoration is not yet complete.

Thanks to a balancing of tradition with progress, spirituality with technology, the centuries have wrought little change in Bhutan. The king's policy of 'Gross National Happiness', whereby a peasant is deemed better off living off his land than striving after consumer goods in the city, has parallels with Adam Smith's notions of compassion in a market economy. Offers of foreign aid are regularly refused, unless they are in the long-term interests of the people and the environment. Poor it may be, but no one goes hungry in Bhutan. About 80 per cent of the population are subsistence farmers, and there is free education and healthcare for citizens. 'Every man is entitled to a house and land,' says Karma, as we drive through paddies of red rice. We pass a group of men

and women building a traditional house, singing as they press down the earth walls and posing happily for photographs. 'If a man does not have a house or land, he can petition the king, and he will get it.'

It is a paternalistic society, and protected by legislation. Building a new house to traditional design is compulsory, as is wearing the national costume, a creation of 1616. 'Do you mind?' I ask Karma. 'No. It is important that we preserve our traditions and culture. The king knows what is best for us.' It is a widely-expressed view. If anyone is unhappy, they are not talking.

In fact, the king is no longer omnipotent. In 1998 he handed over power to his ministers – ministers proposed by the king himself, and elected by the national assembly, which includes representatives of the country's 20 districts and the monk body. In 2003, income tax was collected for the first time. Last June, satellite dishes were legalised, the World Wide Web became available and Bhutan became the last country to launch its own television station. Two international hotel chains have been invited in: Aman Resorts has opened the first of six hotels in



From left The monastery of Takshang high in the Himalayas; the fortress-monastery of Punakha Dzong; man at a prayer wheel



Bhutan, catering for anyone willing to pay \$9,000 for a week of spiritual cleansing. Christina Ong, who can always be relied on to spot the next big thing, is now opening a hotel in Paro. In preparation, stone-breakers toil at widening mountain roads, Druk Air is updating its fleet to two 124-seater jets, and there are hopes of a second airport.

As we wind eastwards over the Himalayas into ever-remoter territory, the prospect of Westernisation seems unimaginable. There is only one road across the country, and it is barely wider than a Jeep, with bends and switchbacks at four-second intervals. Above, crags are crowned by monasteries and hermitages. Below, crystalline rivers flow through terraces of rice or mustard. There are only a few houses, their eaves hung with wooden phalluses to ward off the evil eye.

We rise through forests of chir pine, oak, cypress and juniper that are aflame with magnolia, wild cherry and rhododendrons. We gnaw on strings of yak's cheese bought at the roadside, wave at the occasional langur, scour bamboo clumps for signs of the red panda (without success), and emerge from mist-shrouded passes to descend again through subtropical banana, orange and cardamom groves into the Punakha Valley.

From its seclusion, you would never

Below us, crystalline rivers flow through terraces of rice or mustard

guess that, until 1955, Punakha was the capital of Bhutan, ruled from the dzong. There is no town to speak of, but the fortress-monastery alone is worth the journey, testimony to the monks' warlike past. Today, Punakha Dzong remains the winter seat of the central monk body. Rising above the confluence of two rivers, it houses 800 monks and teems with life. The monastery is effectively a boarding school, where we saw monks, some as young as five, rushing to class down ladder-steep stairs. Others swept the yard watched over by one of the kudrungs, or disciplinarian monks. Teenage monks, catching sight of him as they crossed the courtyard, ducked behind pillars. From the safety of the shadows, a young boy pulled faces behind the back of his tormentor: boys, even ordained ones, will be boys.

In comparison, Thimpu, the new capital, feels like a metropolis. The population has grown and traffic increased – the introduction of parking regulations is planned. It is, however, still the venue for a busy farmers'

market and credit cards are almost unknown. Bhutan remains a glorious, pristine, magical country: an anomaly in our world but for how long? The arrival of luxurious hotels means that visiting Bhutan will be a more comfortable experience, but my advice would be not to delay if you want to see a country where globalisation has been kept at a distance. Hurry, before football replaces archery as the country's national sport, and the Real Madrid strip replaces the *gho*. ■

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Teresa Levonian Cole travelled with Cox & Kings (+ 44 20 7873 5000 www.coxandkings.co.uk). Cox & Kings operates two brochure trips to Bhutan per year, including Calcutta, Sikkim and Darjeeling. Private trips can also be arranged at other times. High season, during which festivals take place, is from April–June and September–November. Amanresorts' Amankora in Paro Valley (www.amanresorts.com). Christina Ong's Uma Paro opens this autumn (www.comohotels.co.uk). Druk Air: www.drukair.com.bt.