



འབྲུག་

B

HUTAN

An Enchanted Realm

Compliments of Himalayan Roadrunner Motorcycle Tours

www.ridehigh.com

E

THO METHO

... is the Dzongkha word for rhododendron. Our new company, formed after the privatisation of tourism in 1991, is one of the largest travel agencies in Bhutan. The three directors, Dago Beda, Nim Gyeltshin and Jochu Dorji have more than 15 years experience in tourism, specialising in cultural tours, trekking and eco tours. We are committed to offering a personal and efficient service to make your stay in Bhutan a memorable and happy experience.



Dago ❖
Nim ❖
Jochu ❖



Gentians in the Basingthang Valley. ❖

❖ Let Etho Metho escort you through Bhutan.

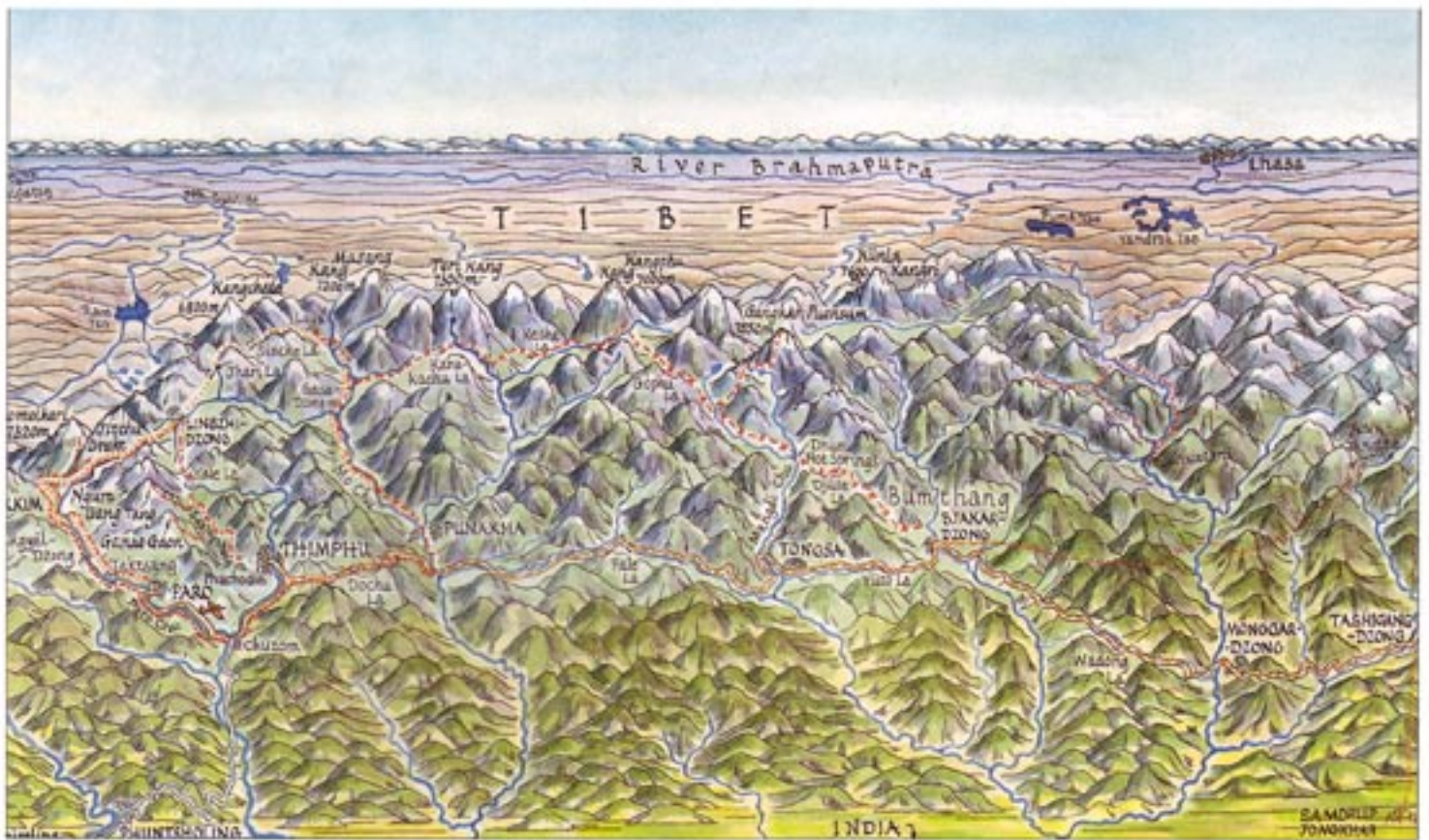


❖ Gangkar Puensum - Lunana Trek

Photography by Glenn Rowley (Fax: UK 17687 74693) Design by ICC, Habburn, England.

❖ FRONT COVER: Masked Dancer at the Paro Festival.





BHUTAN lies in a hidden corner of the eastern Himalaya, sandwiched between China (Tibet) to the North and the Indian states of Sikkim to the west, Assam/West Bengal to the south, and Arunachal Pradesh to the east. The country within these borders forms a giant staircase, from a narrow strip of land in the south, at an altitude of 10,000ft, up to some of the highest unclimbed Himalayan peaks on earth.

A sparsely populated country, Bhutan is often likened to Switzerland because of its small size, jealously guarded isolation and stunning scenery. More than 90% of the population are hill farmers who live in small villages spread over 46,000 square kilometres of rugged mountain country. Buddhist teachings and philosophy are influential throughout the kingdom, as they have been since the 7th century and a deep and traditional reverence for nature has led to Bhutan imposing some of the strictest standards of environmental preservation in the world. More than 65% of the land is still under forest cover and some rarest of

Himalayan wildlife, such as the blue sheep, takin and golden langur, are quite common. It is often said that even the most experienced traveller will find Bhutan to be a "revelation". In this country known as Druk Yul, the "Land of the Peaceful Dragon", the fortunate visitor will find a rare combination of harmony and accord, amongst a landscape of incredible natural beauty. The air is clean and unpolluted, the mountains are magnificent and the architecture is inspiring. Etho Metho has put together a programme of cultural tours and treks, which each offer a unique taste of Bhutan. Whichever trip



you choose, we are confident that all that is special about Bhutan will be revealed, whether you find this by gazing at the beautiful mountains, by attending one of the kingdom's colourful festivals or simply through the charm and hospitality of its people.

T TOURS

There are many ways to see Bhutan. A short tour of a week or less will introduce you to the world's last remaining Himalayan Kingdom, with visits to the Paro and Thimpu valleys and perhaps an excursion to Punakha, the ancient capital. In Paro you can visit the Ta Dzong National Museum, with its fascinating collection of art, relics and artefacts; the ruined fortress of Drukgyel Dzong where Bhutanese warriors fought in past ages against invaders from Tibet and where Bhutan's sacred mountain, Chomolhari, towers above the ruins into the sky. One of Bhutan's most famous sights, Taktsang or the Tiger's Nest, clings to a 3000ft high cliff above the Paro valley; it is the place where Guru Rinpoche is said to have flown on a tiger when he bought the buddhist Dharma from Tibet and India. In Thimpu you will visit Tashichhodzong, the beautiful medieval fortress/monastery which now houses most government offices, the National Assembly, and the King's Throne Room. The king's Memorial Chorten, topped with a golden spire, contains many beautiful works of art and has a fine view overlooking the Thimpu valley. Craft workshops abound, from the Thangka Painters school to workshops for masks, papermaking, ceramics, weaving, fine metalware, gold and silver, and you can watch the artisans at work, fashioning beautiful things in traditional ways. The National Library, Supreme Court, the Traditional Medicine Centre are all in Thimpu; but perhaps the most enjoyable thing to do is simply to stroll along the bustling, colourful streets of the town, looking into the many shops and watching the throngs of people. And on weekends, you can visit the outdoor market, lined with stalls selling fruits, vegetables and countless

other items; and then watch a rousing game of archery!

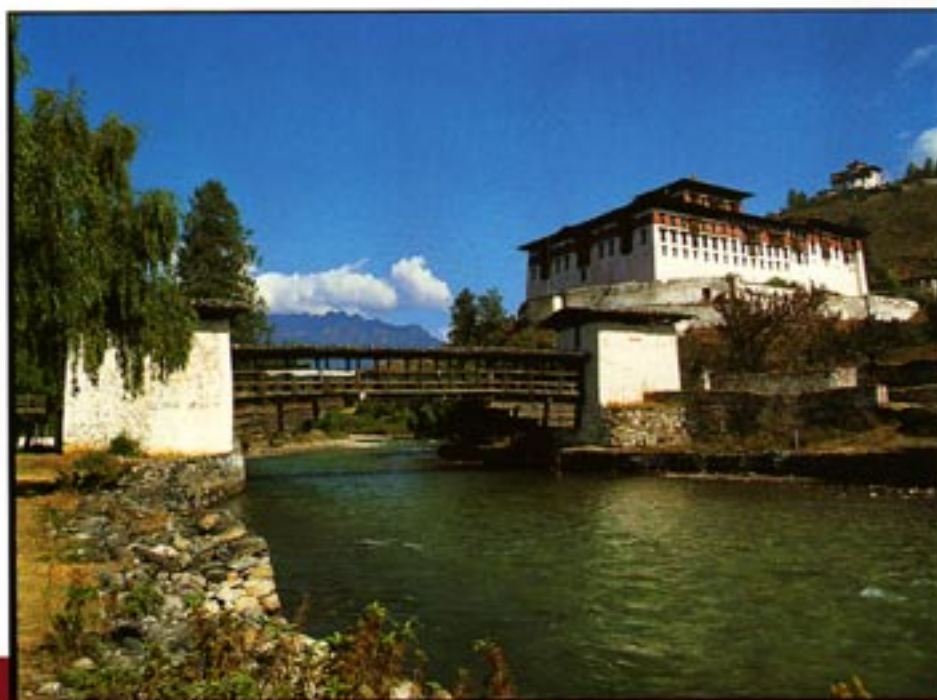
Beyond Thimpu, the National Highway leads eastward, over the 10,000ft Dochu La pass and down into the lush green Punakha valley, where the ancient capital of Bhutan stands at the confluence of the Mo Chu and Pa Chu rivers. Beyond lies Wangdiphodrang, overlooking the river below, and Gangtey, where the rare and hauntingly beautiful black-necked cranes return every winter. The Pele La pass through the Black Mountains marks the division between western and central Bhutan, and on the east side of the pass the road leads down to Tongsa, site of the largest Dzong in Bhutan. Just a short way beyond is the lovely, peaceful Bumthang valley, filled with temples and monasteries, a living treasury of art and history. From Bumthang, it takes about two days to reach the eastern border of Bhutan and the main eastern towns of Lhunsi, Mogar and Tashigang.

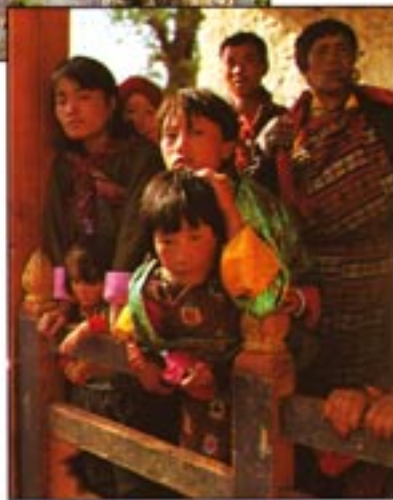
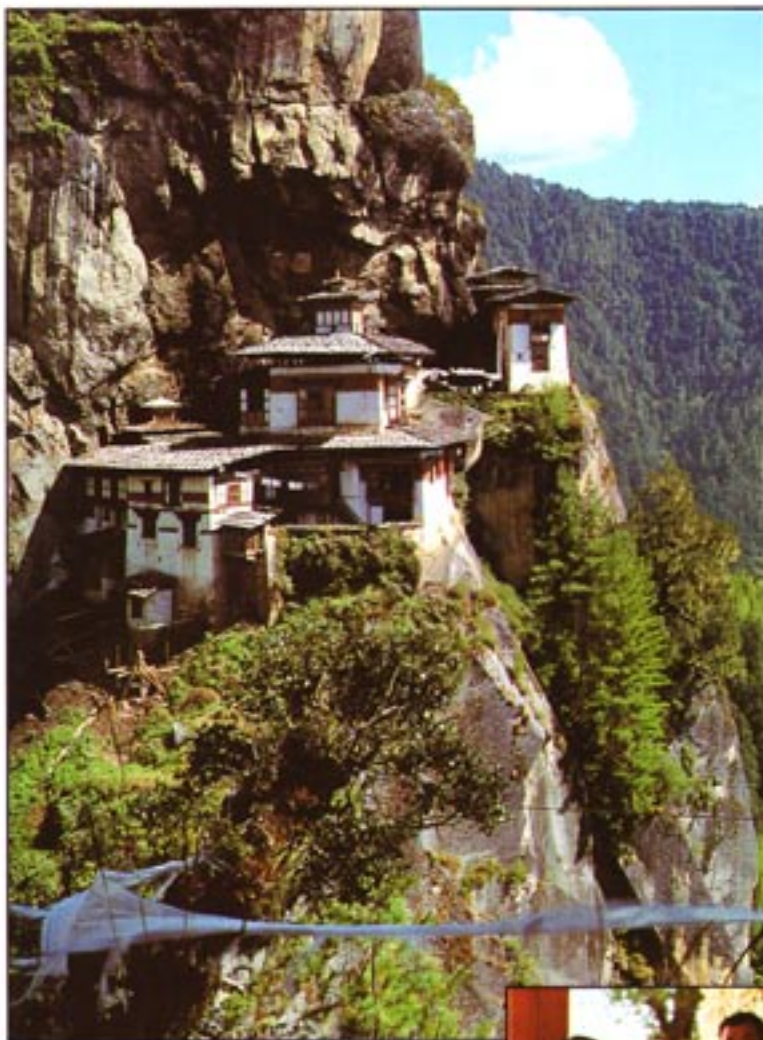


Market Trader - Thimpu. ❖



Paro Dzong. ❖





There are tours to fit every interest, from textiles to bird-watching, walking and photography, and wherever you go in Bhutan there are fascinating excursions you can make to villages, temples, or scenic spots, for a close look at the culture and a land which remains the most unspoiled and most beautiful example of the Himalayan Buddhist way of life in existence today.

❖ Taktsang - The Tigers Nest Monastery.

❖ Spectators at a Bhutan Festival.

Thimpu

The capital of Bhutan, and the centre of government, religion and commerce. It is a unique city, with an unusual mixture of modern development alongside ancient tradition.

Phuntsholing

The gateway to the south is a thriving commercial centre on the northern edge of the Indian plains. From here, heading northwards, the road twists and turns up into the Himalayan foothills, passing through lush forest and scattered villages, at altitudes up to 8,000ft.

Paro

This beautiful valley, with its rich terraced farmland, is home to some of Bhutan's oldest temples and monasteries - as well as Bhutan's first airport. An ancient watchtower holds the National Museum, whilst overlooking the valley is the cliff-side: "Tigers Nest" monastery of Taktsang.

Punakha

The old capital of the kingdom has a temperate climate almost year-round. Punakha Dzong at the confluence of the Po and Mo (father and mother) rivers, is the winter home for the monastic community. There are splendid views of the distant Himalaya on the road from Thimpu to Punakha.

Bumthang

The wide central valley of Bumthang is the ancestral home of Buddhism in Bhutan, and is a place of pilgrimage for the Bhutanese people. The many important monasteries and temples contain a wealth of valuable religious artefacts.

Tashigang

The most important eastern town in Bhutan, Tashigang is the centre of one of the most populated districts in the kingdom, an area where much of Bhutan's finest weaving comes from. In the valleys of Merak and Sakteng live the remarkable Brogpa yak-herders.

F

ESTIVALS



At various times of the year, the annual festivals known as Tsechus take place in different locations. Two of the most popular are held at Paro in the spring, and Thimphu in the autumn, but there are many others at temples, dzongs and monasteries throughout Bhutan. Dancers in brilliant silk costumes re-enact legendary events, accompanied by blaring horns, booming drums, and clashing cymbals as they whirl and leap against a background of sky and mountains. Certain dances require the participants to wear heavy masks, representing human forms, manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, animals, skulls or fearsome deities. There are three types of religious dance: instructive dances which tell a moral tale, dances intended to purify a place and to protect it from evil spirits, and dances that proclaim the victory of Buddhism and the glory of Guru Rinpoche. Crowds of people gather to watch the dances, dressed in the finely woven, brightly patterned cloth for which Bhutan is renowned, creating an intensely colourful and exciting scene, and one which has remained unchanged in its traditional purity for centuries.

The Tsechus are celebrated for between three and five days, with both monks and laymen taking part in the dances, which tend to be performed in a similar programme at each of the Tsechus. Amongst the dancers at all festivals there are so called *atsaras*, or clowns, whose expressive masks and postures provide a welcome counterpoint to the formalised religious dances.

❖ Masked dancer at one of Bhutan's spectacular festivals.



❖ Dancers at the Paro Festival.



❖ Sportsmen at the



The atsaras confront the monks and, within prescribed limits, make fun of the whole affair. In a country where sacred matters are treated with the highest respect, only the atsaras are permitted to mock religion.

The climax of several of the Tsechus is the brief unfurling of a huge applique thangka, representing Guru Rinpoche and his eight manifestations. Known as a thongdroel, the festival-goers believe that simply by viewing this thangka they can be delivered from the cycle of reincarnations (which is the ultimate aim of all Buddhists).

The Bhutanese people attach great importance to festivals, which allow them to become immersed in their religion and to gain merit, and it is because of this importance that the festivals are so well preserved. These events are also a time for the Bhutanese to socialise, to laugh and joke with their neighbours and acquaintances, to dress in their finest clothes and jewellery, to eat well and generally to have a good time.

T

REKS



Stunning mountain scenery en-route to Thanza - Lunana. ❖

Trekkers are fortunate people, because they have the opportunity to see the beautiful kingdom of Bhutan at its most magnificent. From the towering snow peaks of the Inner Himalaya to the verdant forests which cloak the hills above its peaceful valleys, the trails are clean and unspoiled, and the wilderness still pristine in its beauty.

The most challenging treks are those which climb toward the north-western border of the Royal Kingdom, where the highest peaks of the Himalaya separate Bhutan and Tibet. The best known of these are the Chomolhari Trek, which reaches Chomolhari Base Camp, where a ring of great mountains surrounds the camp; the Lingshi/Laya Trek, which continues beyond Chomolhari Base Camp to Lingshi and the 12,000ft high settlement of Laya; and the Lunana Trek, the most challenging and one of the world's greatest, three to four weeks of hiking in the highest and most remote peaks and valleys. These treks will take you close to the huge snow, ice and rock faces of the mountains, where the only inhabitants are rare species such as bharaal, or blue

sheep, takin and snow leopard, and the people are mainly yak herders. During spring, summer and autumn, the alpine meadows are filled with countless varieties of flowers, the views of peaks, lakes and high valleys as spectacular as any in the mountain world.

There are also many treks at somewhat lower altitudes where trails lead through lush forests, rich with a tremendous variety of plants and flowers, and alive with innumerable species of birds and butterflies. Bhutan is becoming renowned for the breadth and diversity of its flora and fauna, still safe and isolated from the pressures of population and industrialisation which have destroyed so much of our planet's bounty elsewhere. These lower altitude trekking routes offer the opportunity to visit villages, farms and temples along the way, so that they are rich in culture as well as natural and scenic beauty. Some of the most popular are the Bumthang Trek, in the lovely hills above the Bumthang valley in central Bhutan; the Gantey Trek, which is especially good for nature-lovers and glorious in the springtime when the rhododendrons bloom;

Trekking in Bhutan is for the connoisseur and the high altitude treks are certainly not for the faint hearted. In northern Bhutan, the weather is colder and damper than in other Himalayan countries, such as Nepal, and the window between the end of the monsoon and the start of the winter snows much smaller, only allowing a short time for trekking at the higher altitudes. The sparse inhabitation in northern Bhutan dictates that there are no detailed maps and detailed maps and quite often no easy paths to follow. Consequently all provisions have to be carried with the trekking party, using ponies or yaks that have to be arranged sometimes months in advance. Independent trekking is almost impossible. Erho Metho can use its immense resources, built up over the last 18 years, to overcome difficulties and offer you a choice of some of the finest trekking in the entire Himalaya...

the Punakha Trek, rich in cultural diversity and one of the treks which may be done even in the winter months; and the eastern routes, such as the Lhuntsi and Rodungla Treks, where hikers can explore the ridges leading to the eastern border near Arunachal Pradesh. These are but a sampling; there are many more, and many routes yet to be explored by intrepid adventurers.

HIGH ALTITUDE TREKS...

The Chomolhari Trek

This six-day return trek offers a taste of the great variety of Bhutanese landscapes.

Starting at Drugyel Dzong, we pass through scattered hamlets and farmland, into a deep and richly forested valley, which leads to a high alpine pastureland where yak herders graze their animals. Our highest camp, beside a clear lake, beneath the 10,000ft high East Face of Chomolhari, is in as magnificent a location as you could ever wish to find.

The Laya/Gasa Trek

Despite the opening up of a number of new trekking possibilities in Bhutan, the long-established route from Chomolhari across to Laya will always rank as one of Bhutan's finest treks. The reasons for this are not hard to find. This route offers a great variety of trekking conditions, from picturesque farmland and forest to alpine pastureland and high passes. Spectacular campsites, beneath some of Bhutan's most impressive peaks, of which the most notable are Chomolhari and Jitchu Drake, are also a feature of this trekking route. Numerous isolated dzongs and scattered settlements, including the outlandish village of Laya, provide a great deal of cultural interest en route. The memories of this special trek will stay with you for a lifetime.

◆ The Tarina Valley - Lunana Trek.

The Lunana Trek

Continuing across the north of the kingdom from Laya, one enters the seldom-visited region known as Lunana. Passing some of the last virgin peaks of the Himalayas, Lunana offers a breath-taking landscape that has previously seen only a handful of foreign visitors. Starting out at Punakha, this unique and challenging itinerary spends three days climbing the steep gorge leading to Laya, before crossing the mighty Karakachu La to enter Lunana proper. After spending seven days walking through this "paradise on earth", the route crosses the Gophu La to explore the valleys south of Gangkar Puensum, which remains the highest unclimbed peak on earth. Seven long days' trekking remain to reach the wide-open, fertile valleys of Bumthang. Probably one of the most challenging treks in the Himalayas.

LOW ALTITUDE TREKS...

The Gantey Trek

The Phobjika Valley, at 3000 metres (9840ft), is one of the few glacial valleys in Bhutan and is the chosen home of the rare black-necked crane which migrates here in winter from the Central Asiatic Plateau. The valley of Gantey is one of the most beautiful places in Bhutan and

Gantey Gumpa is the only Nyingmapa monastery on the western side of the Black Mountains. This moderate trek visits the villages of Gogona and Khotokha, passing through meadows and fields, then forests of Juniper, magnolia and rhododendrons. One of the finest low level treks in Bhutan.



The Druk Path

This is a short, four day trek which leads from Thimpu to Paro or vice versa, crossing the chain of mountains that separates the two valleys. Although there is little settlement on this route, there are wonderful lakes teeming with fish and the area is famous for its spectacular rhododendron forests which bloom in May. In the clear weather of late autumn and winter there are views across to the Himalayas.

The Bumthang Cultural Trek - Central Bhutan

Starting out at the splendid "Etho Metho Lodge" in Jakar, this four day trek passes through several villages on its meandering route through the Bumthang countryside. This trek provides an exceptional opportunity for contact with Bhutanese rural life.

The Lhuntse Trek - Eastern Bhutan

One of the most picturesque of the low altitude treks, this trek begins at Tangmachu, two hours drive from Mongar. Climbing through temperate forest with an abundance of wildlife (including several types of pheasant) this route explores some of the least visited areas of Bhutan before continuing on to Tashiyangste on the ancient caravan route across Bhutan. In springtime the flowers and bird-life make this trek a sheer delight.



N

NATIONAL HERITAGE

The People

In Bhutan, everyone seems to wear a smile. Perhaps this is due to their Buddhist faith, or maybe their sense of contentment is due to their self-sufficient lifestyle. Whatever the reason, the Bhutanese project an apparent inner happiness that travellers will remember will remember long after their visit. Broadly, the Bhutanese fall into three ethnic groups - the Sharchops, who live mostly in the eastern region; the Nglops, who live in the western part of the country; and the people of Nepalese origin, who live in the south.

The way of life

Most of the population of Bhutan continues to live as it has for centuries - in small, isolated farms and hamlets, surrounded by terraced fields of rice, maize, buckwheat and wheat. Higher up, many of the people still live in tents woven from yak-hair, spending at least part of the year on the alpine pastures among their grazing livestock. Both farmers and herdsmen are very dependent on nature, and they have necessarily a hardy and self-reliant outlook on life. With the recent opening of roads within Bhutan, small towns have grown up in places, and there have been changes to the way of life of a tiny percentage of the people.

One trait which is common to all Bhutanese is hospitality. Custom dictates that simple hospitality is extended to any and all guests, even perfect strangers.

Dzongkha Language

Dzongkha, "the language of the dzongs", is one of the Tibetan family of languages. Originally only spoken in western Bhutan, Dzongkha is now the Bhutanese national language, and is taught in schools throughout the kingdom. The written form of the language was only devised a little over 30 years ago, and is based on Classical Tibetan (known as Choekey in Bhutan) which has prevailed as a religious language throughout a vast geographical area (Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh, Sikkim, Mongolia and Bhutan) since as long ago as the eighth century.



Tashichhodzong and National Assembly House, Thimpu. ❖

National Dress

It is rare to see Western dress in Bhutan. Men still wear the traditional knee length, handwoven robe called a "gho". Women wear a longer, ankle-length robe called a "kira" and this is also made from fine, hand-woven fabric, with the pattern usually being distinctive to a particular valley or area.

Arts and Crafts

Bhutan has a wealth of hand-crafted artwork, including sculpture, jewellery, bamboo-work and especially textiles. The tradition of the artisan is carried down from father to son, mother to daughter, and each region has its specialties: raw silk from eastern Bhutan, brocade from Lhuntshi, woollen goods from Bumthang, bamboo wares from Khyeng, gold and silver work from Thimpu. Much of this (with the exception of the jewellery) is the surplus product of peasant farmers, who are simply making available for sale the articles that they use in their daily lives. There is little opportunity to bargain, the items for sale have real value, and prices are quite high. Bhutan is famous, in particular, for the quality of its textiles.

Architecture

Based on Tibetan architectural style, the houses, religious building and fortresses of Bhutan have a simplicity and proportion that serves to make them particularly attractive.

Constructed of stone (or compressed earth) and wood, and often whitewashed, Bhutanese buildings are distinctive from their Tibetan counterparts in that they have a pitched roof, generally made of wooden slatting which is held down by large stones. Pitched roofs are an adaptation to the fact that Bhutan experiences a considerable amount of rain and snow fall. The most impressive manifestation of Bhutanese architecture is to be found in the many dzongs (fortress-monasteries) which dot the landscape. These were constructed throughout the kingdom at strategic points and characteristically contain a community of monks as well as the administrative offices of the regional government.

Archery

Archery is the national sport of Bhutan, and every village has its own archery range. High spirited competitions, usually accompanied by a banquet, are a part of all festive occasions. Using bamboo bows (although modern compound bows are finding their way into the kingdom) teams of archers shoot at targets only 30 centimetres in diameter from a distance of 120 metres. Each team has a noisy crowd of supporters who, as well as encouraging their own side, try to put off the opposition.

BHUTAN maintains a policy of strictly limiting the numbers of people who can visit the country in a single year, and all visitors are charged for the tourist services (hotels, meals, guides, transport, etc) at a fixed daily rate. By doing this the Bhutaneses are able to earn the foreign currency that they require for their careful development programmes, whilst at the same time keeping the numbers of tourists to a level which does not significantly affect the natural environment or the lifestyle of the Bhutaneses people.

The only way to visit Bhutan is as a member of a tour group, which is organised through a recognised Bhutaneses travel agency such as Etho Metho.

Entering Bhutan

The only practical way for tourists to enter Bhutan is by air. Druk Air, the Bhutaneses national airline, operates flights into Paro airport from Delhi, Calcutta, Bangkok, Dhaka and Kathmandu. Passing directly along the eastern end of the Himalaya, the flight to Paro from Kathmandu offers remarkable views of Everest, Makalu, and Kangchenjunga, as well as the Bhutaneses peaks Chomolhari and Gangkar Puensum.

Visas

Visas are required by everyone who visits Bhutan. Etho Metho will make all arrangements, which involves relaying visa numbers to the Druk Air office at the airport where the visitor meets his flight into Bhutan. Without a visa number it is impossible to board a Druk Air flight. The visas themselves are issued on arrival in Paro. Currently visas cost \$20 for all nationalities.

Money

Bhutan's unit of currency is the Ngultrum (Nu), with 100 Chetrum = 1 Ngultrum. The Ngultrum is fixed to the value of the Indian Rupee, and there are approximately 35 Ngultrum to one US dollar (July 1997). Your money should be carried in the form of travellers cheques (preferably American Express), with a little cash (US dollars) set

aside for incidental expenses on departure and return. Keep a note of your travellers cheque serial numbers in a safe place.

Accommodation

There are comfortable hotels and lodges in all districts. Away from the towns and villages there are purpose-built huts on some of the principal trekking routes. Otherwise, there is nothing like camping out under the clearest night skies that you have ever seen. Wherever you spend the night, the warm Bhutaneses hospitality will make you feel welcome.

Geography

The main Himalaya Chain runs west to east across Bhutan and the majority of the country lies between altitudes of 5,000 and 16,000ft. The highest peaks lie towards the northern edge of the territory, and these include Gangkar Puensum and Chomolhari, at well over 23,000ft. Receiving considerable monsoon rain, Bhutan is densely forested - varying from a lush jungle of teak and tropical tree species, through poplar, ash, oak and conifer forest between 5,000 and 10,000ft, to more predominantly coniferous woodland and then scrub beyond 13,000ft. Western Bhutan is made up of four valleys, namely Ha, Paro, Thimpu and Punakha/Wangphodrang. The peoples that populate these valleys are relatively wealthy, occupying large houses which generally accommodate several generations of the family. The country's permanent capital has been located in Thimpu since the early 1950s. Western Bhutan is separated from Central Bhutan by The Black Mountains, which rise to elevations of 16,000ft and form an effective natural boundary. A single road crosses this range by way of the Pele La (10,000ft).

Central Bhutan is divided into several regions. Its most southerly district, Khyeng, is famous for impenetrable jungle. North of Khyeng, lies Tongsa, home to one of Bhutan's most impressive dzongs, which sits in a strategic position, high above the Mangle River. Bumthang is the name given to a group of valleys lying to the north of Tongsa, which rise to an altitude of 13,000ft. In these valleys, the mountainsides are cloaked with dark coniferous forest.

Eastern Bhutan is still a restricted area for foreign visitors and is home to the Sharchops, "the people of the east", who speak a different language to the rest of Bhutan. The climate here is generally warmer and drier than elsewhere in the kingdom, and the altitudes are relatively low. Northern Bhutan is the most spectacular for trekkers and mountain climbers. Lying largely above 11,000ft, the principal regions of Lingshi, Laya and Lunana are inhabited by semi-nomadic yak-herders who live on a diet of milk, butter, cheese and yak meat. The high altitude limits cultivated crops to barley and a hardy variety of potato.

Climate

The southern part of Bhutan is tropical, and in general the east of Bhutan is warmer than the west of the country. The central valleys of Punakha, Wangphodrang Phodrang, Mongar, Tashigang and Lhuentshi enjoy a semi tropical climate with very cool winters, whilst Thimpu, Tongsa and Bumthang have a much harsher climate, with heavy monsoon rains in the summer and heavy snow-fall in the winter, which often blocks the passes leading into the central valleys. Winter in Bhutan is from mid-November until mid March, and at this time of year the climate is dry, with day time temperatures of 16-18°C and night time temperatures falling below zero. The monsoon usually arrives below zero. The monsoon usually arrives in mid-June, with the rain falling mainly in the afternoons and evenings. At the end of September, after the last of the big rains, autumn suddenly arrives, and is a magnificent season for trekking - lasting until mid November.

Guidebook

"Illustrated Guide to Bhutan" by Françoise Pommaret.

