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chasing the dragon

Hidden in the Himalayas between China and India, Bhutan is a land where prayer flags flutter in the wind and Buddhism is the rhythm that guides daily life. ZANETA CHENG travels to the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon and discovers the meaning of true, genuine happiness

BHUTAN BEGINS BEFORE we even set foot on the country's soil. As Bhutan Airways Flight B3704 makes its way from Bangkok to Calcutta and then to Paro, those of us on the left side of the plane can marvel at the jagged snowy peaks of the Himalayas peeking above the clouds some 10 minutes before landing. There's Mount Jomolhari, the second-highest mountain in Bhutan, and collections of other summits. But what stands apart is a cluster of three peaks, the tallest of which, Everest, rises in the centre. It's hard not to have your breath taken away looking at the roof of the world from a tiny tin box in the sky. The Tibetan plateau stretches without end but as the plane dips lower the blue and white of snowy peaks give way to gentler green valleys and forests of Bhutanese pine.

When I set foot on the tarmac, the air is thin, cool and sharp – cleaner than the hot, sticky grey haze of the city we transited out of. Paro airport, the only international airport in the kingdom, and one of the highest in the world at 7,300 feet above sea level, is two



stories high, in stark contrast to the mountains surrounding it, with walls and pillars carved with the colours and legends of the country. It's not a busy airport and when we arrive, staff are scant and immigration consists of six or seven desks and a sunlit hall where guests wait, speaking to one another in semi-hushed tones.

Something about the place, with its portraits of the royal family and carved wooden awnings and banisters, strips away the usual sense of frantic timekeeping that one experiences with airport arrivals. It might also be the two vividly coloured models of the country's most recognisable fortresses (called *dzongs*) at baggage claim. Outside, in arrivals, we're greeted by our guide Kuenley Dorji and a driver with welcome scarves. The scarves are white with imprints of the *ashtamangala*, eight auspicious symbols in Tibetan Buddhism that wish the wearer well, and they flap around our necks in the breeze as we climb into the car for the hour and a half journey to Thimpu, the country's current capital.



Bhutanese highways are slightly wider than standard roads, with one lane in each direction, that snake around the edges of the imposing rock faces that make up the country's terrain. We pass white and multicoloured prayer poles erected by the side of the road, wooden beams driven into the ground and pointing to the sky. They manage to stir reverence even though we don't know what they're there for. Kuenley says that they're to bless travellers and those passing by with good luck and health.

Paro's landscape recedes as we weave our way around the bends and the banners turn into multicoloured dots in the landscape making way for prayer flags now strung along trees by the road. It is silent save for the sound of rushing wind and the bristling of pine needles. We'll come to learn in the next few days that the country is largely composed of this – mantras and nature.

But we don't know much yet and, in the car, we quiz Kuenley on the premise of happiness and whether Bhutanese people are truly happy or if it's all a shtick. The only nation in the world to measure its success by Gross National Happiness, the kingdom lives by four pillars: sustainable economic growth, preservation of culture, preservation of the environment and good governance. It's enshrined in the constitution that 60% of the land in Bhutan will never be touched. The country is currently the only one to be carbon-negative. Healthcare and education are completely free for its people, who can all speak English as well as Bhutanese. Population density, meanwhile, stands at 21 per square kilometre with a total of just 800,000 citizens. Combine security and that much space, and it's no wonder even the Bhutanese themselves admit to living content.

In Thimpu, the capital, the streets are lined with buildings painted in ochre and white, their windows framed by wooden shutters. The



Clockwise from above: Monks in crimson robes are a common sight in Bhutan, as are phallus amulets near Chimi Lhakhang; the capital city of Thimpu; prayer flags greet visitors at every turn; and the famed Tiger's Nest monastery perched high above the Paro valley

tops of the buildings are green or red depending on whether they're official or not. By law, all buildings in the country must incorporate traditional architectural elements, in the same way that the people are required to wear national dress – *kira* for women and *gob* for men – to work in the day.

Bhutan is famously known for its unique luxury offering. Amankora was the first to set up shop on royal land, modelling its buildings after *dzong* fortresses. Others soon followed, with Six Senses Thimpu locating itself in the clouds, giving guests a clear view of the valley below and an eye-level vantage of the Buddha Dordenma, a 54-metre-tall statue of the sitting buddha built in 2015 to celebrate the 60th birthday of the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck. A visit to the buddha is a guaranteed item on any visitor's itinerary but seeing it from this perspective is a treat available only to very few.

Each luxury property also hosts its own programme of unique cultural activities. At Six Senses Thimpu, guests can churn their own butter in a butter-tea-making session with the hotel's chef. Apparently, much of the populace still make their butter in a traditional churn. City folk also make their butter at home using electric whisks rather than hand, but buying butter is still almost unheard of in these parts. Local treats of puffed rice and corn as well





leaning on banisters waiting for a master, or masters themselves in their orange and yellow robes striding down the ancient corridors.

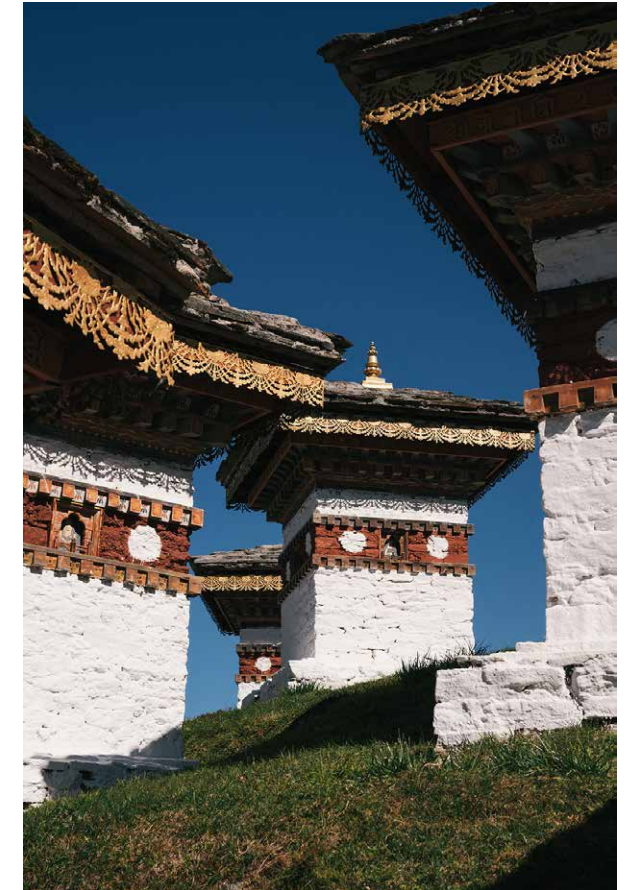
Punakha is home to Bhutan's second-longest suspension bridge and Chimi Lhakhang, also known as the Divine Madman's fertility temple. It's said that Lama Kunley subdued a particularly violent demon at Dochu La with his magical firebolt, and had an unorthodox way of teaching, predominantly advocating the use of phalluses as symbols of blessing and protection. The walk through the village to Chimi Lhakhang shows phalluses painted on walls, with shops selling phallus amulets in different forms for those making the pilgrimage to the temple. Once there, should one be so lucky, which we were, the amulets can be blessed by the priest who oversees the site.

The drive to Punakha from Thimpu or Paro is around three hours. There's no other form of transport save helicopter to get us there. On the way, we pass by roadside stalls selling apples – sweet and delicious – which have been preserved underground after they're plucked, so that they remain fresh during the wintertime. It's on the road into the heart of the country that we notice the smiles. Maybe it's all the discussion about the Gross National Happiness index but when Bhutanese people smile, they aren't the grins on postcards or

as the national moonshine *ara* are also presented during the session when tea, butter and hotcakes are cooked on a traditional stove in a village house built for the activity. Outside, guests can throw darts or participate in archery, the national sport. Among these, a personal favourite is *tso-tso* making. Little conical sculptures made of clay from a mould, these votive offerings dot the crevices of mountainsides and the outside of monasteries across the country. We make them and are given two to take with us – one to leave in a place of our choosing and another to bring home.

When it's time to venture outside, we visit the Royal Astrology Academy where monks are trained, among other things, in fortune-telling, to advise a population that still turns to the stars when a family member is ailing or when important decisions are to be made. Each of us gets a reading and comes out understanding what we were in a past life, and what days of the week and colours for us are most beneficial. A quick lunch follows and then a visit to the textile museum, where weavers are on site to show visitors one of Bhutan's most treasured skills.

Two days in Thimpu and it's off to Punakha, a warmer city further in the centre of the country. At 1,200 metres above sea level, rice is the main crop along the river valleys of the two main rivers of Bhutan, which meet in Punakha. Even though the capital has been relocated to the more logistically convenient Thimpu, many of the ceremonies of the royal family, including the coronation of the current king and his wedding ceremony, are held at the Punakha Dzong, also known as the Palace of Great Happiness. Our guide is adamant that we visit this *dzong* – fully functional as the winter residence of Bhutan's Central Monastic Body – and because we are there in the wintertime, the palace teems with monks going about their business in their crimson robes, some



Clockwise from below: Traditional, hearty Bhutanese cuisine; the scenic Punakha valley; an archer practises the national sport; the imposing Buddha Dordenma; some of the 108 memorial chortens lining Dochula Pass; and a scattering of *tso-tso*



tourism brochures. These are not performed or transactional, the kind we tend to find in cities, perhaps the kind that we ourselves give to others. When we're welcomed into the home of a family for a mid-journey farmhouse lunch, featuring local specialities such as *ema datsi* (cheese and chili) and pumpkin soup, the smiles are quieter and deliberate. The deeper into the country we go, the more of its sincerity we're able to feel.

No more so than at Pemako Punakha, a sprawling 60-acre luxury hotel designed by Bill Bensley as a sort of safari in the heartlands of the Punakha valley. Guests cross a suspension bridge to arrive at the 21-tented villa property, which was inspired by the idea of Shangri-la. Each villa is serviced by butlers who attend to every request with paramount effort. Even the smallest of requests, like giving a pair of sandy hiking shoes a quick dust-off, is done to perfection – they come back cleaner than before the hike.

It's the Bhutanese people that make the place difficult to leave, even as I head back to Paro and make the trek up the side of a cliff to Tiger's Nest – an exercise that I thought would be the *raison d'être* of the entire visit. But no, it's the smiles and the kindness that stay with me whenever I look down at my clean shoes. They carry greater meaning than I had anticipated – a reminder of how it feels to be a country where health and happiness are more valuable than any amount of gold and riches. #