



Peaking in Bhutan

Highlights of the 2009 FOM study tour to the Land of the Thunder Dragon

By Virginia A Sheridan

Dancer at Black-Necked Crane Festival, Gangtey Monastery, Bhutan

The Welcome

We see Mount Everest just off the left wing, peeking through the clouds in the early morning sun – a sight stunning enough to both quiet our garrulous group and coax many an oversized camera lens out of its case. Had we peaked with this highest of peaks on our very first day?

A sudden turn and dip into a narrow fertile valley and it was clear that Bhutan would not be overshadowed by its impressive border guard. The jaw-dropping landing also underscored why this Land of the Thunder Dragon remained isolated for so long: topography has worked hard to keep out the most well-intentioned of visitors.

A Home Away

Our arrival at the Gangtey Palace Hotel in Paro was like a homecoming. Indeed co-leader Khatiza van Savage had attended university with owner Tobgye Dorji and knew his family well (including daughter Chukie, our in-country tour operator). Gangtey Palace, the former residence of the Paro *penlop* (governor) was an intimate experience, with individually decorated rooms and cosy courtyards. We spent tranquil hours drinking tea (and stronger beverages) while soaking in the view of the Paro Valley and the impressive fortress beyond. We learned the history of the newly democratised country (which still reveres its king) through the history of the Dorji family. Narrated by Tobgye in the family's personal altar room, we were surrounded by murals and *thangkas*, including one with the Dalai Lama's handprints.

Engaging Speakers

Yes, we saw stunning sights, but we also gained insight from informal post-dinner presentations arranged by our co-leaders, Khatiza and Andra Leo. We heard about the life of Buddhist nuns from a woman dedicated to improving their living and working conditions. We met Benji Dorji, Tobgye's brother and founder of the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, who lobbies to keep developers out of the winter home of the black-necked cranes. And we learned of Bhutan's efforts to balance the impact of cable television and the Internet (introduced to the country just 10 years ago) from a media consultant and long-time Bhutan resident (coincidentally, a former Singapore resident).

The Road

Bhutan's roads are barely wide enough for two cars, let alone our mini bus and the occasional brightly painted truck from India. Mountains rise on one side, valleys dip on the other. Tight passes were made with a slight adjustment of side mirrors and a collective sucking in of breath. That said, we saw fewer vehicles the entire trip than at the typical Singapore traffic light. More common were groups of students walking to unseen schools and farmers carrying baskets of the ubiquitous red chillies – Bhutan's national vegetable seen drying on rooftops throughout the countryside.

The Bumps

Soon after arrival one of our travellers became unwell and required a few days in a local hospital. An undesirable situation, but one that gave us an insight into the Bhutan



2009 Bhutan Study Tour group, outside the chorten at Gangtey Palace Hotel

not mentioned in the glowing guidebooks. For even in the second largest 'city' in Bhutan, medical facilities were limited. Incoming patients were expected to bring their own blankets, towels and toilet tissue as outgoing patients tended to take these items with them. And yet these conditions far exceeded those available to remote villages where the most basic of healthcare requires several days of foot travel.

For those with motion sickness, there were other 'bumps' in the road. The many miles traversed on winding, weather-worn roads became a meditation in distraction. We rotated the strong stomachs to the bumpy back seats, shared ginger pills and folk remedies, kept the conversation away from the edge.

Vertical Vistas and Views

Though Guru Rimpoche (the holy man credited with bringing Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century) was said to have travelled on the back of a flying tigress to meditate at this spot, most of us walked. Uphill. For two hours. The path to Taktsang ('Tiger's Nest') Monastery was a curvy, 3,000-metres-above-sea-level challenge, but worthwhile for the ever-changing views of the striking cliff-side edifice. Those with tricky knees ascended the first portion on horseback, while others with trickier conditions opted to watch a traditional archery match at a more reasonable altitude. Trekkers to the top, who added layers as the altitude rose and the temperatures dropped, saw prayer flags flapping across a sheer drop, and wizened believers (wearing the traditional woven attire of *ghos* and *kiras*) trekking with respect to this most holy of spots.

Though it was somewhat 'downhill' from there elevation-wise, the vistas were endlessly magnificent. Who could forget Dochula Pass with its 108 gold-capped *chortens* against a distant background of snow-capped mountains? Or the walk through rice paddies, past giant rolls of hay and grazing cows to find the crimson robes of monks drying in the wind at the hilltop Chimi Lakhang Monastery?



Entertaining the children

Black-Necked Crane Festival

In the Phobjikha Valley (where we stayed at a lodge so environmentally conscious that it shut off the electricity generators after dinner and provided wood stove heat for our chilly rooms), we spotted a family of endangered black-necked cranes take flight. A few days later, at a nearby monastery, schoolchildren were 'flying' in crane costumes as part of an all-day dance celebration dedicated to this special species. Amid energetic movements and colourful masks, families gathered in the courtyard to share bowls of red rice and cups of strong tea. Villagers spread blankets to sell religious trinkets, simple toys and used winter clothing. It was a phenomenal opportunity to observe and be observed (as when we shared snapshots through our cameras' digital displays or put on a spontaneous play with cloth doll souvenirs).



Woman in traditional kira dress

The Daily Dzong

Though we joked that we had seen far too many monasteries and *dzongs*, the iconic, architecturally-striking Bhutanese fortresses, in truth they punctuated our days. At the riverside Punakha *Dzong* our guide, Tashi, narrated the life of Buddha through mystical wall murals. At Trongsa *Dzong* (Bhutan's longest *dzong*) we spotted monkeys and young monks at play. We were invited to special altars, blessed with protective knotted cords, endlessly briefed on the complex symbols and deities that comprise the maze of Buddhist beliefs practised here. And we spun enough prayer wheels to ensure a lifetime of good karma!

People

But it was the personalities that enlivened the places. The bulged-cheek women selling strings of *chhurpi* (the rock-hard yak cheese meant for all-day sucking). The children at a lunch stop who were entertained with Sue Ellen Kelso's paper airplanes (which they threw, then chewed). The young monk with the Swiss watch at Paro's Rinpung *Dzong* who confessed that he sometimes fell asleep while reading the required texts. The intent faces of students drawing meditative *mandalas* at the traditional arts school in the capital city Thimphu.

And then there was our group. Three married couples, several veteran FOM study tour 'groupies', a few Asia travel newbies. Nature enthusiasts, avid photographers, an expert skier, a geologist, one who somehow knew the protocol for bowing at Buddhist temples. We admired and absorbed, breathing easily in the crisp Himalayan air, lulled to sleep by distant streams and the occasional barking dog. We all wore the traditional *ghos* and *kiras* at the final night's celebration (courtesy of Chukie), watched Bhutanese dances by campfire, sang songs of *dzongs*.

In the end we could proudly say that we enjoyed our taste of what Bhutan had to offer – except for *ema datse*, the national chilli and cheese dish that probably requires a Bhutanese upbringing to truly appreciate.

Photos by the author

Virginia A Sheridan has served *ema datse* to her husband who loves her nonetheless. Currently the Content Editor of *PASSAGE*, she will explore the Indian side of the Himalayas when she co-leads an FOM study tour to Sikkim this November.