

BHUTAN

TOWARDS

Happiness

Catch a glimpse of the Mount Everest, trek up to a monastery hanging on the edge of a steep cliff, or simply sit back and enjoy the serenity of the mountain kingdom of Bhutan which gave the world the concept of Gross National Happiness.

BY PALLAVI PASRICHA;

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANSHUMAN SEN

“JUST A FEW more minutes and you will reach. Think of the breathtaking views up there. You can do it.” Like a stuck record, I keep repeating these words to myself as I bravely trek up the steep 8-km hill to Tiger’s Nest, or Taktsang Monastery, sitting on the edge of a sheer cliff. Raj, our friendly Bhutanese guide for the trip, slows his pace to keep me company. But I am in no rush. I am enjoying stopping and chatting with passersby as they motivate each other.

Coming from a city where the pace of life is absolutely maddening, going slow is my motto and agenda for these four days. It is not everyday that I go to the Kingdom of Happiness, and I want to experience it at leisure.

Looking at the emerald green mountains around me, my thoughts flash back to my journey here. I sat in awe as the charter plane, part of the MakeMyTrip package, flew over the tallest mountain range in the world and then close to the Mount Everest. The sight of this towering, snowclad Himalayan peak, shimmering under the bright morning sun made me goosebumpy.

Coming out of my reverie, I start walking again. We are climbing from 7,382 to 10,200 ft and when I reach, huffing and puffing, I am quite proud of what I have accomplished. For me, it is as good as scaling the Everest.

The sight of the Taktsang monastery, hanging at the edge of a sheer vertical cliff, is spectacular and I wonder how it was constructed way back in 1692. Butter lamps

flicker inside as I bow my head in silence and close my eyes for five minutes. It’s peaceful and silent. As I walk out to the terrace, I am entranced by the surreal sight of Paro spread out at my feet.

Like almost every monastery in Bhutan, this one too has a legend associated with it. I am told that at Tiger’s Nest, Guru Padmasambhava travelled from Tibet to Bhutan on the back of a tigress and meditated here for three months in the 8th century after subduing a demon.

To me Bhutan seems a land that proudly retains its culture, and has managed to keep its distance from the hustle-bustle of the 21st century. After all, this tiny mountain kingdom has given the world the concept of Gross National Happiness as a measure of progress in place of economic indicators.

Never mind the eight lakh local people, this philosophy begins working for me from the moment I land. Soon after arriving in Paro—which I am told is the world’s second toughest landing strip after Alaska, the first thing I spot is a board that says ‘130 Years of Peace, Unity and Happiness’. It is an



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appropriate welcome. I am already beaming with the picture of Mount Everest etched in my mind.

Just after leaving the airport, we pass by a park where the 15th Paro Archery (the national sport) tournament is underway. All the men are attired in their national dress, *gho*, a single piece of cloth that is tied with a belt and women in *kira*, a long cloth till their ankles. It is compulsory to wear this in a few public areas and all government offices. We watch the competitors aim at a target which is a mind boggling 340 ft away, and I, a city bird, wonder how they can they even focus on the target so far.

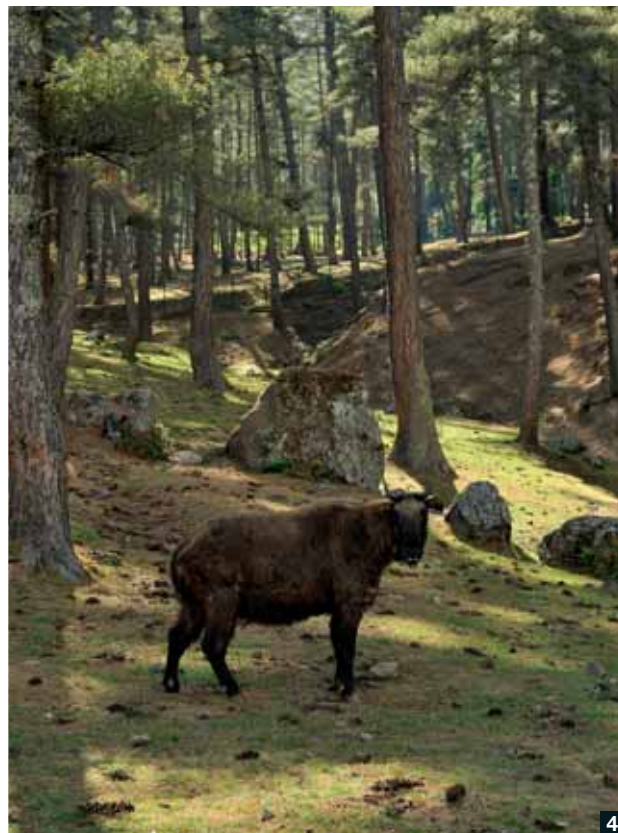
Paro Valley is quiet with a small market. The houses, made of mud and wood, are sprinkled along different hills so that the town does not look congested. After spending a day here, we are on our way to the capital, Thimphu. It is vibrant, lively and much bigger than Paro.

There is a certain buzz in the air in the Bhutanese capital, but it never loses the air of serenity I am already getting accustomed to. What strikes me is the absence of traffic lights, not just in Thimphu, but across the country. We visit a number of dzongs (ancient monastery-

1. A view of Punakha Dzong from a school garden 2. Young monks play with the ball at Chimi Lhakhang Monastery



1. A young boy happily poses for the camera 2. A typical Bhutanese meal with dishes like red rice and *Ema Datshi* 3. A glimpse of Thimphu 4. At the Takin Sanctuary



fortresses) but it is Punakha Dzong that mesmerises me the most. Three hours away from Thimphu, it is located at the confluence of two rivers. This peaceful setting takes my breath away, making me stare for a few moments.

We stop by at a park next to Punakha Higher Secondary School where children are sitting during their break. Some are chatting, others are studying. A spirit of well-being and calm hangs in the air as the river gushes by. I cannot help thinking that if my school had been located in such a place, I would have fared better with my studies. We walk over a wooden bridge, festooned with colourful prayer flags and then along a pathway strewn with flowers to reach the dzong. Four purple jacaranda trees outside are a perfect contrast to the crimson red robes worn by the monks. Incense and chants fill the air.

Chimi Lhakhang monastery is next on our list. Also known as the temple of fertility, people from across the country come here to pray for a child. We walk for 15 minutes through fields to reach there. A group of young monks playing with a ball catch my attention. It is the sweetest sights ever—little monks clad in maroon robes, but not missing out on a carefree childhood. As far as I can gauge, the happiness concept is not mere talk. Wherever I look, people appear content, whether it is a monk, a child or women behind shop counters.

Inside the monastery, I am surprised when the priest blesses us with a phallus. Legend goes that Lama Drukpa Kunley, who travelled from Tibet to Bhutan, would hit the evil with his penis. He told people that the phallus was lucky and they should keep one in their home to drive away evil spirits. That is why many houses have graphic paintings of phalluses. I am rather amused to see all this.

Back in Thimphu, we roam around the market. Even

FYI

CURRENCY IN BHUTAN

Indian currency is accepted in Bhutan. It is on par with Bhutan's currency, Ngultrum. However, ₹500 and ₹1,000 bank notes are not accepted. It is best to take lower denominations from the bank or airport before. These can be used in hotels and most of the shops.

small shops here have a bar and you can pick up local liquor from the general stores as well, but smoking is frowned upon and banned in public. On our last evening in Thimphu we visit Bhutan Kitchen, a popular restaurant. Food in Bhutan is spicy. The fiery red chilli is a staple, which they tend to throw into practically every dish. I could not get enough of *Ema Datshi*, the national dish made with green chillies in a cheese sauce. The meal starts with *Ara*, a potent local drink made of grains like rice, wheat and barley. We then have the Bhutanese staple red rice, served with chilli beef, and the meal turns out to be amazing.

I head back to Paro and then finally need to pack my bags for our return journey. These four days have been like time out from my world of rush, hurry and noise and I cannot help wishing that I could also pack some of the leisure, calm and serenity of this magical land to take back with me forever.

AT A GLANCE

GETTING THERE

MakeMyTrip runs packages that include charter flights from Delhi/ Mumbai to Paro. Tour Fare: ₹33,333 onwards per person.

WHEN TO GO

March to November is the best season.

MUST DO

STAY

Paro: Affordable: Tashi Namgay Resort; tel: +975 08 272 318; www.tnr.bt. Cost: ₹2,900 for two.

Luxury: Zhiwa Ling; tel: + 975 08 271 277; www.zhiwaling.com. Cost: ₹11,250 for two.

Thimphu: Affordable: Namgay Heritage Hotel; tel: +975 02 337 113; www.nhh.bt. Cost: ₹3,700 for two.

Luxury: Amankora Thimphu; tel: +975 08 272 333; www.amanresorts.com. Cost: ₹58,000 (approx) per person.

EAT

It may not be everyone's cup of tea but if you are open to experimenting try butter tea. It is salty and made from yak milk

SHOP

Beef or red chilli pickle from the farmers market in Thimphu.

SEE

The 51.5 metre high statue of Shakyamuni Buddha close to Thimphu. It is the tallest statue of Buddha in the country.