

THE LAND OF smiles

Bhutan's towns and villages, valleys and mountains, rivers and rice fields, monasteries and palaces and gentle people make up its paradisiacal charm, says Hema Narayanan

DIVINE PERCH:
Prayer flags flap
above the sacred
Tatksang Monastery
or Tiger's Nest

CULTURE-RICH:
(Clockwise) The National Memorial Chorten; the Punakha Dzong; women waiting to perform at the Paro Tsechu festival



HEMA NARAYAN

To reach **Punakha Dzong** or 'Palace of Great Happiness,' standing tall at 4,430 ft, we crossed a small village nestled amidst **magnolia** trees. The fort's imposing walls rise from the clear waters of the **Ma Chu** and Pa Chu rivers



Jimpa Langso, is how the extraordinary country of Bhutan welcomed us - a verdant paradise of around ten lakh people. As we entered the border town of Phuentsholing of Bhutan, through the Indian town of Jaigaon in West Bengal, there was an immediate transition from chaos to calmness. Everyone seemed to be happy and wore a smile on their faces. People spoke fluent English. Dorji, our chauffeur for this 10-day trip, stated that English was the teaching medium at all schools here.

It is only about seven years since Bhutan a geographically-isolated and landlocked country, opened up to visitors. Perhaps they were happy in their own worlds and did not see a need to promote tourism. No wonder this country measures its prosperity in terms of Gross National Happiness instead of Gross Domestic Product.

Dressed in the traditional national Bhutanese attire called *gho*, Dorji greeted us with *kuzu zangpo* or 'hello.' Colourful and checked, *gho* covers them from head-to-toe and as a mark of respect to their king, they keep their arms covered.

Of the myriad travel routes one can take in Bhutan, we decided to travel the Thimphu-Wangdue Phodrang-Paro-Phuentsholing circuit. During our ride to Thimphu, we saw Bhutanese women walking past, clad in an ankle-length dress called *kira*. Wrapped and folded around the body, it was pinned at both

shoulders with striking silver brooches - it was worn along with *toego*, a short jacket.

The journey through the vertiginous ribbons of road looping through Bhutan's daunting and gorgeous terrain began. I could not stop admiring the effort of the Dantak (Border Roads Organisation) that build and maintain these impeccable roads even at altitudes as high as 13,000 ft. All through, Bhutan is festooned with colourful flags carrying prayers on the wings of wind.

LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

During our drive to the capital city, Dorji filled me up with tidbits on the culture. *Druk* meant dragon, he said, and the Bhutanese refer to their country as *Druk Yul* - Land of the Thunder Dragon - while they like to be called *Drukpas*. So much so that Bhutan's only airlines is called Druk Airways.

It was radically refreshing to know that Bhutan is a women-dominated society. I noticed that there were more women everywhere - as executives, workers or just passers-by - than men. In fact, women here inherit the ancestral wealth and property and a man goes to live in her house after marriage.

Soon, we started to see rhododendrons everywhere in full bloom - pink, purple, white and yellow. It seemed like our timing to travel - in April - was perfect. Bhutanese call them *etho metho* - a remedial medicine for pneumonia too. Of the 5,000 species of plants including 600 types of orchids, 45 types of rhododen-

NAVIGATOR

How to get there

There are two options - you can either directly fly into Paro in Bhutan or reach Bagdogra (nearest airport) in West Bengal and take the road to Phuentsholing. Paro airport is a difficult one and only Druk Airlines flies in and out of it. There are limited pilots who fly this segment and limited flights too. Distance from Bagdogra: 170 km; the journey takes five hours.

Visa requirements

Indians don't need a Bhutan visa, but an entry permit, given at Phuentsholing. Indian Rupee is at par with Ngultrum; 1 USD = 45 Ngultrum.

Travel and costs

BhutanTravelAgency.com, an online travel agency duly registered with Bhutan's Tourism Council. Dial 011 40569699 or 1800 103 8808 (India toll free number) or mail at *pleaseboth-erme@bhutantravelagency.com* for reservations.

drons, 400 types of mushrooms and some 300 odd species of medicinal plants, the Bhutanese have chosen the Blue Poppy as their national flower, not the rhododendron.

THIMPHU

Thimphu spreads over the valley formed by the Wang Chu, *chu* meaning river. Unlike most capital cities, it has no high rises and even a simple petrol pump is built according to the traditional Bhutanese style, making it beautifully consistent. Quaint, colourful and artistic, this city oozes class. We stopped by an exquisite-looking hotel and had our first meal - *dal-chawal* with spicy pickle on the side.

Thimphu has a great mix of attractions - both traditional and happening. The places of worship had a meditative calm and time seemed to stand still. I experienced this at Changangkha Dzong, one of the oldest temples dated back to the 15th century. Young Buddhists chanted hymns and blew bugles in worship of the eleven-faced Buddha, considered the guardian deity of children.

The National Memorial Chorten, 'the most visible religious landmark in Bhutan,' is an impressive white dome with golden spires gleaming in the sun and framed by the lazuline sky. Built in 1974, the paintings here depict tantric Buddhism and the colourful prayer wheels are uniquely humungous.

For lovers of art, visits to the Art School, Folk Heritage Museum and the Paper Factory are a must. The school teaches dance forms,



UNSPOILT BEAUTY:
A bird's eye view of Thimphu; (below) dancers with colourful masks at the annual Tsechu festival

HEMA NARAYANAN



Paro, a **must-trek** destination in Bhutan, houses the vertiginous Taksang Monastery or **Tiger's Nest**, perched atop a sheer cliff rising **9,700 ft** above sea level; its location is enough to make even the **strong**-willed quiver

folklore, handicrafts and performing arts, providing a means of employment to many. I visited a 200-year-old Bhutanese home in the museum - it was fascinating to see how their unique wooden homes could transform into an all-season house.

Someone has wisely said, 'If I had to name the biggest difference between Bhutan and the rest of the world, I could do it in one word - civility.' I agree wholeheartedly. The culture of Bhutan - with respect to literature, customs, religion, monastic practices, music, dance and the future - is reflected in Thimphu. It has a pretty active nightlife too and if you want to disco, head to the Buzz Club or Space 34.

Dorji had promised to show me a bird's eye view of Thimphu, so, in the evening, we undertook a long, winding climb up to the BBS Tower and savoured a mesmerising sight. On our ride back, we saw both the official residence of the king (his palace) and the impressive edifice of SAARC Convention Centre that now houses the National Assembly and ministries. We took a stroll around the city centre's clock tower, soaking in the chic European-like ambience, before returning to our grand resort, Terma Linca - expensive but indulgent.

WANGDUE PHODRANG

About 70 km and three hours from Thimphu past some stunning countryside, we reached Wangdue Phodrang via the Do Chula pass at 10,150 ft that offers stunning views of the

Eastern Himalayas. We'd started very early to catch a glimpse of Mt Jhomolari, Bhutan's highest peak, and hoped for clear skies but luck didn't favour us. The Druk Wangyel Chortens or the Chortens of the Victory of the Druk Gyalpo are 108 striking chortens built at the Do Chula top in 2004.

The next day at Wangdue was dedicated to witnessing the architectural creations or *dzongs*. To reach Punakha Dzong or 'Palace of Great Happiness,' standing at 4,430 ft, we had to cross Lobesa, a small village located amidst magnolia trees. This impressive fortress, dating back to 1637 CE, looked picturesque with its imposing walls rising from the clear waters of the confluence of two rivers - Ma Chu and Pa Chu - that become Punachang Chu.

PARO

After days abounding in culturally- and visually-rich experiences at Thimphu and Wangdue, it was time for some adventure. Paro, a must-trek destination on our list, houses the vertiginous Taksang Monastery or Tiger's Nest, perched atop a sheer cliff at 9,700 ft; its location is enough to make even the strong-willed quiver.

Dorji dropped us off at the base and we made the start despite feeling daunted. After the deceptively-easy first 100 m past pines and dedicated *Mani* stones, we reached the first viewpoint. Prayer flags flapped in the wind as we bit into an energy bar sitting at the lone teahouse on this cliff.

The real climb began with the second stretch - steeper and harder. Puffs and pants, stops and gaps later, we were at the second viewpoint where we could see the monastery eye-to-eye. But from here, we had to descend 400 steep steps, cross a narrow gorge and climb another 300 steps to reach the base of the monastery, a collation of six temples.

Many drop off at this point, but making it to the other side is worth the effort. The elevation, the mammoth waterfalls, the expanse of the valley and the feeling of accomplishment is something to be savoured. They say the revered Guru Rimpoche arrived here from Tibet in the first century, riding a tiger. We stayed here for an hour, meditated in peace, chanted *Om Mane Padme Hum* and gazed into the valley. Every visitor must undertake this trek; you could take a horse if it gets difficult.

We then drove one hour to the west of Paro valley to arrive at the Chele La Pass. At over 13,000 ft, it's the highest of Dantak roads. Chele La's chill factor may be high but the landscape is riveting.

LAST STOP

From my balcony at the Tashi Namgay resort just opposite the Paro airport, I watched an aircraft take off from what is listed as one of the world's most difficult airports and only a handful of pilots are trained to fly here. It was the cherry topping on my Bhutan trip and a sight worth cherishing. ■