

A SLICE OF HEAVEN

BHUTAN IS A LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON AND SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA. IT IS THE HIMALAYAN KINGDOM WHERE EVERY CURVE OF THE ROAD LEADS ONE TO A NEW LEGEND, BUDDHIST MONASTERY, AND CENTURIES-OLD PRACTICES. THIS ENIGMATIC NATION'S HERITAGE, ITS FIERCELY GUARDED TRADITIONS, AND BREATHTAKING NATURAL LANDSCAPE, MAKE BHUTAN EVERY TRAVELLER'S DREAM DESTINATION. **BY NEELIMA VALLANGI**



Paro Taktsang Monastery clings to the cliff edge leaving you both dizzy and in awe. **Opposite:** 108 Chortens atop Dochula are a picture of serenity.



I WAS STANDING AT THE EDGE OF A CURVING ROAD HIGH UP IN THE HILLS,

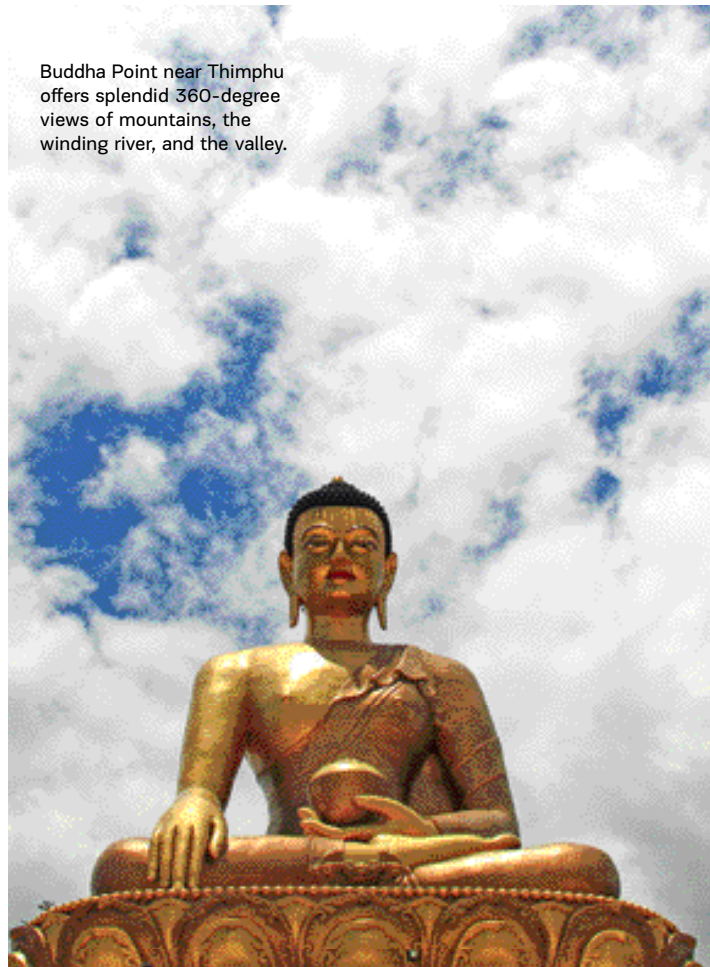
watching the city slowly flicker to life as darkness descended into the valley at dusk. It was hard to believe this was a capital—a sprawling settlement by a winding river, surrounded by lush greenery, devoid of overbearing concrete monstrosities, and one of the only two capital cities in the whole world not to have a single traffic signal! All the tourists from morning had disappeared on the gently climbing mountain road to Buddha Point, a popular attraction. It was now buzzing with residents of the city—joggers, runners, cyclists, and people walking their dogs on that pleasant evening in Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan. Even the capital has this aura of serenity where people enjoy close proximity to pristine wilderness and nature's healing powers.

Just that morning, when my family and I drove up to Buddha Point to see a gold-gilded gigantic bronze statue of Shakyamuni Buddha on a hill top at the southern side of Thimphu, I ended up hiking in the surrounding Kuensel Phodrang nature park that preserves 943 acres of forest area, to find solitude between fluttering prayer flags and swaying trees on a mountain slope, under a vast open sky just minutes away from the city. Then it really doesn't come as a big surprise that this tiny Himalayan Kingdom is one of the happiest nations!

Later that afternoon when I learned about Bhutan's National Animal, Takin's mythical story, I truly felt like I stepped into an enchanted land. In Motithang Takin Preserve, a wildlife reserve near Thimphu where the Takin lives, we got our first glimpse of the rare and strange animal from eastern Himalayas. Folklore says Drukpa Kunley, an eccentric Tibetan saint was once asked to perform a miracle to prove his powers; he ate an entire cow and goat barring the skeletons. Then he put the goat's head over the cow's body and the weird creature was brought to life. Strange enough, Takin indeed looks like a goat's head fixed on a cow's body and is found only in Bhutan apart from a small population in western Arunachal.

I was fascinated to no end about this eccentric saint Drukpa Kunley or better known as the Divine Madman—the man responsible for introducing Buddhism in Bhutan. Bhutan's obsession with painting giant phalluses on walls and hanging wooden replicas from house corners to ward off evil stemmed from his bizarre teachings. And that precisely was his intention apparently, to shock one out of their prejudices. One can still see the phallic paintings and wooden souvenirs in most of Bhutan, even more so in the countryside. So far, I had no luck finding one of those traditional houses with the paintings. But I was holding on to the hope that I might get to see one over the next few days I would spend in Bhutan.

Buddha Point near Thimphu offers splendid 360-degree views of mountains, the winding river, and the valley.



Two days later, we made our way from Thimphu to one of the most popular rice bowls of Bhutan, Paro Valley. A rustic town on the banks of Paro River with mountains in the background and a rather unhurried feel to it. Green paddy fields flooded to the brim dotted the ethereal landscape and the jagged peaks surrounding the valley seemed to flirt with clouds every so often. Wind gushed through the valley, the river gently meandered and the ubiquitous prayer flags fluttered furiously, spreading good wishes. In the far distance, the monastery whose mere mention brings the word precarious to mind, Paro Taktsang or Tiger nest, evoked a sense of pure wonderment at how marvelously it held onto to the near-vertical cliffs. Tomorrow we would hike to Paro Taktsang, but today we spent our time gazing at monasteries that were the white dots in the cliffs in front of us.

The next morning, the dark clouds swirling around mountaintops looked ominous as we set out on the hike to Tiger's nest Monastery, which is at a height of 900 metres above Paro Valley. Unknown to me, the cloud cover was only working to our benefit; it provided us cool shade as we hiked up the steep trail. Once we reached the top, bright sunshine pushed through the dark overcast sky and brought back the blue skies peppered with white fluffy clouds. The first view of Paro Taktsang monastery precipitously sitting on the cliff edge made my heart skip a beat—the reality of the monastery's splendour was not diminished even by an iota despite the thousands of images I had already seen in the



Clockwise from top left: Hiking trails cut through the Kuensel Phodrang National Park; Bhutan is peppered with majestic Dzongs (fortresses) and palaces built in traditional style; tiny windows, calendars and portraits hang on the walls of a traditional house in Haa Valley; National Flower of Bhutan, the Poppy.



virtual world. Built in 17th century at the site where Guru Rinpoche flew to, over a Tigress and meditated for 3 years, 3 months, 3 days and 3 hours, the monastery derives its name Tiger's Nest from this tale. Destroyed in a fatal fire in the recent past, this iconic monastery has managed to capture the imagination of the entire world with its fairy-tale setting and religious significance.

After a tiring yet deeply satisfying hike, we drove to the riverside in the evening and spent our time listening to the song of gurgling water and fluttering prayer flags. In Bhutan, there's no particular need to go sightseeing, every sight you see is splendid anyway. We enjoyed sitting on the banks of the river, just few feet from the roadside, soaking up the sunshine.

After few languorous days in Paro, we made our way towards the more atmospheric countryside of Haa Valley to experience a slice of rural life in Bhutan. On the way, egged on by my driver for no particular reason, I walked up the mountain at Chele La Pass that morning where I found myself staring at a flower so rarely seen (for the longest time it was thought to be a Himalayan myth like the Yeti) Blue Poppy, which is also the National Flower of Bhutan. The fact

that I could just walk into a whole patch of wildflowers was a testimony to the abundance and preservation of natural wealth in this corner of the world. I spent an hour lost in the beauty of those flowers of every size and colour—orange Rhododendrons, blue Poppies, yellow Piptanthus and many others. It would be an understatement to say I was delighted, because wildflowers are one of the few things that make my heart truly sing.

Crossing one of the highest passes in Bhutan on our way to Haa Valley, the milestone at Chele La reminded me of home, once again. The roads signs and milestones all along the winding roads of Bhutan had been constantly reminding me of our Border Roads Organization (BRO) while driving because they were so similar to BRO's milestones seen in remote Himalayan frontiers, except the only difference that the project was called Dantak here. As we reached the supremely sylvan-looking Haa Valley, we ran into an entire Indian army settlement stationed in Haa to train the Royal Bhutan Army! I was surprised to know that the Royal Bhutan Army came into existence upon insistence of Indian government that feared Chinese incursion through Bhutan

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borders. It was in Haa that I also found out the entire 1,500 kilometres of road and telecom network in Bhutan was laid out by none other than our expert mountain tamers at BRO under the ambitious Project Dantak in 1961 (hence the similarity in milestones). No wonder we are one of the only three countries allowed to enjoy Bhutan's sublime beauty at no additional cost when the whole world has to pay a fairly hefty price (US\$200-US\$250) to enter this country!

Staying at a 150-year-old traditional farmhouse in the countryside of Haa, we sat around in the kitchen answering our local hosts' several questions, playing with the calves in the compound and running after the kittens that were hiding in the corners of the wooden house. Haa Valley is the perfect place to do nothing and that was our plan for the last leg of our journey in Bhutan—to just be in one of the most beautiful places. However, my only quibble was that after a week in Bhutan, I still hadn't spotted a house with those famed phallus paintings. But on the last evening, ruing about the missed opportunity, I went for a walk at dusk in the countryside of Haa. And as fate would have it, there was an old house between the mountains with those graphic paintings—the Himalayan Kingdom rarely disappoints!

Being in Bhutan felt like Shangri-La not only because of its rich culture and traditions but also because the Bhutanese were not perfunctorily upholding their oath of environmental protection. There were no deep gashes on mountainsides. Instead, there were wild flowers, chirping birds and monasteries floating in clouds—a rare Shangri-La indeed, where both the people and wilderness are happy!✦

Clockwise from below: Uma by COMO in Paro; a traditional meal at Uma by COMO; Bhutan Peaceful Resort in Thimphu. Opposite: The capital city of Thimphu with the backdrop of the Dechencholing Royal Palace.



T+L Guide

Getting There

Druk Air, the National Air Carrier of Bhutan, operates regular flights to and from Paro to Delhi, Kolkatta, and Gaya.

STAY

Terma Linca Resort and Spa

set on the Thimphu riverside and a ten-minute drive away from the capital city has 30 luxury rooms. *Phuntsholing-Thimphu Highway, Thimphu; 975-2/351-490; termalinca.com; doubles from ₹21,000.*

Peaceful Resort is a super deluxe hotel in Thimphu. It is located a kilometre from the bustle of the city in the royal residence area. *Upper Motithang, Thimphu; 975/337-012; bhutanpeacefulresort.com; doubles from ₹3,500.*

Uma by COMO in the picturesque valley of Paro, features nine exclusive private villas and 20 luxury rooms that tastefully blend traditional Bhutanese designs and contemporary comforts. *Uma by COMO, Paro; 975-8/279-999; comohotels.com/umaparo; doubles from ₹30,000.*

Tiger's Nest Resort in outskirts of Paro, has arguably the best view of Paro Taktsang Monastery. *Satsamchorten, Drugyal Highway, Paro; 975-8/27-1310; tigernest.bt; doubles from ₹4,000.*

Soednam Zingka Heritage

Lodge is a traditional three-storeyed Bhutanese house converted to a heritage lodge. It is one of the few places to stay in the remote Haa valley. *Hatey, Haa; 975-8/371-037; soednamzingkha.com; doubles from ₹4,000.*

EAT

Recognised as the national dish, do try out the traditional *Ema Datshi*, a soupy dish made from chilli peppers and homemade cheese from yak or cow curd.

DO

Buddha Point One of the highest Buddha statues in the world, this 169 metre high Buddha Dordenma is a must visit, at least for the panoramic views of Thimphu if not the statue itself.

Paro Takstang Go on a day hike to this iconic monastery sitting on impossible cliff edge.

Hot Stone Bath Stones from the riverbed are heated on a fire and splashed into compartments in wooden bathtubs filled with water.

Mothithang Takin Preserve Meet the endemic National Animal of Bhutan, Takin, in this preserve close to Thimphu.

DochuLa Go for a picnic amidst the 108 chortens on top of this pass located on way from Thimphu to Punakha.