IS THIS THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH?

Like the quest for the Holy Grail or the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, finding true happiness is really just a myth, isn't it? Well, not according to the people of Bhutan, reputed to be some of the happiest people on Earth. But what is their secret? We travel across this Utopian land of monks, yetis and luxurious hideaways to find out.

words christa larwood photography sam barker
Happiness is something I’ve often found myself contemplating, but this is the first time I’ve done it, while being stuck in someone’s floor. Well, not stuck exactly. More like hairing out on dear life and trying not to fall through completely. One leg is dangling down through a gaping hole, while the other is splayed out and scrabbling around in a most unladylike fashion.

Just a moment ago I was chatting to a lovely 73-year-old Bhutanese widow called Angay Nam, who invited us into her farmhouse for some tea. But the raised platform leading to her front door is made from a decidedly shaky layer of dried mud on a wooden framework. One misjudged step later, I find myself pelvis-deep in the porch.

The surface crumbles further, seeming certain to give way. I brace myself for a painful, eight-foot drop to the pigsty waiting pungently below. But suddenly, right at the very last moment, arms shoot out to grab my sinking form and pull me to my feet.

The irony is that before I punched a hole in her house, we’d come here to talk to Angay about why she’s so happy. The Bhutanese people have a reputation for happiness. A 2005 survey found that over 95 per cent of people in Bhutan reported being happy with their lives. In world terms, that puts them right up there with the rich and jolly Scandinavians – yet in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Bhutan doesn’t even make it into the world’s top 100. So what is their secret?

If there is a secret, then Angay knows it. She swats away my swarm of apologies and seems far more interested in talking to us about her family and the fact she’s off on a pilgrimage tomorrow. She smiles as she talks, her teeth stained red from decades of chewing betel nut.

I’m in shock – here a big, strange and apparently overweight Westerner has just trodden a washtub-sized hole in her home. You think she’d be enraged, or at least mildly peeved, yet she’s chatting cheerfully away to me as if I’ve just bought her a present.

’Happiness,’ she tells me, ’means being independent and self-sufficient. And I am both of those things.’

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In Bhutan, there are many reasons to be happy. The facts of life here read like a checklist of Utopia: free health care and education, incredibly low crime rate, the lowest utility bills in the world and mostly organic food to eat. Not to mention the land itself, which is not only breathtakingly beautiful, but is 72 per cent covered in virgin forest, making Bhutan the only carbon-negative country in the world.

Modern development was tardy in coming here – it was the last nation to get television, in 1999. But from the moment we arrive in Bhutan’s capital of Thimphu it’s impossible not to notice the well-fed, prosperous-looking people. Almost all wear their traditional dress – a ghoo for the men, kiras for the ladies. Often a monk’s saffron and scarlet robes complete the colourful scene. And, on the face of it, they do seem very cheerful indeed.

Make that cheerful and curious.

We’re driving the streets in a new Range Rover and locals peer into the windows, sometimes nudging their friends and pointing. At first I think that Thimphu might be an unexpected hotbed of car enthusiasts appreciating the vehicle’s stylish lines. Or maybe I am just looking remarkably, traffic-stoppingly comely today.

But sadly for my ego it emerges that the king of Bhutan himself owns a small fleet of Range Rovers and when bystanders are craning to see who’s inside, they are expecting royalty. I try to resist giving them a regal wave.

Rows of traditional Bhutanese-style buildings stretch out before us, all matching and postcard-perfect, with intricately carved wooden windows and lintels. And it’s impossible not to notice that they are often adorned with paintings of large – how shall I put this? – anatomically accurate phalluses. It’s an arresting sight, but a common symbol of strength in Bhutan and a tribute to the famously active member of one Drukpa Kunley, the Divine Madman. This patron saint of Bhutan famously debauched women up and down the country on his unconventional, but no doubt enjoyable, path to enlightenment. If we were to take his advice on finding contentment...
Bhutan is one of the most determinedly exclusive destinations on the planet, providing a lavish seclusion that’s made it a favourite with Hollywood celebrities (to quote his teachings, ‘Happiness lies below the navel’), this would be a very different story.

As it is, it’s the old king’s definition of happiness we are interested in, seeing as he’s the founder of a unique concept that’s made Bhutan an international poster child for civic joy. ‘I care less about Gross Domestic Product than I do about gross national happiness,’ he told a journalist in 1972. And from this one statement sprang a whole new movement. Gross National Happiness, known in Bhutan as GNH, is now considered in every government decision.

So, billboard advertising and plastic bags were banned, as was tobacco, making Bhutan the only smoke-free country on Earth. People liked their national dress, so everyone must wear it while working, and buildings are restricted to the traditional style, making for those lovely matching rows of white.

We drive through Thimphu’s busiest intersection, a roundabout directed by a traffic policeman rhythmically stopping and waving on the cars. Several years ago he was replaced by a conventional electric traffic light, but people didn’t like being told what to do by a flashing bulb. So, in line with GNH principles, after just three days our white-gloved friend was back.

A simple life might be desirable for the locals, but the Bhutanese like to keep their visitors in high style – Bhutan is one of the most determinedly exclusive destinations on the planet. Backpacking hordes are kept at bay by the simple expedient of imposing a minimum daily spend of US$200 (£130) per night.

Instead, the country is focused on rolling out the red carpet for the well-heeled. Some of the world’s most luxurious resorts are tucked away in scenic valleys throughout the country, providing a lavish seclusion that’s made it a favourite with Hollywood celebrities. Just last week, I’m told, Drew Barrymore was in town.

The Range Rover pulls up at our digs in Thimphu, the Taj Tashi hotel, and for visitors seeking happiness of their own, this is a good place to start. The Taj is the most luxurious place to stay in town, short of bunking in at the royal palace, which makes it popular for visiting dignitaries and heads of state. And it’s clear from the moment you arrive, when you’re given sweet, delicious Bhutanese tea and blessed by a genuine lama, that every care has been taken to infuse the hotel’s modern comforts with the traditions of the area. This extends to the design motifs – monastic trumpets called dhungs appear at every turn and dorjes, double-ended sceptres signifying strength, have been worked into design motifs throughout.

A night’s sleep on a pillow deliciously infused with Himalayan herbs, several hours sitting by the pool gazing out at the stunning Thimphu Valley and one extremely good spa massage later, I’m convinced that if there is such a thing as a recipe for happiness, I have found it. GNH be damned – being expertly pummelled by the deft hands of my therapist Karma is clearly what the world is starved of. But, reluctantly, I have to admit that, however much I might be enjoying it, the locals’ secret to happiness is probably not going to be found by lying blissfully semi-comatose on a massage table.

So, it’s back into the Range Rover for a mile or so until we reach the Centre for Bhutan Studies. This organisation is charged with checking whether this whole GNH idea is actually making people happier, and a surprisingly young woman called Tshoki Zangmo beckons us inside.

‘These are challenging times in Bhutan,’ she tells me with a sweet smile that does nothing to hide her razor-sharp intellect. ‘We are looking to achieve a balance, to take the good parts of globalisation without losing the good parts of what we have.’

I’m itching to ask her something that has been nagging at my freedom-seeking Western mind since my arrival in Bhutan. Surely, enforcing certain traditions restricts people’s right to choose? I gesture at Tshoki’s traditional kira dress to illustrate...
For you, wearing this would be restrictive, she says, plucking at her silk sleeve. You would see it as a violation of your individual rights. But to the Bhutanese people, this is our identity, our strength. Bhutan doesn’t have a big military to protect us. Nor do we have economic strength to match our neighbours, India and China. Our culture is the one thing that we can use as a weapon to preserve our identity, and later on perhaps our security.

She smiles softly, but her voice rings with conviction. I don’t feel any challenge to my rights when I wear this, she says. I welcome it.

This is delivered with earnest sincerity and I’ve no doubt that Tshoki has the very best intentions. Still, the ‘Our culture is a weapon’ statement gives me a slight feeling of uneasiness. It’s a slogan you could readily see on a Soviet-era poster proclaiming the joys of order alongside a cheerful portrait of smiling, square-jawed peasants.

In all the efforts to be the happy, smily proponents of the GNH theory are individual objections being suppressed here? Could this be—and it seems unlikely but I can’t help asking myself—a nationwide PR stunt?

Out in the country, Tshoki tells me, people have usually never heard of the government’s GNH policy. Surely then to discover to what extent the Bhutanese truly are happy—and how far this squeaky clean and jolly public image stretches—we must head out of town and into the rural heart of the country.

We turn west and drive into the clouds. In these foothills of the Himalayas, thick mist hangs down a few lazy inches above the dirt road surface, muffling the senses and giving a quiet, disquieting atmosphere. Beyond the Range Rover’s windows, the mountainside looks like the set of a Tim Burton movie, an eerie, ever-changing panorama of beckoning trees and twisted vines masked in dramatic white. It’s the kind of place where you might wander off the path and disappear forever. And this is perhaps rather fitting. After all, we have now entered yeti territory.

Left: archery is the national sport, known locally as Dha, and archers must shoot a target almost three times further away than those in Olympic competitions.
The abominable snowman, considered across most of the world to be a myth propagated by crackpots in tinfoil hats, is not just believed but widely feared throughout these parts. It’s known by the local name of migoi, or strong man, and reputedly roams through the Himalayas hunting for food, kidnapping women and scaring the life out of anyone who crosses its path.

Our photographer’s assistant, Sonam, grew up in the east of Bhutan where the dangers of dallying with the migoi are instilled from a young age. My mother always said, if you hear one call out in the forest, don’t call back or it will think you are a female migoi in heat and come after you; he says gravely.

It’s tempting to think of this as a bit of a joke played by locals on passing tourists. I mean, a yeti? Really? But it’s official – the king has set up a protected migoi reserve 370 miles east of here, the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, where the creature can go about its business unmolested by man (which is rather ironic given the migoi’s apparent predilection for molesting humans).

And there might be something more to this than a charming cultural tradition. Sightings and footprints have been recorded throughout history but in 2009 a US television crew found a thatch of suspected yeti hair in these very hills, and DNA testing found that it belonged to a ‘primate of unknown origin’… I lean over nonchalantly and lock the Range Rover’s doors.

As we drive, the mystical mountains dwindle and flatten out to wide expanses of exquisitely crafted farmland, neat rice paddies jutting out of hillsides like stairs to the sky. This is the true heartland of Bhutan, where traditional life flourishes and the newfound modern conveniences of Thimphu seem a world away.

At dawn the next morning, the Wangdi farmers’ market stirs to life. Heaps of freshly plucked carrots, chillies and passion fruits line the aisles. A gang of farmers’ daughters, brightly attired in their traditional kiras, accept fistfuls of ngultrums and Indian rupees as customers buy the produce by the crate.

The market’s charming bustle suggests an idyllic rural existence, but farming is a labour-intensive business. Throughout the country only a few farms have access to heavy equipment such as tractors, many farmhouses have no running water or electricity and most of the properties lie far from the nearest road, so a simple trip to the market can mean days of trekking. These conditions, to a Western ear, sound onerous in the extreme and seem an unlikely hothouse of contentment. Can they really be as happy as they claim?

We find a typical Bhutanese farmhouse in the gateway to the Wangdue Valley. It stands proudly upright, overlooking carefully tended chili fields and rice paddies where a scattered family can be seen working, bent double. When the sky begins to hint at dusk, they descend on the house in good-natured weariness with children chasing around their legs.

“We are very lucky here. We have enough to eat. A roof over our heads and I have all my family around me – of course I am happy. What more could I want?”
The matriarch, Mrs Nidup Zangmo, welcomes us to her home and obligingly corrals the children into position for a photograph. She’s never heard of this Gross National Happiness, she tells me. It’s impossible to guess her age – 50? 60, perhaps? – but when I ask her about her farm and her life, her face breaks into a youthful smile. ‘We are very lucky here,’ she says. ‘Our crop yields are good; we have enough to eat, a roof over our heads. And I have all my family around me – three generations in one house. Of course I am happy. What more could I want?’ Her last question is not rhetorical. She seems to be genuinely curious about what else could make her happy beyond her farm and the squirming children at her feet.

I feel immediately foolish. Happiness in the West is defined by wanting and achieving more. More money, more success; nicer, bigger, better things. By this measure Nidup, in her relatively simple surrounds, should be dissatisfied, if not miserable. Yet here she is serenely happy with what she has, having released the tension of striving for what she doesn’t.

I have been busily looking for holes in Bhutan’s happy ‘veneer’, my mind ridiculously more capable of accepting an elaborate nationwide conspiracy than that the people of Bhutan might just be plain old happy. And this realisation makes me feel rather sad.

More investigation shows that Nidup’s outlook is more than just a personal ‘glass half full’ mentality. It’s born of lifelong immersion in Buddhist principles, where desire is the root of all suffering and the releasing of desire is the pathway to enlightenment. And Nidup is not alone. Three quarters of the population of Bhutan are devout Buddhists – in fact, one in every hundred citizens is a monk – and this philosophy touches every aspect of life.

The spiritual heart of the nation is in Paro, back to the west of Thimphu, so it’s time to hit the road again. Through the hills and mountains we go, making full use of the Range Rover’s Terrain Response system as we negotiate bucket-sized potholes on parts of road that have been all but wiped off the mountain in recent landslides.

At the Dochula Pass, an ear-bleeding 10,000 feet in the air, there is a monk behaving curiously. He takes two slow, deliberate steps and throws himself forward onto his stomach, muttering a prayer. Then he stands up and does it again. His clothes are dirty and ragged and a callous adorns his forehead, a result of laying his head on the rough bitumen every two steps along the road.

He is on a pilgrimage from Paro to Bumthang in the east – that’s 180 miles of twisting, vertiginous mountain roads. Judging by the fact that his journey from Paro to here (about 60 miles) has taken him two months already, he has a very long path ahead.

Paro itself is the subject of countless pilgrimages. The reason for this is the stupendous Tiger’s Nest monastery, known locally as Taktsang Shakhang, which teeters on a cliffside 10,400 feet in the air.

The only catch is, it’s not exactly a breeze to get to. Once you leave the car behind, it’s a three-hour slog on foot in high-altitude conditions to even get within sight of the monastery. And just when you’ve climbed up the mountain, just when the Tiger’s Nest feels so close you can almost touch it with an outstretched hand, the stairs drop dizzyingly down halfway to the valley floor again before starting a friendly stroll steep hundreds of feet up to the monastery itself.

We wheeze and struggle up, sucking in the thin air like landed fish, being passed at regular intervals by monks and locals who, to my fevered eyes, look decidedly smug.

The Tiger’s Nest monastery winks in the sun and ruffles its coloured prayer flags. Legend says that the second Buddha, Guru Rinpoche, flew here on the back of a magical tigress – an infinitely preferable route, one can’t help thinking – and it’s now the most important religious site in the country. If the happiness of the people in Bhutan is real and it’s underpinned by their faith in Buddhist principles, then what better place to come to gain an understanding?

There’s a small flurry of activity as the lama of this monastery, Lam Kado, emerges...
This tension shouldn’t be surprising—he is, after all, one of the most senior religious figures in the country—but his ready smile puts us immediately at ease. And thankfully he doesn’t seem to mind my barrage of impertinent questions.

‘I think that in Bhutan,’ he says after a moment’s thought, ‘particularly in the villages where life is simple, it is a good place for people to find happiness. The environment is clean and safe, and people are very hospitable.’ He looks hard at me, with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. ‘But this doesn’t mean that you have to be from Bhutan, or even be Buddhist, to be happy. Certainly not. Wherever you are from—the UK, Australia, India—you have every chance at happiness because it is found within yourself. If you can find peace inside, you can be happy no matter where you are.’

He wanders out to the edge of the cliff, a patch of red and saffron against the glowering sky. His figure is framed by flapping prayer flags and curves of pristine mountains in a scene so perfect I find that I am filled with a feeling of peace. For a fleeting moment, I think I might actually understand what people here are so happy about.

Bhutan is not perfect. It has its problems, just like any other place. Modern development has brought with it the beginnings of urban homelessness and drug abuse. One doctor I met on the road told me that he often dealt with cases of alcoholism in Thimphu. Not to mention some of the issues that are inherent in any traditional culture, that stifling sense of conformity. I mean, what happens if you don’t want to be the same as everyone else? Or if you simply have to be different—if you’re gay, or a woman compelled to strive for a life beyond marriage and children?

But despite this, the evidence is incontrovertible—people here in Bhutan really do seem to be very happy indeed. Somehow, they’ve got it worked out. For now. One can only hope they’ll be able to keep hold of this sense of contentment as their nation firms its grip on the coat-tails of the modern world.

Sonam wanders nimbly down the mountain, barely seeming to notice the heavy photographic equipment balanced on his shoulders. ‘You want the secret to happiness?’ he says with a Cheshire Cat grin. ‘Yes? Are you ready? Here it is. Relax. Be happy with what you have. Don’t be greedy. And stop worrying about finding happiness!’ Then he laughs like a Viking and it echoes all the way to the valley floor.

Happy Trails

Every visitor to Bhutan must organise their trip through a local tour company and be accompanied by a guide. There is a US$200-per-night minimum spend (£130), but most of this cost is devoted to your travel arrangements and it’s not difficult to get an all-in-price of $200 per day including guide, accommodation and meals.

Onelife’s search for happiness was organised by Wind Horse Tours. This local travel company specialises in bespoke travel and organises adventures across Bhutan, from festival season trips to snow leopard-spotting in the Bhutanese mountains. For more details and to book, see www.windhorsetours.com

For a night’s assured happiness, visitors to Thimphu can stay at the Taj Tashi hotel. It’s the most luxurious place to rest your head in the city, and combines everything you’d expect from a modern hotel with a definable sense of Bhutanese tradition. To book, see www.tajhotels.com

Left page: the Tiger’s Nest monastery is the most sacred Buddhist site in Bhutan. This page from left: Lam Kado shares his words of wisdom; schoolboys tarry with a game of football in Paro.