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Mountain kingdom extraordinaire

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Bhutan: where marijuana grows on the roadides and life is measured in Gross National Happiness

MIKE GRENDY
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

THIMPHU, BHUTAN

After passing Mount Everest on the left, the Druk Air Airbus 319 weaves its way down a narrow mountain valley to land at Paro.

The few visitors on-board have little idea of what lies ahead: A 15th-century mad monk named Lama Drukpa Kuenley whose phallus is symbolized graphically on buildings to ward off evil spirits and/or promote fertility. A chain of luxurious yet "local" resorts surrounded by spectacular scenery. Muffins with chili, marijuana growing along the road being gathered as pig feed, countless stray dogs, itinerant road mend­ers breaking stones along the one-lane "highways", cliff-hugging monasteries, fortress, a benevolent king who last year abdicated in favour of democracy and the Gross National Happiness index.

Welcome to Bhutan, Himalayan mountain kingdom extraordinaire — "druk yul," the land of the thunder dragon. Tucked in between Tibet (China) to the north and India on the three other borders, Bhutan has a population of about 690,000. Some two-thirds are subsis­tence farmers, 80 per cent live at least an hour’s walk from a road and about half live more than a day’s walk from a road.

Bhutan opened its doors to tourists only in 1974. Although the annual limit of 2,000 visitors has been lifted, so far most of the year relatively few outsiders visit: it’s still considered a new and exotic destination.

“We want to preserve our environment, our culture,” said one government official. Bhutan is trying to avoid the uncontrolled tourism that brought undesirable influences to Nepal, a few Himalayan mountain ranges to the west.

So far, the strategy seems to be working. Visitors pay $200 US a day, which includes all accommodation and meals, taxes and entry fees, plus a guide and driver. That tends to keep out back­packers, but is quite reason­able by international travel standards.

All Bhutanese are encouraged to wear traditional clothes, and it’s compulsory for schools and government offices as well as on formal occasions.

A sign at the post office reads "Education for every girl and boy."
BHUTAN: An intriguing blend of past and present

FROM FI

"Bhutan is not an ordinary place," said the award-winning writer and Himalayan expert Stan Armington in his Lonely Planet Guide, Bhutan, should be required reading for anybody planning to visit the country, who is based in Kathmandu. "It has one foot in the past and one in the future."

The unique part, set in spectacular scenery (elevation ranges from 300 metres in the south to peaks topping 7000 metres in the north) with the prayer wheels, prayer flags and philosophy of the country's BuddhistGHzion, is what attracts most visitors.

The government encourages tourists to continue to wear traditional clothing every day and most do. The attire is compulsory in schools and government offices, and for formal occasions.

The men wear a gho, a long robe hoisted to the knee and held in place by a woven cloth belt (ferra) tied tightly around the waist. Long socks and usually modern footwear complete the outfit.

Women wear a kata, a brightly coloured four-length cloth that wraps around the body over a blouse, plus a short, open, jacket-like garment called a ghoapo. The women's wear flip-flops or modern footwear and occasionally you will see women chinc from under the knees of some of the more fashionable clothes.

However, you will want to wear good hiking footwear to visit many of the dzongs (fortresses/admistrative centres) and especially the monasteries like the famous Taktshang Goemba (Tiger's Nest) monastery, which clings to the cliffs at an altitude of 3000 metres—2000 metres above the Paro valley floor, which makes it a four-hour round trip hike.

At Punakha, an almost sub-tropical area with bananas, bougainvillea, jacaranda and prickly pear cactus, you walk half an hour through two small villages and fields and along irrigation channels to the Chimi Lhakhang monastery, built by Lama Drukpa Kuenzang (1455-1529), the so-called "mad, sadu" or "divine madman."

He gained notoriety through his outrageous—shocking, obscene, sexual, sur, insulting—behaviour: provoking people to discard their preconceptions about life and religion.

Children who go to the temple to receive a blessing from the sexually active saint, whose phallic staff adorns many buildings in the area to protect them from evil spirits and/or as a symbol of fertility (especially in Bhutan often have several versions). Children can enter the school, go to a monastery to learn to become monks or nuns.

Hotel accommodation also comes in several versions: from basic guest houses to the luxurious Amankora—five recently opened properties ranging from 34 rooms in Paro and 16 in Thimphu, the capital, down to eight at Punakha (where the main building is a restored 200-year-old farmhouse) and Gangtey in central Bhutan.

Amankora's all-inclusive rates start at a good day and if you stay seven days, also include a tailor-made itinerary, private transport with guide and driver and a spa treatment.

I was lucky enough to combine visits to four of the Amankora properties with a customized tour designed by Tshering Dorji, of Bhutan Sacred Tours (www.bhu
tan sacredtours.com). The hus
bond of a former student of mine, Dorji took care of all the details including my visa, tour operations and flight —arrangements that must be made by a travel agent or organisations like Amankora (www.amankora.com; toll-free at 1-800-331-900) on your behalf.

With up to five staff for every guest and thirty-two square-feet timbered rooms, Amankora has a differfent feel from most hotels.

"For example, while we do not have a formal reception or concierge desk," says general manager John Reck, "members of the lodge family can always be found in the Living Room or reached by phone.

"Chillies and cheese form part of the Bhutanese diet. Chilies are eaten as a vegetable rather than being used as a spice — Although one morning my muffins were laced with red chilli.

"You also notice countless stay dogs, especially in the towns and villages. They often lie on the roads, along with cows. Local people navigate the narrow winding roads with skill and, for a country with Asan/Indian influence, surprisingly good manners and infrequent honking. Peasants gather the marijuana that grows everywhere to feed their pigs."

"Runestone workers from India and Nepal live in very basic shacks along the roads they repair during the day. You often see women breaking stones with sledgehammers to provide road material."

Watch for black-faced langur monkeys by the side of the road, often near waterfalls. However, you'll probably see the takin, a cross between a pronghorn antelope and musk deer and the national animal, only in the mini-zoo in Thimphu.

The previous king, 54-year-old Jigme Singye Wanchuck, introduced a constitution and democracy to Bhutan last year — a move that worried many inhabitants who had become used to the benevolent monarchy in place since 1907. He also introduced the concept of a Gross National Happiness (instead of Product Index), to emphasize the importance of quality of life.

The first general election was held in March 2008, and the first joint sitting of the elected parliament in May.

The Druk Phuennam Tsego (Bhutan Peace and Happiness Party) won the elections by a narrow landslide against the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party). You can drive it straight from India. But most visitors fly in on the only carrier, Royal Bhutan Airlines’ Druk Air with two fairly new Airbus 320s — from either New Delhi or from better connections for most travellers, from Bangkok via Kolkata. Economy round trip starts at about $278.

Allow plenty of planning time especially if you plan to visit in spring or fall, which are the festival seasons. Government-controlled Bhutan tourism is still in its infancy and the bureaucratic wheels move slowly.

I didn’t need them but take earplugs as the dogs in Bhutan usually bark and howl at night: the Amankora resorts are quiet because they are far enough out of the centre of town. I did take a hike in the mountains of the country and had no problems (although I did sit in front). Altitude sickness affects some people. Take clothing layers depending on the time of year, temperatures can range from -6°C to 34°C.

Keep your bank receipt when you change money so you can change back when you leave the country: the rupee, the local currency, is worthless outside Bhutan.

To give you a feel for the country: visit the 2003 film Travellers and Magicians, a screezy set in Bhutan, which was made by the Bhutanese with the help of Australian financing.

Mike Creevy for the Calgary Herald

A woman at the market weighs chillies, which along with cheese, are a major part of the Bhutanese diet.

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