

The first glimpse

Bhutan, the writer thinks, is caught between the medieval, the mystical, and the modern

BY KAREN GREENSPAN

“Kuzuzangpo la” or, “how is your honorary body after long sleep?”

Our adorably handsome guide, Jamtsho, roughly translated this common Bhutanese greeting as he collected us from our hotel.

It was our first morning in Bhutan. My husband and I had signed up for ‘A Hiker’s Paradise’ – a group trip to Bhutan, only to learn two weeks before leaving that two of us comprised the entire group!

The tiny Buddhist nation of Bhutan is a developing country about the size of Switzerland, with a projected population of 733,004 in 2013. It is isolated by formidable geographic barriers – the Himalayas in the north and dense subtropical jungles in the south. For centuries, the few roads and difficult geography protected it from colonisation by foreign powers and, in more recent times, preserved its distinct culture and landscape from globalisation and modern development.

With two political giants for neighbours – China to the north and India to the south, Bhutan walks a tightrope as it maintains its unique character and sovereignty.

I landed on this destination simply as a means to experience the iconic Himalayas with the least amount of altitude sickness, never before having travelled to Asia and knowing nothing about Himalayan Buddhism.

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We were staying at a one-of-a-kind, Bhutanese-style, refined property with architecture characteristic of traditional Bhutanese structures – notably ornate wood carving and detailed iconographic painting. Mystical flute music was piped into the exquisitely decorated and generously sized public areas while fine cuisine using ingredients from the organic greenhouse garden was served in the restaurant. The bar, teahouse, spa and fitness facilities, meditation room, along with an in-house Buddhist shrine room and monk completed the property’s amenities.

The large picture windows of our enchanting room beckoned

■ A young girl in Kyichu, Paro



Above: (1) Kyichu Lhakhang (2) A farmer at work in Paro (3) A temple in Bhutan is typically surrounded by small prayer wheels built into the wall

Centre spread: Women take a breather. Women in Bhutan work alongside men in the fields

us outside to muse over a series of graceful 30-foot-tall, white prayer flags on vertical poles fluttering in the wind. Beyond them stood a dark, rugged rocky mountainside, where faraway, isolated homes seemed to cling to the most unlikely perches.

We headed out from the hotel to visit Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the two temples in Bhutan built by Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century, a committed convert to Buddhism. The king initiated an ambitious temple-building project to subdue a giant ogress who was thought to be impeding the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet.

It is told that he pledged to build 108 temples in a single day

to pin down the giant body of the demoness thought to be sprawling supine, across greater Tibet. Each temple, located throughout Tibet and Bhutan, was positioned to restrain a specific body part. Kyichu is reputed to hold down her left foot.

A family of mourners sat together on the flagstones of the temple courtyard preparing a plate of food they would bring into the temple to offer to their deceased relative at mealtime. They would sit in the temple with the uneaten plate of food for an appropriate length of time and then feed it to the ever-growing population of stray dogs.

I learned that this ritual would be performed three times a day for forty-nine days to support the deceased through the intermediate period of judgment (*bardo*) that would determine the realm of his or her next incarnation. For the Bhutanese, it is extremely



important to usher one's relatives toward a 'good rebirth'.

After removing our dusty hiking boots at the doorway, we entered the dimly lit temple – heavy with the scent of incense, butter lamps, and old fabric and books. I watched intently as villagers entered the intimate space making the requisite three prostrations – first to the master lama and then three to the Buddha.

The monks had just finished their 'tea break' and began blowing the five-foot-long horns, beating the drums with long hooked sticks, and chanting prayers. Jamtsho explained that in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the drum represents wisdom and the hooked drumstick signifies compassion. Each drumbeat unites wisdom with compassion – creating self-arising awareness in the listener.

Every time they started a new prayer, the horn-blowing would recommence. The ancient sounds, though completely foreign, struck a resonant chord within me.

Jamtsho informed us that this was one of the 'auspicious' days of the month, so extra prayers and special offerings were added to the usual regimen. He referred to the Bhutanese as a 'superstitious people', as he further explained that the 4th, 8th, 15th, and 30th days of each month are deemed auspicious.

According to their flexible calendar system, astrologers have



The cremation platform behind Kyichu Lhakhang

the discretion of adding or deleting days and/or months to the calendar year for the sake of a successful outcome.

My senses were overwhelmed with the many primal sounds, smells, and sights as I first encountered the mysterious universe of a Himalayan Buddhist temple with its darkened interior housing the exotic golden statues of the serene Buddha, the beloved saint – Guru Rinpoche, and an evocative Avalokitesvara – Deity of Infinite Compassion, rendered with eleven heads and one thousand arms with an eye engraved on each hand to accomplish the endless task of liberating all beings from suffering.

The story is told that Avalokitesvara couldn't fully

comprehend the needs of the suffering multitudes, so his head cracked into eleven pieces to better hear and comprehend their cries. Then grasping the magnitude of his job, he was so overwhelmed that Amitabha Buddha invested him with one thousand arms and eyes to help him reach out to all who suffer.

The flood of daylight overwhelmed our eyes as we re-entered the outside world. They gradually adjusted to more mundane sights as we walked back to the hotel along a farm road.

Most paths are farm roads as some 60 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture. Roosters crowed a serenade as we passed prematurely wrinkled and weathered old men and women hauling heavy loads of firewood on their backs. A younger couple languidly prodded their cow toward home

while little children with cute, rosy faces and runny noses engaged us while laughing and running.

"Kuzuzangpo la" – I practised letting the strange, lilting phrase roll off my tongue as I repeated the greeting to everyone we passed. They responded pleasantly without seeming to be the least bit impressed or surprised.

We continued our walk and I asked Jamtsho about his family. I could hear the monks had renewed their horn-blowing and drumming faintly in the distance. Jamtsho explained that his two sisters were both married to the same high lama who is a reincarnation of a previous high lama. This simple landscape and earnest discussion were only interrupted by an occasional cell phone call – from our guide's travel office or his new bride.

I found myself in this faraway place – suspended between the medieval and the modern, connected by the thread of mystical belief, challenging much of what I knew – or thought I knew. ■■■



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Greenspan spent many years performing and teaching international and Israeli folk dance.



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