





Remote. Landlocked between China and India. Least industrialised, but bestowed with incredible cultural riches. The country is home to 8,00,000 happy citizens, proudly upholding their maverick King's unconventional patent metric, Gross National Happiness. Ecstasy is guaranteed, even before setting foot into the exotic Kingdom of Bhutan.

MYSTICALLY MODERN

Adrenaline kicks in as the aircraft glides precariously close to harsh 18,000ft mountain peaks and descends rapidly onto the almost-hidden runway of Paro international airport. The unpretentious Buddhist temple-style airport sets the stage for a quaint adventure in The Land of the Thunder Dragon. A recommended starting point is the largest city and capital, Thimphu. Hairpin bends turn powerless as

Showing the way
to a green planet

Bhutan

Named after a powerful mythical creature, shrouded in ancient Buddhist mythology and iconographed by dreamy *dzongs*, Bhutan is among the world's top 10 biodiversity hotspots and the only carbon-negative country on the planet.

words // Punita Malhotra



The 169 ft tall bronze statue of Lord Buddha Dordenma in Thimphu

eyes hook to the rugged brown mountains skyline, softened by gentle flow of the relentless Raidak under a cloudless blue umbrella.

The city is an unexpected medley of mystic and modern. From hand-signalling traffic policemen and timber-trimmed Bhutanese houses to men in knee-length *gho* and women in ankle-length *kira*, culture continues to be championed conscientiously all

over. Archery is a much-loved national sport, but shooting cue ball at snooker bars is gaining momentum. Spinning the prayer wheel is second habit, as is smartphone browsing. Traditional emma datshi (stir-fried chilli peppers cooked with cheese or butter) with red rice, jasha maroo (spicy chicken), phaksha paa (meat with red chilli) and momos (meat stuffed dumplings) make for a special meal, but

the demand for new-age cafes and international food joints is rising. The Kuenselphodrang Nature Park with its 169 ft bronze Buddha Dordenma statue is a favourite retreat. So is the Clock Tower Square sprinkled with shopping outlets, restaurants and amphitheatre seating...youth hangout for hip-hop dancing, live shows, fund-raisers and sports events. Thimphu is embracing the new, without letting go of the old.

Local INSIGHTS



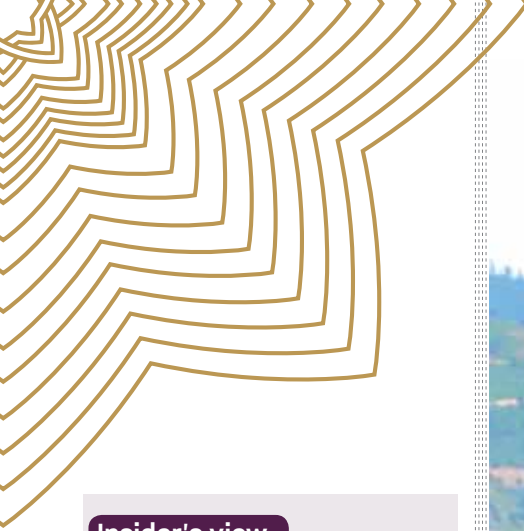
BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT

As per the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), Bhutan falls under one of the ten global biodiversity 'hotspots'. This is because its location gives it access to an incredible range of habitat, from rainforests to alpine meadows, which encourages the growth of diverse plant and animal species.



ADVENTURE SEEKERS

From kayaking and rafting on the untamed rivers fed by the glacial melt to cycling the lesser-known regions, or spotting jungle life in Manas Royal National Park, outdoor activities are aplenty. The Panbang river in Bhutan also offers some thrilling and remote camping, river rafting and fly-fishing options.



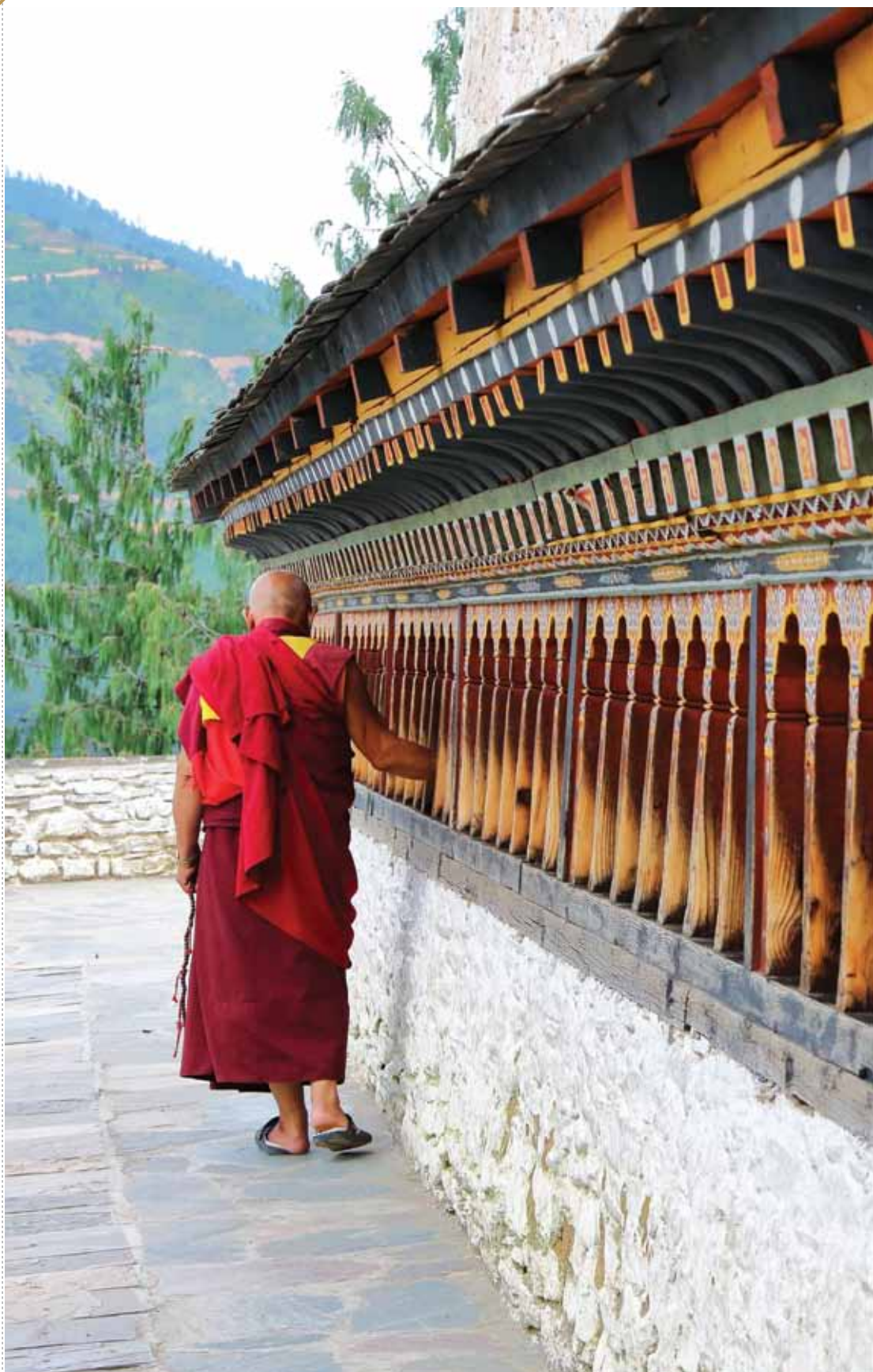
Insider's view



Ritu Sinha

Human Resources

“A visit to Bhutan is an experience unlike any other. It goes much beyond its striking natural beauty and ancient culture. It is like discovering a whole new way of life. The people sparkle with happiness and warmth, and the good vibes are infectious. One must plan a trek to Taktsang Monastery popularly known as Tiger’s Nest which clings to a cliff, a dizzying 900m above Paro Valley’s lush rice fields. Spring is the ideal time to visit Bhutan when you can also witness the masked dance between gods and demons during the Paro Tshechu Festival.”



Prayer wheels at Lhakhang Changangkha, a 12th century monastery in Thimphu



White-washed facades of Dzongs are adorned with glorious frescoes and elaborate carvings of thunderbolts with colourful clouds, dragons and lotuses.

The National Textile Museum gives insight into how Bhutan is steadfastly preserving its art heritage. Exhibits include woven fabric with applique and embroidery of nature motifs, mandalas and mythical creatures. National Institute for Zorig Chusum showcases handicrafts like brass Buddha figurines, colourful papier-mâché masks and Thimphu's famous handmade paper. Priceless souvenirs effectively promoting the thriving eco-tourism.

An unmissable highlight is Tashichho Dzong (fortress of the glorious religion). Its imposing facade of white walls, red tapered roofs, symmetrical windows and fine, colourful woodwork is a sight in itself. The dzong houses the throne room and government offices that drive progressive initiatives like timber export ban, hydroelectric projects, subsidies for LED lighting, free electricity to discourage use of wood fuel and electric transport. Recently, in a vigorous afforestation programme, 108,000 saplings were planted to celebrate the birth of the new prince. On the agenda are ambitious pledges for a paperless government, 100% organic agriculture and a waste-free environment. The Kingdom of the Clouds is demonstrating the way to a green world and everyone is noticing.

HEAVENLY ZEN

Mission Bhutan is incomplete without the quintessential dzong experience. Since ancient times, these architectural marvels, often perched on cliff-sides or at confluence of rivers, have functioned as fortresses, monasteries and administrative headquarters. Impressive construction using hundreds of wooden planks and no nails. Circuitous and slow routes become rewarding journeys at the sight of white-washed facades adorned with glorious frescoes and elaborate carving of thunderbolts with colourful clouds, dragons and lotuses. In the hallowed monastic spaces, air is heavy with billowing incense, groups of red-robed monks chant, blow slender trumpets and perform masked dances. Fact and fantasy merge here, and legends of reincarnation and levitation, demons and deities, Yeti and Takin seem true, at least momentarily. This religious faith, guarded lovingly, is the eternal guiding light for society and governance.

Every dzong drips zen, and each has its distinctive features. Of special mention is Trongsa Dzong (190 km from Thimphu), a sprawling ancestral home of the Royal Family, located in a misty forested gorge boasting breathtaking views of the Mangde River. Another must-see is the Punakha Dzong in Bhutan's winter



ESSENTIALS

COUNTRY
Bhutan

LANGUAGES
Dzongkha and
English

CURRENCY
Indian Rupee
and Bhutanese
Ngultrum

TEMPERATURE
20°C (max),
11°C (min)

capital, Punakha (83 km from Thimphu). Surrounded by lush forests between two rivers, it is accessed by crossing the lovely Bazam Bridge.

The dzong pilgrimage finale (on every Bhutan traveller's wishlist) is Tiger's Nest (60 km from Thimphu). This pristine white monument with golden pinnacles is the most photographed site in the country, and for good reason. Its location—clinging mysteriously to a cliff side 3,000 feet above the Paro Valley floor and its lineage—Guru Rinpoche (credited with introducing Buddhism in the nation) is said to have established the monastery in the 8th century by reaching the top on a flying

magic tiger. A laborious 3-4 hour walk up a narrow path leads a view gratifying enough to convert any exercise-shirker into a hiking aficionado.

EARTHLY REVERENCE

Bhutan is the unblemished dream destination of every die-hard nature lover. Contoured rice terraces and bountiful orchards that bask in the warm sunshine. Pure glacial peaks, towering mountain ranges and icy-blue lakes that spell timelessness. And gushing green rivers that instill an intense craving for unfettered living. The pristine serenity soothes the core of one's being and that Bhutanese-Buddhist reverence for nature unconsciously seeps into the soul.

It is this very sentiment that has empowered the country to press forth a constitution mandate for a minimum of 60 per cent land to remain under forest cover (right now that number is 75 per cent). Result? Bhutan is the only carbon-negative nation on the planet, with its forests absorbing over 6 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, four times more than what it emits. Abundant flora and fauna, including the rare blue poppy and native wildlife like royal Bengal tigers, snow leopards, yak, one-horned rhino and elephants, all roam free in the country's 5 million acre corridor of protected areas. Bhutan also generates clean renewable electricity from its fast-moving streams for export (a whopping 70 per cent is sold to India). Another significant gift to the world.

Some of the world's most stunning hiking trails wait to be discovered at the dreamy Phobjikha Valley or Gangtey (130 km from Thimphu). It is a wonderland of semi-tropical, pine-forested and alpine landscapes overflowing with vibrant rhododendron, blooming wildflowers and dwarf bamboos. The area is also famous for hundreds of rare, migratory black-necked cranes during winter season.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Visiting an unusual land like Bhutan calls for an open mind and sensitive choices. Travellers can encourage sustainable tourism by staying in log cabins or home stays, picking local guides and shopping for genuine handicrafts. This is one destination that deserves to remain exclusive. After all, it is the last Shangri-La. ✨

Bhutan is renowned for its pure glacial peaks, towering mountain ranges and icy-blue lakes that spell timelessness.



The Punakha Dzong Monastery, where all of Bhutan's kings have been crowned