

Bhutan

September-October 2023



This was a trip taken with Renaissance Tours. The leader, Dr Alex McKay, is a Fellow of the Royal Adriatic Society in London. He is the author of a number of books on Himalayan history and culture his PhD is from the London University School of Oriental and African Studies. He has had teaching and research positions at London University and at Leiden.





Preface

The days prior to heading off have been subsumed in reading about Bhutan, about checking weather conditions in Thimphu and about final packing.

Predictably, historians of Bhutan, in English writing at least, have reached for European terminology in periodisation of Bhutan's story, and there are clearly parallels. The rise of religious establishments, for example, clearly match the monastic houses of Europe and the workforces attached to those centres (draap) are comparable to serfs. And, of course, the Hidden Lands that Tibetan Holy Men ran to (partially to avoid the disturbing presence of the Mongols, partly in search of God, Gold and Glory) have resonance in the European quest for empire.

Interesting is the scheming politics behind the so-called trulku method of determining the rightful heir, the vague way people can either claim or be said to be the rebirth of an earlier person. It sure leaves much ambiguity and considerable potential for controversy.

Day 1: Saturday 23rd September 2023

Our flight to Bangkok is on Thai Airways International TG476, a Boeing 777-300ER, leaving Sydney at 10.00am and arriving at Bangkok at 16.20. Our hotel is the Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel, right next to the airport. Not that we are staying there for long!

Our day began at 4.50am. We both woke before the alarm and it did not take us long to do the final packing before the requisite house check. Not long afterwards, we were carrying our bags down the stairs and walking to the station. We were farewelled by Noisy Friarbirds and welcomed to Engadine station by a Channel-billed Cuckoo.

The train was on time. The changeover at Wolli Creek was smooth. Soon we were at the airport and not long after that our check in luggage was on its way to the conveyor belts and, hopefully, on to Bangkok.

Our seats are 15D and 15G. Our flight leaves from gate 26 (the only one that requires a bus to the plane) and, well, that just left us to go through immigration (now automated) and baggage search. I had to unpack mine for a second search as the scanners couldn't see everything. It cheers me up that they can't! Perhaps surveillance is not so all-encompassing as we fear.

Thai business lounge at Sydney is actually the Air New Zealand lounge, near gate 60, and the walk to the gate is a good 15 minutes. We look south and enjoy a quiet breakfast, having had quite a trek through many-a-shop and wishing I could still have been a shareholder in SYD instead of having the company privatised under me.

The breakfast was average, the red wine, a NZ Syrah, was rough and barely drinkable. The café latte was excellent. And at least we had a retreat.

We then hiked back to our gate, gate 26. That's where the chaos began. Gate 26 is a link to a bus service to planes that don't have a docking bay. For some reason there were ten flights being shifted through the same gate in that hour and it was bedlam. The queues were mixed up, there was no separation of flights or economy/business and the acoustics were poor. Signage did not match the actual processing and passengers were angry. In the midst of this the frontline staff had to cop it and cope. They did that with extreme grace and I especially mention Dilo, the girl who ensured that Faye and I were cared for. There's a lot to be said for using a walking stick. I only wished I could have used it on that self-entitled man who pushed right past the staff, stormed to the front of the queue and barged on down beyond the rest of the passengers. He is on our flight, also in Business Class, and he won't get to Bangkok any quicker for his temper tantrum.

I wonder if this chaos is the result of Qantas hoarding booking slots, or whether Sydney Airports management since it was taken over is being run poorly or is it that this is day 1 of the school holidays. It was not a good look. Whatever, our 10.00am flight, due to board at 9.10, did not move until 10.45 and did not take off until 10.55.

Having eventually been seated, having had our bubbly, we ordered our meals. The main course for the first serving was roast duck in red curry, served with jasmine rice, sautéed green beans with garlic and Thai omelette. The second serving main meal was stir-fried mee sua with chicken strips.

I then settled into watch “At Eternity’s Gate”, a movie about Vincent Van Gogh, while my meal arrived. A glass of orange juice, some nuts, then a rock melon and prosciutto skewer, followed by a seared tuna tartare with Japanese sesame dressing in a cucumber cup. Thence came smoked salmon with apple-fennel remoulade, cherry tomatoes and spring onion curls. Oh, and two glasses of white wine out of France.

By the time that main meal had arrived, Van Gogh and Gauguin were deeply in conversation about art, Gauguin had left, Van Gogh had cut off his ear and a lifetime of struggling with his demons had begun. Indeed, the movie came to its climax, the death of Van Gogh, as I consumed the cheese platter, the glass of port and the coffee with an orange almond cake. As the coffee went down, so, too, did Van Gogh.

After lunch I took the chance to lie down, stretch out, close my eyes and listen to some music before turning to an audiobook on the life of Shakespeare by Hesketh Pierson. It was an hour worth the time, going way beyond a mere biography and exploring both Shakespeare’s poetry and his growth as a playwright.

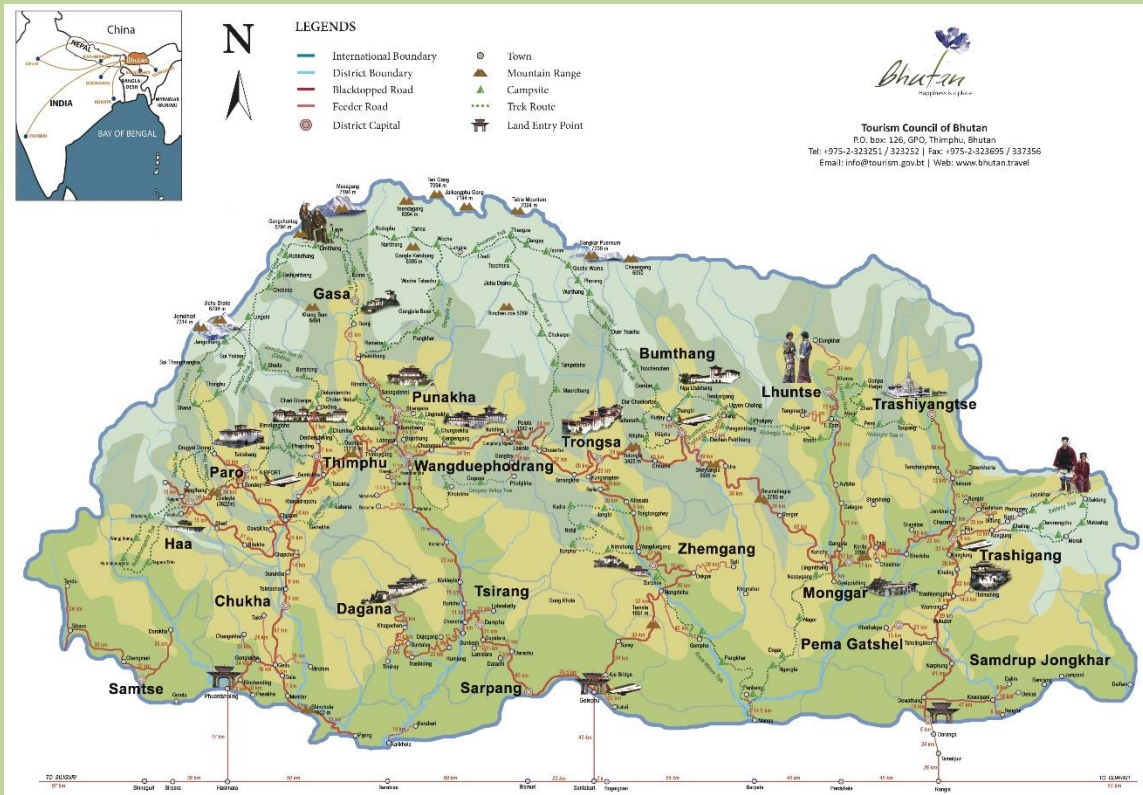
Not too long afterwards it was time for our “second serving”. That’s the one that centred on Mee Sus. It began with seasonal fruit, came with a bread roll and finished with apple crumble cake with “Crème Anglaise”. I wonder why English cream requires translation into French. Well, it really is just a custard.

We were then held up coming into Bangkok. There had been torrential rain and we were put into a holding pattern, but it did not take long to get off the plane, go through immigration, pick up our bags and head for the hotel. That, indeed, was the tricky bit. Thankfully, when we went out at gate 4, I spied the Novotel shuttle bus. We hopped on, met two others from our party on that bus and were soon in our hotel.

Alex was there to meet us, to ensure we were setting alarms for 2.00am and to record our room numbers (1257).

And that left us to shower, change, charge equipment and head to bed.

Day 2: Sunday 24th September 2023



A summary: Bangkok – Thimphu

2.30am We check out of the hotel and depart by hotel shuttle to the airport where we check in for Drukair flight KB 153 to Paro, Bhutan.

The flight departs on KB 153 and arrives in Paro before we transfer to Bhutan's capital, Thimphu¹, via Tamchog Lhakang, a distance of a mere 55km but scheduled to take 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Leading us to enjoy lunch at the local restaurant before checking into the Namgay Heritage hotel, finally stopping and resting before a 5.00pm welcome briefing and dinner at the hotel!

Our hotel that evening is the Namgay Heritage Hotel, tel 61 975 2 337 113

As it transpired:



¹ Thimphu (/tɪmˈpuː/; Dzongkha: ཐིམ་ཕུག [tʰim˧.pʰu˧]) is the capital and largest city of Bhutan. It is situated in the western central part of Bhutan, and the surrounding valley is one of Bhutan's dzongkhags, the Thimphu District. The ancient capital city of Punakha was replaced by Thimphu as capital in 1955, and in 1961 Thimphu was declared as the capital of the Kingdom of Bhutan by the 3rd Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck.

The city extends in a north–south direction on the west bank of the valley formed by the Wang Chhu, which flows out into India as the Raidāk River. Thimphu is the fifth highest capital in the world by altitude and ranges in altitude from 2,248 metres (7,375 feet) to 2,648 metres (8,688 feet. Unusually for a capital city, Thimphu does not have its own airport, instead relying on the Paro Airport (connected by road some 52 kilometres (32 miles) away).



The landing at Paro airport is said to be the most dangerous in the world!² Well, perhaps, but. I can definitely say that the approach, down the valley, did make our Airbus feel a touch close to the edges of the gorge. We were in a whiteout of low cloud for much of the approach, with possibly no more than 20 metres visibility. Even the wing tip was a ghostly suggestion of itself. But when we entered that gorge, those of us who had never flown in must have all issued just a little gasp.



² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6PimS7dtW8>

It was raining. Of course, it was. We were greeted with “welcome to happy rainy day”. Believe it or not, it actually is Blessed Rainy Day and a national holiday. Festival time!

Departure from Bangkok was smooth. We were up at 2.00, on the bus at 3.00, allocated tickets for the flight (Faye in 15a and mine in 16a. Yes, we both had window seats. The plane had a three/three configuration. It was an Airbus 319. Oh, we also had breakfast.

But let us now arrive, through the gap, onto the runway, with an amazingly smooth landing. Immigration queues were long, but I have seen longer in many places. In any case, the luggage took its time. Soon afterwards, we were loaded into a minibus and on our way. Paro is not truly a large town, so we were soon out into the countryside. And the distance in time to Thimphu is much less than suggested.



We had one stop on the way. The old iron bridge (Tamchog Lhakhang), built in the 14th century by the Tibetan saint Thangthong Gyalpo, was one of many he built but it was destroyed in a flood in 1969 and restored in 2005. The rain had eased. We could explore it, see the cave where he meditated, run our hands around the prayer wheels and admire the wild, healthy marijuana.





By 9.00am we had arrived at our hotel, through the expanding town of Thimphu, had rooms allocated and had our briefing about the trip. Our room is 304. We then had free time until lunch, time to settle into our room, unpack, charge devices and stop. Outside, even the weather is celebrating Blessed Rainy Day!



Lunch was delicious. We had it in the hotel and it was buffet, with a Chinese slant. Noting the Buddhist predilection for vegetarian food, it was of interest that we had quite a bit of meat involving chicken and fish.

After lunch we headed off as a group to the Changangkha Lakhang, a monastery dedicated to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. It was actually founded in the 13th century and long predate the creation of Bhutan and linked more to Nyima, one of the sons of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo who first introduced the Drukpa Kagyu tradition of Buddhism to Bhutan. The lower level has two spaces. One is for regular worship of the Buddha, and one is a closed space dedicated to more esoteric tantric forces. We could not enter that. Upstairs is the space dedicated to the founder of Bhutan.

We were not allowed to take photos inside the actual temple, but we certainly had more than enough time to look around. I did wish I could have photographed the butter lamps/candles, coloured in the most amazing patterns.





We then stopped off at a market. It was for produce and it was in a new space that has been open just a few weeks. You could smell the new timber. The fruit looked lovely too, but I am not sure how Faye felt when market stalls enabled you to scan a QR code to discover the correct amount to pay.

It's a bit early to make generic comments so I'll merely now report that Sydney FC defeated Melbourne City 2-1 in the knockout semi this afternoon.

And once again we dined in. We are slowly getting to know our fellow travellers.

Reflections

Hi folks

It is Blessed Rainy Day in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Truly. Look it up. And so it proved. Having been put into a 45 minute holding circuit coming into Bangkok yesterday because of torrential rain, we face a total white out coming into Bhutan this morning, with even the wing tips but a blurry memory.

Which is just as well, for when our Airbus 319 came through the narrow valley and visibility emerged, I swear that that once blurry wingtip was brushing the side of the mountain. This is not for a faint-hearted pilot!

The sharp turn into the runway was then a breeze, the landing smooth and the reputation of Paro as being one of the most difficult landings was secured. It was a real thrill.

And it was indeed raining!

We have a minibus here, are being driven by a careful driver, guided by a pleasant Bhutanese (Drakpa) and in the hands of an academic out of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. I like a man with a PhD in history and an interest in Buddhism, even if his intellectual home is buried in the most imperial of Britain's learned establishments.

We drove immediately to the capital, Thimphu, stopping en route to admire the famous "iron bridge" of medieval times (those of us who have trekked Nepal will remember many scarier bridges), prayed with the prayer wheels and resisted the marijuana growing wild all around us.

We had the rest of the day in Thimphu, visiting one of Bhutan's most important temples, checking out a market, noting that there is an electric charging station in town (surely, we can do better) and eating.

Oh, it's time for dinner. And if this makes no sense it is because we were up at 2.00am

Tomorrow is festival time!





Day 3: Monday, 25th September 2023



A summary: Thimphu

This morning, experience one of the most popular dance festivals in Bhutan, the thrilling annual Thimphu Tshechu³. Tshechu commemorates Guru Rinpoche, who came to Bhutan around the 8th century and brought Buddhism to the country. For a few days, monks and

³ A tshechu (Dzongkha: མཆོད་འཇུག་, literally "day ten") is any of the annual religious Bhutanese festivals held in each district or dzongkhag of Bhutan on the tenth day of a month of the lunar Tibetan calendar. The month depends on the place. Tshechus are religious festivals of the Drukpa Lineage of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tshechus are large social gatherings, which perform the function of social bonding among people of remote and spread-out villages. Large markets also congregate at the fair locations, leading to brisk commerce. The Thimphu tshechu and the Paro tshechu are among the biggest of the tshechus in terms of participation and audience. They are related to traditions in other branches of Himalayan Buddhism, many of which have been banned in Tibet.

The focal point of the tshechus are Cham dances. These costumed, masked dances typically are moral vignettes, or based on incidents from the life of the 9th century Nyingma teacher Padmasambhava and other saints.

laymen perform masked sacred dances and rituals in elaborate silk costumes under sounds of trumpets, cymbals and flutes. Dances and costumes have survived unchanged as any changes in rituals would be considered sacrilege. Devotees travel from across the country to witness these colourful masked dances, receive blessings and celebrate. Tshechu is also an annual social gathering for the Bhutanese and a special occasion to wear their most refined costume.

The Thimphu Festival is performed in the majestic Tashichho Dzong⁴, an impressive fortress-monastery that now houses the secretariat building and throne room of HM King Jigme Khesar, the 5th Dragon King of Bhutan, as well as various government offices.

Dzongs are large fortress-monasteries which dominate every major town in Bhutan. They are the administrative and religious centres of the district and were once the mainstay of that district's defences against the invading Tibetans.

After lunch, enjoy a tour of Thimphu including Norzim Lam⁵ and the 51-metre-tall statue of Buddha Dordenma⁶ sitting up on a hilltop overlooking the city.



⁴ Tashichho Dzong (Dzongkha: བཟུ་ཤིས་ཚུགས་ཐོང་) is a Buddhist monastery and fortress on the northern edge of the city of Thimphu in Bhutan, on the western bank of the Wang Chu. It has traditionally been the seat of the Druk Desi (or "Deb Raja"), the head of Bhutan's civil government, an office which has been combined with the kingship since the creation of the monarchy in 1907, and summer capital of the country. In old British documents, it is known as Tassisudon.

⁵ Norzin Lam is Thimphu city's main artery, one lined with all manner of local craft shops and stalls, along with larger shopping centres. Expect to find anything from art work and handicrafts to clothing, carpets, books, woven and wood items.

⁶ Great Buddha Dordenma is a gigantic Shakyamuni Buddha statue in the mountains of Bhutan celebrating the 60th anniversary of fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The statue houses over one hundred thousand smaller Buddha statues, each of which, like the Great Buddha Dordenma itself, are made of bronze and gilded in gold.

As it transpired:

Why do I feel like we are following in the footsteps of Zhabdrung, chased as he was by the Tibetan army, arrows hitting the saddle of his steward's horse, surviving and eventually triumphant when Bhutanese forces not only defeated the invaders, but killed their general Laguney and removed "his organs", offering them to the protective deities! Apparently Laguney's head was still hanging in Cheri in the 18th century. No wonder that Zhabdrung, with his magical powers and the help of the Drukpa, the support of a smallpox epidemic amongst the invaders and pure luck could proclaim that "I am the eliminator of deviant incarnations". This is his valley, his power base and the core of what would become Bhutan.



How much of this is reflected in the dances today, I do not know. They were stylised dances and they no doubt were immediately recognisable to locals but outside our own cultural experience.

The tshechu is religious, is also closely connected to Guru Rinpoche and is heavily based on the Cham dances, complete with costumed, masked performers. They illustrate Buddhist teachings or celebrated incidents in the life of Rinpoche and other notables, and they come with Astaras (clowns or jesters) who are there to entertain, to entrance evil forces and to prevent them from causing harm during the festival.





The place was packed! We had no way of finding a seat amongst all this humanity and it was often hard to get even a good view, but the music and the dancing were mesmeric and somehow, we were all thoroughly entertained. I shot a lot of film.



Equally interesting was the crowd, a crowd that was pouring in all day, a crowd that dressed itself up for the occasion and a crowd of genuine good spirits. It was also a crowd of individuals who wanted to be photographed and many were taking pictures of themselves. Men and women, boys and girls, young and old, had gone out of their way for this event. This was a festival not for tourists. It was their own!







We escaped just before midday which no doubt gave relief to the many waiting to be let in. At least a few more could come in. We then headed to lunch in a local restaurant, and

it was delicious. It was spicier and, though not vegetarian, more traditional Bhutanese than other meals to date.

After lunch and a quick return to the hotel we went to the home of Karma Phuntsho, the author of “The History of Bhutan”. Now that book is long and tedious even though it is packed with information. He is anything but. He was self-effacing, erudite, precise, knowledgeable and charming and I could listen to him for hours. He covered so much about modern Bhutan. Too much to attempt to summarise.



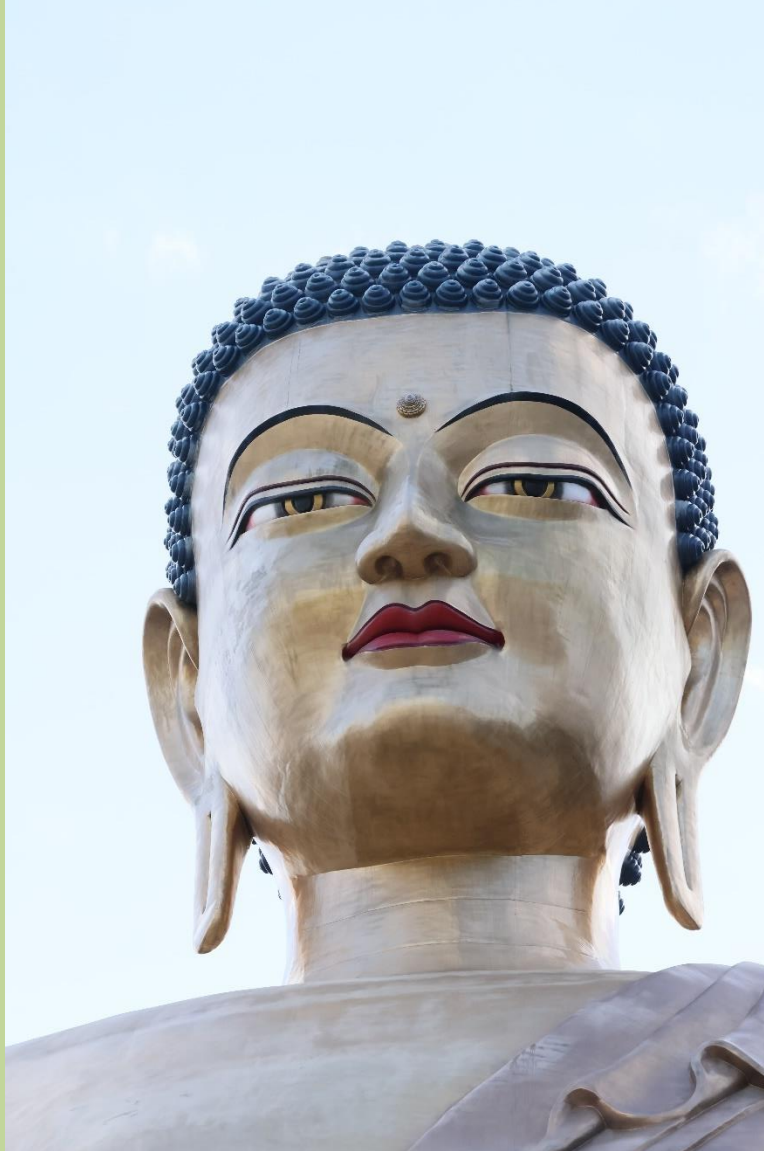
I will note one observation he made relating to the spiritual life in Bhutan. He noted that so much of the beliefs and practices go way back beyond Buddhism, that the love of nature is rooted in those earlier experiences and that these old local deities and spirits are there still. The arrival of Buddhism sat over the top, absorbed them, incorporated them and left a rich legacy. He also noted that rapid modernisation is putting a strain on those old practices.

When asked about the National Happiness Index he also showed a healthy scepticism, pointing out that Bhutan regularly came in 80 or lower in national figures, that Scandinavian countries regularly came at the top and that the high emigration of Bhutanese to other countries (especially, apparently, to Australia) belies the myth that all is rosy in Bhutan.

Later, Faye managed to find out that he shared rooms, while at Oxford, with the current king of Bhutan. She also managed to find out that the two are not that close politically.

And that left us with a visit to the new Buddha, sitting high up on a ridge in splendid gold leaf, glowing in the afternoon sunshine. Inside, despite a nod to Bhutanese and Tibetan traditions, this was more traditional of SE Asian Mahayana Buddhism. The money came from a rich Singapore gentleman. It will become part of the religious tour circuit.





Day 4: Tuesday, 26 September ·8:00am – 4:00pm

A summary: Thimphu – Bumthang⁷

By 6.00am we are advised to place our luggage outside our rooms for collection by porters

By 7.00am we are to transfer by coach to the Paro airport, another drive of 65km but probably 1 hour and thirty minutes. We then check in to Drukair flight KB 10 to Jakar (Bumthang). The flight is scheduled to leave at 9.55 and arrive at 10.30am where we will transfer to Tamshing Llakhang⁸, a major Nyingma⁹ monastery with lots of Bhutanese paintings. It's central to the work of Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), a renowned "Treasure Finder"

Of interest is how the Nyingma school also has an important tradition of discovering and revealing "hidden treasure texts" called Termas, which allows the treasure discoverers or tertöns to reveal new timely scriptures.

At 1.00pm we are eating at a local restaurant. Before continuing to Jambey Lhakhang¹⁰, one of the oldest temples in Bhutan.

⁷ Bumthang District (Dzongkha: འུམ་ཐང་རྫོང་ཁག་; Wylie: Bum-thang rzung-khag) is one of the 20 dzongkhag (districts) comprising Bhutan. It is the most historic dzongkhag if the number of ancient temples and sacred sites is counted. Bumthang consists of the four mountain valleys of Ura, Chumey, Tang and Choekhor ("Bumthang"), although occasionally the entire district is referred to as Bumthang Valley.

Bumthang directly translates as "beautiful field" – thang means field or flat place, and bum is said be an abbreviation of either bumpa (a vessel for holy water, thus describing the shape and nature of the valley), or simply bum ("girl," indicating this is the valley of beautiful girls). The name is said to have arisen after the construction of Jambay Lhakhang.

⁸ Tamzhing Lhündrup Monastery (Wylie: gdam zhing lhun grub chos gling) in Bumthang District in central Bhutan is the most important Nyingma gumpa in Bhutan. Its temple and monastery are remarkable for their direct connection to the Bhutanese tertön and saint, Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) and his tulkus. It is now the seat of Sungtrul Rinpoche, the current speech incarnation of Pema Lingpa.

Tamzhing consists of a deteriorating temple and a cramped vihara. It supports a body of over 95 Buddhist monks. In March 2012, the monastery was submitted for inscription on the list of World Heritage Sites; it currently resides on the tentative list.

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyingma>

¹⁰ The Jampa Temple (Tibetan: རྩམས་པ་ཆེ་ཁང་, Wylie: byams pa, THL Jampé Lhakhang) or Temple of Maitreya is located in Bumthang (Jakar) in Bhutan, and is said to be one of the 108 temples built by Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo in 659 CE on a single day, to pin down an ogress to earth forever.

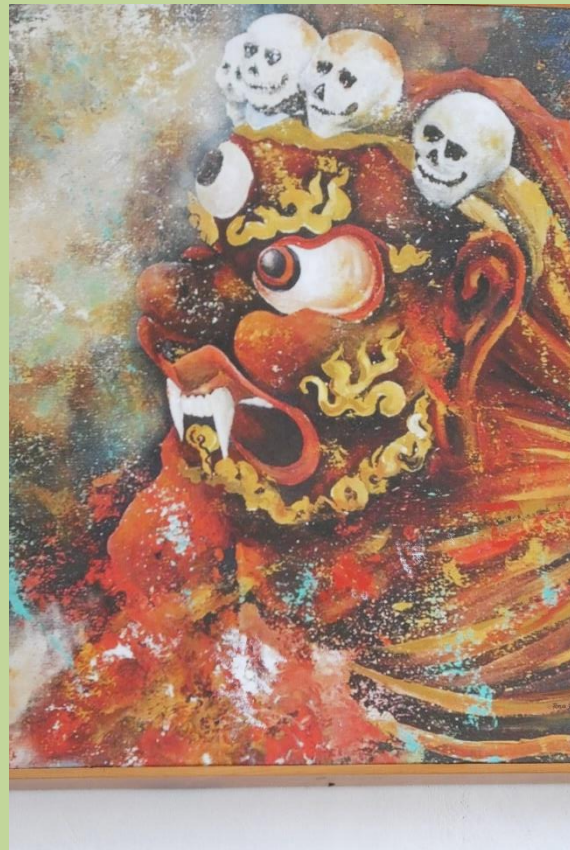
It was divined that the supine demoness was causing obstruction to the spread of Buddhism, and temples were constructed on her body parts that spread across Tibet, Bhutan and the borderlands. The best known of these temples are Jokhang in Lhasa, Kichu in Paro, Bhutan and Jambay Lhakhang in Bumthang District, Bhutan.

As it transpired:

All went exceedingly smoothly from wake up to loading on the bus, although paying for the wheat beer and two cups of tea pressed the skills of the hotel staff in finding the right change. They managed us. I am not sure how others went.

The return drive to Paro also went smoothly and as luck would have it, we sat on the side that revealed the opposite view to the drive up. Today, the sun shone! It revealed steep sided rocky slopes that could not grow tree cover but was instead low shrubs. No doubt they were sources of herbs, both edible and medicinal.





Once we arrived at the airport that, too, went smoothly, or at least it did for me. We both booked our luggage through; both went through immigration and I went through security. I turned around and there was no Faye. Someone official decided she did not have the appropriate sign off at immigration to let her through. She had to go all the way back. Of course, all was in order and she emerged triumphant. I can but assume that official thought she was catching the flight to Delhi.

Once inside, we checked out the art gallery of paintings that were for sale before we were called. And our call was early. Indeed, we flew out at 9.25, the time we were meant to board. The flight was not full so Faye and I were able to enjoy a window seat each. Mine showed me glimpses of both the second and the highest mountains in Bhutan. The highest is Gangkhar Puensum at 7570 and the second is Mount Chomolhari at 7134. The first looks a touch like Kanchenjunga and is not to be climbed. It is too sacred.



Mount Chomolhari



Gangkhar Puensum

The views from the plane through the pine covered hills, into the valley of Punakha and then down towards Bumthang were truly special. The pilots had the best seats in the house.



Alex

We were loaded onto our min bus and driven straight to Tamshing Llakhang while our luggage, in its own vehicle, headed to our accommodation. Well, as luck would have it, the village was still mid-festival and we walked into another set of dances, the first one was the Black Hat dance. We are beyond spoilt.







We then went to the sanctuary of the temple, an area out of bounds for photography though the courtyard was not and there, dancers relaxed between performances or prepared for their big event.









Butter candles



We then returned to the hotel to unpack before going straight back to the same site (well, across the road), for our lunch, a lunch that depended on buckwheat as its staple base.

Having dined splendidly (though the yak butter tea was a mild westernised version), we battled the traffic around the festival and headed around to the Jambey Lhakhang, an ancient monastery, dating back to the 8th century and the time of Guru Rinpoche. It was one of the most beautiful temples I have ever visited. Small, ancient, focused on the Buddha to come, a powerful statement of Buddhist faith indeed.





That was the tour bit. In addition, Faye spotted a hoopoe, we both saw White Wagtail and we now have both spotted Brown Shrike and the Common Magpie.



Oriental Turtle-dove

Day 5: Wednesday 27th September 2023

A Summary: Bumthang

Today, explore the Bumthang district with a drive to the stunningly beautiful Tang Valley, the most remote of Bumthang's regions. This seldom-visited valley has some off-the-beaten-track lhakhangs (temples) and monasteries.

Visit the museum at Ogyen Choling Palace¹¹, an aristocratic mansion that has been transformed into a folk museum with a fascinating collection of domestic and defensive artefacts. This is the ancestral home of Kunzang Choden, one of Bhutan's most celebrated writers and intellectuals.

Stop at Membar Tsho¹², a small freshwater lake and sacred pilgrimage site also known as Burning Lake.

As Transpired:



¹¹ The Ogyen Choling Heritage House and Museum are located in the beautiful Tang Valley, about a 1-hour drive from Jakar, Bumthang in Central Bhutan.

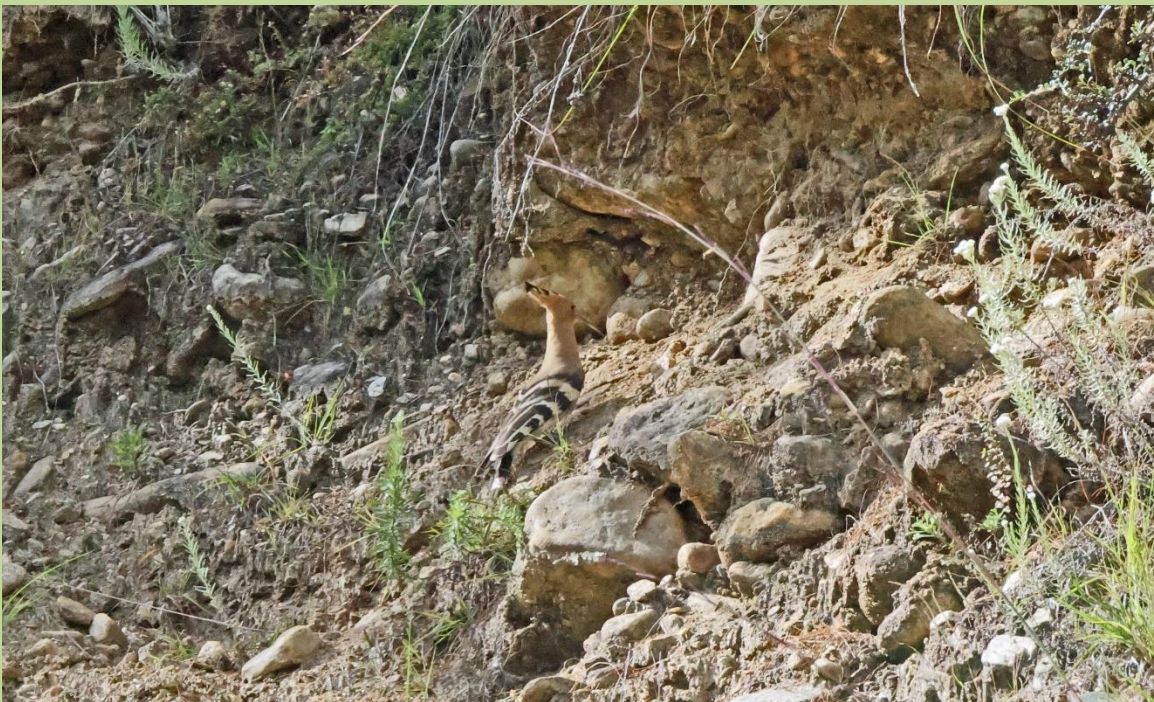
The Ogyen Choling Museum, was established by the descendants of the ancient and religiously significant Ogyen Choling nagtshang. This building was reconstructed after the 1897 earthquake and is regarded as the most realistic representation of the living conditions of the Bhutanese religious nobility in the 1800's and early 1900's.

¹² Membartsho (Dzongkha མེ་བར་མཚོ་), also known as Mebar Tsho, is a holy site, revered as the place where Pema Lingpa, Bhutan's greatest tertön (treasure revealer), discovered several of Guru Rinpoche's terma in the 15th century. The pool in the Tang Valley, near Bumthang in central Bhutan is known locally as the Burning Lake, because according to legend, Pema Lingpa had a dream urging him to go to that particular spot in the Tang Chuu river. After standing on the rocks looking into the depths, he discerned there was a temple at the bottom with many doors, one of which was open. He dived in and swam into a large cave where a woman with one eye handed him a treasure chest. As he took it from her he found himself back on dry land.



Believe it or not, that's exactly what we did. It was quite a drive, up and over several steep pine-covered trees, showing to best advantage the 70% forest cover over Bhutan,

providing us with a few additional stops amidst meadows and butterflies, and enabling us to partially convert our fellow travellers to the joys of birds.



Hoopoe

By far the greatest excitement for Faye and I was a delightful grey bird, down-curved red bill that proved, on research, to be an Ibisbill. That is a bird I have never seen before.

The rest of the bus got excited by a Hoopoe and who can blame them. Hoopoes are rather endearing. I think Faye was equally happy to see a Plumbeous Redstart.



The family home, now museum, at Ogyen Choling was huge. We were met and spoken to by Kunzang Choden, the woman whose birthplace it was and whose family has owned it for 50 generations. She has converted the huge old “home”, a home of more than thirty rooms, into a museum. Much comes from her old home (this is a restored building following earthquake damage (I think the 1897 one) but also from others in the Tang valley. It also has a library of old books on Buddhism. But, perhaps, the most interesting exercise was in navigating the wooden ladders from one floor to another. This is an important family, closely linked to Tibet and therefore the Nagas, the naughty spirits, are called lu.



While we were there a Taiwanese group, dressed in Bhutanese clothing, were also visiting. They looked lovely. I got chatting with one girl who told me they came from Bangkok to Paro on the same flight we did. Before they went through immigration, they all changed into these outfits. When they went through security not only were they checked for contraband, they were helped by the staff in how they should wear the clothes. It must have looked like a fitting room. She had pictures on her phone to show me.

We had lunch here. It was simple, delicious local food and we all enjoyed it. It was to have been eaten outside but that's when the rains came.



As for the journey home, we stopped twice and one river park was a real treat. That was near where Pema Lingpa meditated in a cave.







But the special walk to Burning Lake did not find a lake at all! Instead, we found a deep gorge of rushing water, a location festooned with prayer flags and a host of Cha chas to keep the local deities happy. Pema Lingpa must have had a long dive into a deep, flowing

gorge to recover the treasure texts and emerge with his lamp still burning. May I be a touch sceptical! My sympathies are with Michael Aris and his claim of “fraud”.





On the way up to the valley we heard of a special dance where the monks dance naked, except for.... A mask! The trouble is that sisters can often identify the masked naked monks.

As we spoke about that, we also explored “night hunting”, the tradition in this country of relaxed sexuality, where boys might ask girls her address and if she smiles, etc, he goes at night, sneaks up into her room and, well, let nature take its course. Of course, a girl might be mischievous and give someone else’s address, with interesting consequences, and a boy might climb through the wrong window too. Sometimes even into the father’s window.

Tonight, we learnt that to help preserve traditional culture, national dress is compulsory for all officials, that there is state-sponsored traditional medicine and all new buildings must be in traditional style. There must be a gap between the roof and the building (once used for drying foods. Lintels are built out from the wall and decorations refer to Buddhist culture. Deers are prominent because the historic Buddha’s first sermon was to deer at the Sanath Deer Park. That’s the one where he spoke of the Noble Fourfold Truth.

Oh, and the deer obtained Enlightenment!

We then covered lots of traditional Buddhist structures: statues, mani walls, chortens, a stupa, the Mandala, the altar, etc.

The mandala reflects a sacred enclosure. The outer walls protect the inner, consecrated centre. This is evident in the dzong too. While regional castles and administrative centres,

they are also spiritual centres and the Punakha dzong is the most important, the home of the Je Khempo.

Reflections

I am starting this on a balcony of our rather large room in the colder mountain air of Bumthang, one very pretty valley to the north and east and, with a little pass or two, and the odd snow and ice, is not that far from Tibet.

Indeed, that's the reason we are here for it is through these passes that Buddhism reached Bhutan many years ago. It was here, in other words, that Guru Rinpoche did his thing in the 8th century. We see some time in a monastery he built, one of several that were said to pin down an ogress so she could not bring destruction to the world.

Earlier we visited another monastery to look at famous wall paintings and walked right into a village festival of the most wonderful mesmeric dances. The place was packed with locals all dressed in their very best, all preening, all beautiful (men and women) and all having a jolly time.

We had flown here from Thimphu this morning, a flight of just 25 minutes, but one that gave us views of both the highest and second highest mountains in Bhutan. The highest is 7570 metres, which makes it more than three times the height of Kosciuszko. I was getting twitchy desires to go trekking again, to wander the high mountain passes, to achieve enlightenment of the mind, to truly destroy my 70 plus year old body. That's what mountains can do. Yes, it's a dream to be able to do it again.

Back in Thimphu yesterday we also attended another holy dance that went on all day (well, a series of dances). As Thimphu is the Big Smoke, the people here were dressed beyond splendidly and were taking selfies left, right and centre. It was easy to get them to pose. Damn it, they wanted to be photographed.

Oh, yes, and another temple. This one with a gigantic Buddha, paid for by a billionaire from Singapore. It was also more like a temple in SE Asia than one from the Tibetan school.

Outside, the valley is shrouded in cloud and the tops of the mountains are barely visible but it probably has no bearing on what will eventuate today. Yesterday was similar but every time we wanted to explore the countryside it did not rain and it even gave us lots of sunshine to visit the Burning Lake.

The Burning Lake is neither a lake nor is it burning. In fact, it is a ferociously deep gorge out of which a holy man (Pema Lingpa for the curious) dived in, recovered spiritual texts and emerged holding a burning lamp, thus demonstrating his truly spiritual powers. There was no reference to a witness but if someone did it today there would be as it is a major tourist attraction.

But let me enlighten you further with two other cultural practices. One, practised in the east, is when monks strip down to their blessed naked bodies and dance for the village. They do wear masks but given that many of the monks have sisters you can imagine the ribaldry as their identities are pointed out.

The other is the almost universal ritual of teenage life. In Bhutan it comes in the form of night hunting. No, this is not some machismo male hunt for the tiger (whose numbers, incidentally, are growing). It's when the lads of the villages go out hunting for "love". No, let's not be coy. It's much more direct.

Around the villages or festivals, a young lad might catch the eye of a young maiden. The hint of a smile might be enough to ask the girl of her address. If she provides it, in the depth of night the young lad will climb up, clamber in through the window and, we'll, I shall draw a polite veil over the next hour or so.

Things can go astray. Some young ladies are not to be trusted and might give the wrong address, thereby creating some uncomfortable scenes. And sometimes, indeed, the young lad might clamber into the wrong room, only to find daddy!

Now we did much else besides, yesterday, but I mention just one thing. Maureen, this, especially, is for you. On one side of the bus was a Hoopoe. That excited the party that do not go birdwatching. On the other side, however, was a grey bird with a long, red, down-curved bill. It was my first ever sighting of an Ibisbill. No, no pictures. But a very happy Brian.

Day 6: Thursday 28th September 2023

A Summary: Bumthang

Today experience the Thangbi Mani Festival reputed to bring peace and prosperity to families and ensure a better harvest for the entire community. Watch sacred masked dances and lay monks perform purification rituals while people jump over the flames to purify themselves. The festival culminates in a fire blessing ceremony (Mewang).

After a talk by Alex, enjoy dinner at the hotel

To Our Loved Ones

It is kind of you who asked me to continue writing if and when I can. Here the opportunity arises in the lobby area of the “resort”: one, I hasten to add is exceedingly comfortable except for erratic power. Which amuses me because since COVID and the crash of tourism, the production of hydro power is its biggest export.

Not that is very helpful. I believe that most of the seeding money comes from India, most of the power goes to India and most of the profits head in the same direction. It does not generate much in the way of jobs either. While big dams are not required and small check dams do the work, still the technical staff comes from India too.

And that takes me to here, this resort. We are a party of 14. There are five other guests in the resort. In the dining room last night, we had seven staff on duty out front. How many were in the kitchen I do not know. That, in anyone’s language, is underemployment. No wonder one of the biggest exports now from Bhutan are their young people and many head to Australia. Oh, and one of their best money earners is the remittance of money home. There is an entire new housing estate in Thimphu locals call “Little Australia”.

I have been reading a 900 plus History of Bhutan (Karma Phumtsho). It is rather tedious, requires serious editing and repetitive but within it there are gems and we met up with Karma who spoke to us for 90 minutes and in person he was none of the above. He was erudite, eloquent and had many relevant things to say, including reflecting on what I write about above. Especially in reference to the National Happiness Index. He did point out that in UN surveys measuring such a thing, Bhutan comes in at least 80 or more below the top and that the Scandinavian countries regularly come first.

With a cheeky smile he said perhaps Bhutan would do better as the “unhappy” people left!

OK, it’s time to head off into the high valleys, searching for Enlightenment, so I’ll close.

As Transpired:

Well, not quite to plan. The festival was not happening today so we drove up to a beautiful valley and a village called Ura.





The drive took us over several high passes, through massive cypress pine forests, to emerge into a complex spruce and evergreen forest. Amidst all of that were small pastures.



Ura is in a wide valley and is rather advanced for a rural village. It is the home of Karma Phuntso and Karma Ura, both holders of PhD from Oxford. We met both their mothers and lunched in the extended home of Karma Ura. That gave us a great chance to see inside homes of a rural elite, of the streets and of the yards, lanes and temple.







We returned a different, faster way but of course that still meant high windy mountain passes and by the time we got back into Bumthang we were almost an hour late. Mind you, we had had an accident during the morning. No, not the bus. Tshering is an exceedingly careful driver. One of our party had fallen and damaged her shoulder. X-rays back here indicated there was a chip and her right arm is in a sling.



We then visited the Jakar Dzong. The approach up the hill, the high thick walls, the arrow slots and the central tower all showed they were, indeed, castles, and the behaviour of the penlops also show a similarity to medieval Europe.



Red-billed Choughs





By then, I was very tired. A chest cold made me feel weak and sleepy and we came back to our hotel, rested, dined and ended the day almost packed for our escape tomorrow.



Our birding highlights included seeing a Forktail (Faye), a Spotted Nutcracker (Brian), a White-browed Fulvetta (Faye) and large numbers of Red-billed Choughs (Both of us)

Day 7: Friday 29th September 2023

A summary: Bumthang to Trongsa

In the morning, visit the Jakar Dzong¹³ or the 'Castle of the White Bird', overlooking the town and dominating the Chamkhar Valley.

Constructed in 1549, the dzong played an important role as the fortress of defence of the whole eastern region and also became the seat of the first king of Bhutan.

Then, depart Bumthang and travel through the Chhume Valley, home of Bhutan's famous Yatra weaving and traditional textiles. There may be an opportunity to see the weavers create their intricate handiwork.

Continue over the picturesque Yotong La pass and down to Trongsa¹⁴.

Visit the Ta Dzong Museum, located in the former regional governor's watchtower. Established with Austrian technical assistance, the museum houses examples of royal 'Raven crowns', the symbol of Bhutan's monarchs, and depictions of the highest ranks of Buddhas.

Yangkhil Resort, (61 975 3 521 417/418

As it transpired:

Well, Jakar Dzong was yesterday's finale and today we got to see the Thangbi Mani Festival. That included checking out the temple before finding a shady spot from where we could watch the dancing and the singing.

¹³ Jakar Dzong or Jakar Yugyal Dzong is the dzong or fortress of the Bumthang District in central Bhutan. It is located on a ridge above Jakar town in the Chamkhar valley of Bumthang. It is built on the site of an earlier temple established by the Ralung hierarch Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk (1517–1554) when he came to Bhutan. Jakar Dzong may be the largest dzong in Bhutan, with a circumference of more than 1,500 metres (4,900 ft)

¹⁴ Trongsa, previously Tongsa (Dzongkha: ཁྲོང་གསར་, Wylie: krong gsar), is a Thromde or town, and the capital of Trongsa District in central Bhutan. The name means "new village" in Dzongkha. The first temple was built in 1543 by the Drukpa lama Ngagi Wangchuck, who was the great-grandfather of Ngawang Namgyal, Zhabdrung Rinpoche, the unifier of Bhutan.

Chökhör Raptentse Dzong at Trongsa which was built in 1644, used to be the seat of power of the Wangchuck dynasty before it became rulers of Bhutan in 1907. Traditionally the King of Bhutan first becomes the Trongsa Penlop (governor) before being named Crown Prince and eventually King. Built on a mountain spur high above the gorges of the Mangde Chhu, the dzong controlled east-west trade for centuries. The only road connecting eastern and western Bhutan (the precursor to the modern Lateral Road), passed through the courtyard of the dzong. At the command of the penlop the massive doors could be shut, dividing the country in two.

Higher yet on the mountainside is a watchtower, called "Ta Dzong" (watch tower), built to guard the dzong from enemies but now housing a museum and a chapel dedicated to Jigme Namgyal who was Trongsa Penlop from 1853 to 1870.





When we woke, however, the valley was blanketed in a thick fog. The shade was necessary, however, as the day turned out to be seasonally hot.

As soon as the dance moved into a procession we followed, for this was the fire dance. Two tall pyres were placed about 4 metres apart. Well, luck turned my way. Just as I was getting into the bus to search for my hat, I trod on a cow dropping. Well, I could not go in, walked around, rubbing my shoe on all the grass and ended up, totally accidentally, in the stunning location for the fire dance. As the flames roared higher and higher, as the space got hotter, people ran through the gap around and around.





I returned to the temple for more dancing but it was getting dangerously crowded and the crush to get in and out was concerning. That did me. All I can report is a bird pooped on my head.





Our lunch was a delightful picnic by the river in a picturesque setting and with excellent food. I also had a glass of arak.

And then we were on the road to Trongsa. Yesterday we crossed a 3599m pass. Today, the one that goes up, and then down into Trongsa, was 3450m. That's seriously high.

On the way we stopped at a weaving shop/factory and the items were truly beautiful. We are not in the market of possessions anymore, so what I really liked was a smoking ceremony at the back, complete with masses of juniper and drumming. Faye had a lesson in how they made natural dyes.





The Smoking Ceremony



Apart from the odd roadside stop, we then drove down the hill into Trongsa, we had learned that there was a longevity blessing on the dzong. Of course, we participated and we were given an easy passage past the locals, which made us all guilty but which meant we were blessed by the monk, given a blue thread and sent on our way.





Reflections

Well, folks, we have arrived in Trongsa, up over a 3450m pass and down to a tiny valley and a special ceremony in the dzong a (a castle for you and me). The ceremony was delivered by monks and delivered us a long life. Faye was not so keen that I might live another 70 years.

The day began in Bumthang, or, rather, in a tiny village outside that was having another religious festival. This one was as packed as the others and the locals were having a wow of a time. The first dance was mesmeric, and became a procession out of the temple into a field where the dancing continued.

I then had a touch of luck. So, to speak. This dance was to culminate in the burning of two large bonfires, about 4m apart, through which the locals would run. the luck came

when I was about to get in the bus to find my hat. I trod on a cow pat. I could not get in the bus but ran out, wiping the shit on grass and miraculously found myself close to the front to photograph the fires, the running and the rapture. I also ran through it. Well, walked. Later, when it was a pile of hot coals. Not a huge flame.

But back to yesterday! A long drive over another pass, through pine forests and, higher up, spruce. The exploring the tiny village of Ura, dining in the home of Karma Ura. Ross, he's the man who was given the task of developing the indicators to measure the National Happiness Index. His mum was lovely. Mind you, as grandmother, she entertained a child with an iPad, watching a children video. Yes, there is change!

Now dining in Trongsa, drinking a wheat beer.



Day 8: Saturday 30th September 2023

A summary: Trongsa – Punakha

In the morning, explore Trongsa Dzong, the ancestral home of Bhutan's monarch. Admire the solidity and strength of the Dzong's traditional architecture and its superb wall-paintings.



Depart Trongsa and journey through hillsides of dwarf bamboos, lush pasturelands and evergreen forests. Make a stop at the beautiful 18th-century Nepali-style Chendebji Chorten¹⁵. Cross the Black Mountains range that divides western from central Bhutan, ascending the Pele La pass, marked by prayer flags.

¹⁵ Chendebji Chorten is a stupa in Bhutan, located 41 kilometres (25 mi) west of Trongsa at 2,430 metres (7,970 ft) in elevation.

According to legend, Chendebji Chöten covers the body of an "evil spirit".

Chendebji Chorten is constructed in the style of Nepalese stupas such as Boudhanath. It was built at some point in the 18th century, and is located along the Chorten Lam, a path connecting various chortens in Bhutan. A prayer wall or mani stone is located in the complex.

It was constructed by Lam Oensey Tshering Wangchuk, reportedly to repel the demon Ngala.

Continue through dramatic landscapes of terraced farmland before arriving in Punakha¹⁶, the old winter capital of Bhutan. Punakha was the capital of Bhutan until 1955 when the seat of government was moved to Thimphu under the modernising reforms of the 3rd Dragon King.

Zhingkhams Resort (61 975 2 584722)

As it transpired:

The day opened with a bang. Our toilet blocked (note that we were not the only ones) and we soon discovered that there was no tap to turn off and no drainage hole. By the time someone had come, the floor in the bathroom resembled something like a wading pool. One lovely staffer came with a plunger, corrected it and then promptly started to wipe the floor with towels. No, not a mop and bucket. It reminds me of Greece.

Our first stop was, indeed, the Trongsa dzong. We had to wait until the Prime Minister and his entourage passed by us. The Prime Minister even spoke to us. Sadly, no photos were allowed, though I suspect that if we asked, he would have only willingly obliged. Prime Ministers rarely object to publicity.

The walk through the dzong was less crowded than yesterday and the main temple had the most beautiful silk scroll art of the life of the Buddha. As for the rest of the dzong, the courtyards were accessible but this was a working set of offices.



¹⁶ Punakha (Dzongkha: ཡུ་ཤར་ཁ།) is the administrative centre of Punakha dzongkhag, one of the 20 districts of Bhutan. Punakha was the capital of Bhutan and the seat of government until 1955, when the capital was moved to Thimphu. It is about 72 km away from Thimphu, and it takes about 3 hours by car from the capital. Unlike Thimphu, it is quite warm in winter and hot in summer. It is located at an elevation of 1,200 metres above sea level, and rice is grown as the main crop along the river valleys of two main rivers of Bhutan, the Pho Chu and Mo Chu. Dzongkha is widely spoken in this district.



There was a large class in operation in one courtyard for trainee tour guides. It's a three month course plus field visits to the main sites. Most trainees were males but two women were doing the course and all could speak some form of English. One could speak Japanese.

Our next stop was the Trongsa Ta Dzong. This was the watchtower and it is now a museum of some of the most special items in Bhutan, including the Raven Crown!



And then we were on our way, stopping en route at the Chendebji Chorten, where a ferocious game of football was in progress.





The remaining trip up over the pass was interrupted for lunch at a very pleasant café not far from the chorten. We had a nice meal, set out across a long table, as is our regular dining experience, but set off in its own space, was a special dining area just for the king and the Je Khempo (the spiritual head).

The remainder of the journey was a long climb up over a pass, emerging occasionally into high altitude pastures, but in the main forested. The highest ridges had a crown of hemlock!

Then down, down, down, through the military town of Wangdi (and also holding a prison), past a big football game and on into Punakha. It was after 5.00 when we arrived and as I had a front, cramped seat, my knee was protesting but we did find quite a few new birds for the trip today.



Punakha Dzong

