

Bhutan Trip Report Volume 1

October 2023



Day 9: Sunday 1st October 2023

Summary: Punakha – Thimphu

Visit the wonderful Punakha Dzong¹, one of the most magical sights of Bhutan. Situated at the confluence of two major Himalayan rivers, it is the resting place of Bhutan's first ruler, the 17th-century lama Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who unified the country 250 years before the rise of the present Dragon kings.

Then depart Thimphu for a remarkable drive over the high mountain pass of Dochu La², located at 3,100 metres. On the prolific hillside at the top of the pass is a congregation of 108 memorial chortens around a temple. Weather permitting, enjoy panoramic views of the eastern Himalayas, including Bhutan's highest mountain, Gangkhar Puensum (7,570 metres).

Hotel: Namgay Heritage Hotel (61 975 2 337 113)

As it transpired:

I guess I can say that the cold that came on several days ago, the predictable result of confined bus travel, is easing, and I slept with more ease last night than previously. It was only from about 4.00am that I needed to sit up and let the sinuses drain a little. However, Faye woke with flu-like symptoms and when another member of our party also woke feeling poorly and had a RATS test that proved positive, the entire bus headed to the Punakha hospital for testing.

That was an efficient exercise in testing but at the end of it three of us were all deemed positive, isolated and by a little after 10.00am we had our own taxi to deliver us direct to

¹ The Punakha Dzong, also known as Pungthang Dewa chhenbi Phodrang (meaning "the palace of great happiness or bliss"), is the administrative centre of Punakha District in Punakha, Bhutan. Constructed by Ngawang Namgyal, 1st Zhabdrung Rinpoche, in 1637–38, it is the second oldest and second largest dzong in Bhutan and one of its most majestic structures. The dzong houses the sacred relics of the southern Drukpa Lineage of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Rangjung Kharsapani and the sacred remains of Ngawang Namgyal and the tertön Pema Lingpa.

Punakha Dzong was the administrative center and the seat of the Government of Bhutan until 1955 when the capital was moved to Thimphu. It is listed as a tentative site in Bhutan's Tentative List for UNESCO inclusion.

² The Dochu La (Dochu Pass, la means pass in Dzongkha) is a mountain pass in the snow-covered Himalayas within Bhutan on the road from Thimphu to Punakha where 108 memorial chortens or stupas known as "Druk Wangyal Chortens" have been built by Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk, the eldest Queen Mother. Apart from the chortens there is a monastery called the Druk Wangyal Lhakhang (temple), built in honour of the fourth Druk Gyalpo (head of the state of Bhutan), Jigme Singye Wangchuck; the open grounds in its front yard is a venue for the annual Dochula Druk Wangyel Festival. The pass with 108 memorial chortens is adjacent to the country's first Royal Botanical Park.

The pass is located at an elevation of 3,100 metres (10,200 ft)

Thimphu, skipping the scheduled itinerary and ordered to isolation. It was not following either Bhutanese or Australian protocols!



Well, at least we have seen Punakha Dzong, in daylight and at night and I am not sure we need to see inside it. It sits astride the confluence of two major rivers and as such it dominates the trade routes. It is said to be the second oldest Dzong in Bhutan but it lacks the defensive features you'd expect. The walls are thick but there's no narrow arrow slits and I suspect this one was a statement of administrative powers more than a defence requirement.

Before we knew of our COVID positive status, Faye and I had sat outside overlooking the vegetation below and we were enjoying some wonderful birdwatching. A Magpie Robin came and perched right next to me and sang, a Black Drongo played around below and a flock of Grey Treepie flitted through the bushes.

Our special taxi trip took us up and over the Dochu La and the 108 memorial chortens were clearly evident. The view to the snow-clad peaks was not. They remain shrouded in cloud.

It was then just a short drive back into Thimphu, to our old hotel and even our old room. The staff were fully briefed and provided us with our lunch in the main dining room but not long after that, we all retreated to isolation. Faye promptly fell asleep and slept much of the time. I wrote an update email.

When the others arrived, Alex took the three of us to Thimphu hospital. I am not sure it was worth the effort. We were checked for chest infection (clear), asked about headaches (well, yes, now, a little, but not then), had our blood pressure taken by a stunning Triage nurse (no wonder mine was a little high), suggested we take Triazapan (nope – I’ll stick to Panadol), and brought back. There were no extra RATS tests anywhere, so I suspect no one will ever know when we are clear or whether any others get sick.

Our light meal was delivered to our room. A bowl of soup, hard boiled eggs and a platter of fruit.



Day 10: Monday 2nd October 2023

A summary: Thimphu

In the morning, visit the National Textile Museum, which showcases Bhutan's achievements in fabric arts. Continue to the School of Arts and Crafts, which provides students four-to-six-year courses in Bhutan's 13 traditional arts.

After lunch, visit the Jungshi Handmade Paper Factory to see how the paper traditionally used for scriptures, lampshades and other handicrafts is created.

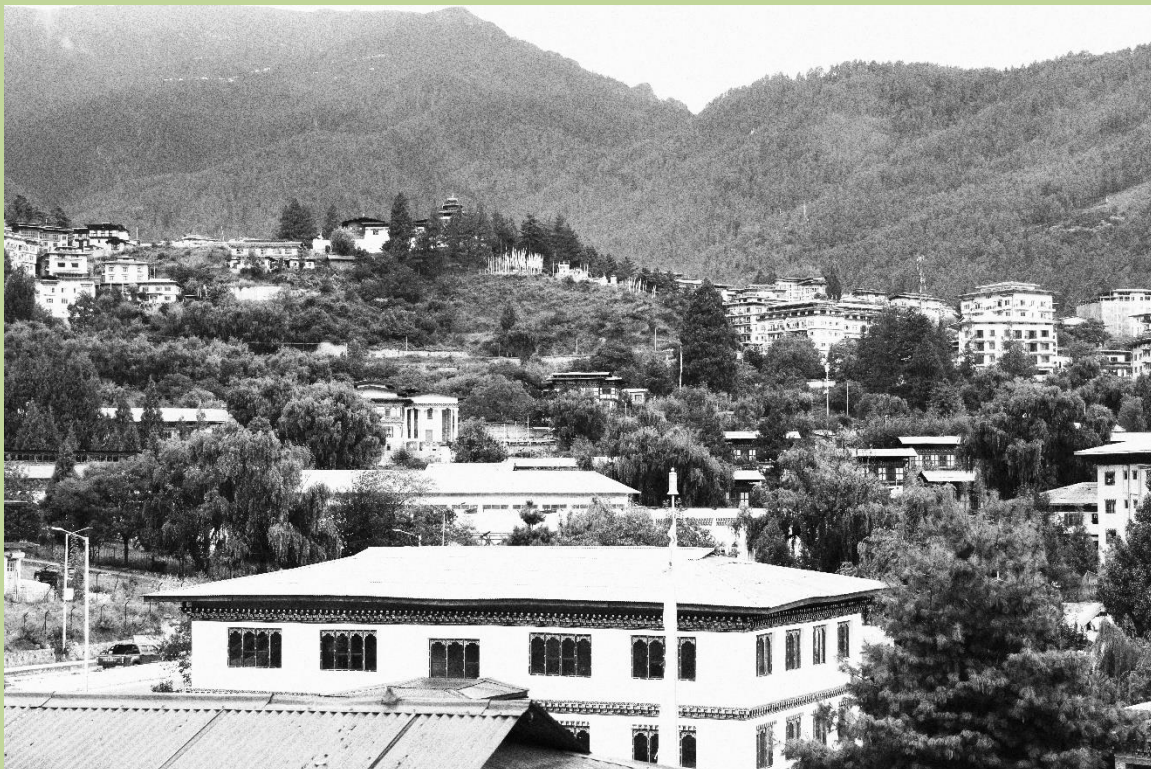
As it transpired:

Neither Faye nor the other positive case seem much better this morning. We did go down for breakfast, sat with together and our third victim sounded worse than Faye, but she is determined to enjoy the crafts today. I am just as keen to see the town in operation on a normal day.

The staff resupplied our room with new towels, provided us with additional water bottles, coffee and cups and even brought up new toilet paper. And at 9.30am Alex and Drakpa both checked in on us.

My own Covid symptom is having no energy. I did two short walks around the Thimphu shopping precinct and each time the uphill return left me tired and listless. Mind you, it is a warm, humid day.





It was interesting to see the building techniques employed on sites. It is labour intensive, and many are guest workers from India. At a guess, from the south. I have heard many come from Andra Pradesh and their maximum stay is 12 months.

My other great highlight was to see Bhutan's only traffic policeman in operation. He stands proudly in his rotunda, uses his arms with theatrical flair and is actually obeyed.



And on my first walk, I returned with a packet of digestive biscuits. Faye wanted it. I tried several shops until I secured it, paid using an old 100 rupee note and got exact change.

We ate our meal in the hotel at lunch, rather than attempting to travel with the party. I am not sure if that is covered by Renaissance yet. Whatever, Faye needed the sleep.

Our speaker this evening was Francoise Pommaret. She spoke about the Asiatic heritage of Bhutan and its vitality. She started with traditional arts she began by saying that there is no difference between arts and crafts. Textiles are the most prominent cultural marker.

There is a revival of traditional dyeing based on herbs, trees and minerals. They now weave with a pedal loom. Weavers can have poor eyes and back pain.

Traditionally men did embroidery and women did the weaving but that is changing.

Every year there is a national arts and design competition.

Calligraphy is also an important art form. You begin by preparing the paper. The 108 volumes were written in gold.

Woodworking is also important. Masks can be made from wood or paper. Wood carving is especially decorative.

Bamboo and cane weaving is done in central and southern Bhutan by both men and women. Traditional shutters were made from bamboo.

Stone carving is not so much done but clay art, painted, is highly regarded. The clay has fragments of bones of the saints.

Wall paintings are done off site, rolled, and then plastered onto the wall. Religious paintings follow strict design rules.

And those are a few notes from the talk. Interestingly when she spoke of contemporary art, it still appeared that the impetus was when the Royal family gave its imprimatur. That art gallery at the Paro airport was their initiative, for example. The big name in contemporary art is Asha Kama (Kama Wangdi) and the artist collective that supports this work is called VAST. It is listed now as a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) or, in our language, an NGO. There is also an artist (or two) called TWINZ.

Oh, while sitting in and listening to this talk my chair gave a slight jolt. Faye reported later that her bed shook, and the TV also shook. Yes, we had had an earth tremor.

Reflections:

Well, here we are, back in Thimphu, earlier than planned by several hours. One of our party fell sick, tested positive on a RATS test this morning and Faye felt dreadful too. The entire party was taken to Punakha hospital and all were tested. Three of us came up positive. Faye and I were the other two aside from the first person. We were immediately isolated, placed in our own taxi and sent on our way, over Dochu La (La indicates a pass) at 3100m.

We were allowed to stop there to see the view of snow-clad peaks and did see the 108 chortens but those icy slopes were enveloped in cloud.

And here, therefore, we are. We get tested again tomorrow. I am actually quite well, except for sinus and a hint of a sore throat. Faye has collapsed badly and is sleeping it off mid-afternoon. Maureen, we have quite a gap before we are due to see you in Bangkok so I hope Faye also throws it off by then. We'll keep you posted but bring a mask or three and no hugging.

And there matters rest.

Day 11: Tuesday 3rd October 2023

A summary: Thimphu – Paro

Today depart Thimphu for Paro, Bhutan's second largest town. Discover Paro town and visit the National Museum, arguably Bhutan's finest museum. Located in the former Paro dzong, the museum provides a wonderful display of the kingdom's rich culture and heritage with an impressive collection of artefacts and thangkas (religious scroll paintings).

In the afternoon, visit the auspicious Kyichu Lhakhang³, a sacred monument said to pin down the left foot of a treacherous ogress. This is one of the oldest temples in Bhutan dating back to the 7th century. Continue to the small Jangtsa Dumtseg Lhakhang, an unusual Buddhist temple in the form of a chorten. Dating to the 14th century and attributed to Chaksampa, the 'Iron bridge builder', it features an outstanding range of wall-paintings of early Indian Buddhist 'magicians.'

Hotel: Olathang Cottages (61 975 8 276581)

As it transpired:

When we woke, I am pleased to say that my improvement continues apace but, even more pleasingly, Faye seems to be feeling better. Not so our tour leader, Alex. Apparently, he came down positive this morning. By this afternoon, when we booked into the Olathang Cottages, Alex was being taken to the local Paro hospital. He had not been with us all day.

We three had a taxi all day. The cost of the car was 3500 Ngultrum. Split three ways, that's cheap. It was also comfortable and delivered us to all sites and to the cottages smoothly. The driver was a pleasant man, a safe driver and the father of five boys. Two are living abroad.

³ Kyichu Lhakhang, (also known as Kyerchu Temple or Lho Kyerchu) is an important Himalayan Buddhist temple situated in Lango Gewog of Paro District in Bhutan.

The Jowo Temple of Kyichu is one of the oldest temples in Bhutan, originally built in the 7th century by the Tibetan Emperor Songtsen Gampo. It is considered to be one of the 108 border taming temples he built. In the 8th century, the temple was visited by Padmasambhava and it is believed he concealed many spiritual treasures here. Je Khenpo Sherab Gyaltshen wrote that during the 12th century the temple was looked after by the Lhapa Kagyu tradition and that during the 13th century it was handed over to a descendant of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo's son Nyima. In his *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Jigdral Yeshe Dorje (2nd Dudjom Rinpoche) records that the Jowo Temple of Kyichu could not be seen and that Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) uncovered the temple and restored it as it was before. In 1644, the temple was taken over by Ngawang Namgyal. From 1836 to 1838, the temple was restored and re-consecrated by the 25th Je Khenpo Sherab Gyaltshen. In 1971, Kesang Choden Wangchuck, the queen of Jigme Dorji Wangchuck built a Guru Temple next to the old Jowo Temple which was consecrated by Dilgo Khyentse. Ever since then the annual rites of great accomplishment for the deities Vajrasattva, Palchen Heruka, and Vajrakilaya have been held in this temple for the well-being of the country under the patronage of Kesang Choden Wangchuck. There is a belief that the two orange trees in the courtyard of Kyichu Lhakhang bear fruit throughout the year. It was built to Subdue Demoness (Sin Mo)

I am pleased to say that Faye is much better today. She is still very tired, lacks energy, but her coughing is minimal. She did tell me she had difficulty in breathing. It's not the lungs, so much, as the ability to take in the amount of air.

I am stronger again. While I was tired after walking a short distance yesterday, I didn't feel the same tiredness on any stairs or walks today.

So, minus Alex, we were in full tour mode except we had a personal chauffeur and a separate table at lunch, complete with table service. In other words, we might have the best of it except for the extra costs incurred.

The drive from Thimphu to Paro is now quite familiar but is worth repeating. Some of the landscapes are truly beautiful.





And once in Paro, beyond the airport, we headed up to the watchtower, the Ta Dzong, which did indeed house a very large museum of artefacts. As per all such buildings and temples, no photographs are allowed inside and as per policy, there are different entry prices for tourists to locals.





Probably the most interesting items on display were the thangkas and they are exquisite, even if their religious iconography is mysterious to me. I also enjoyed seeing the

weapons and helmets, the traditional regional costumes and the teapots. But I think I enjoyed seeing the interior of the actual watchtower most. This was a formidable fort.

We then drove to lunch as rain was threatening. However, we were held up by an accident. A truck with a load of metal reinforcement rods back out and the rods skewered a car on the left front panel. It took a while for police to assess, get the truck to move forward and clear the queue.



After lunch, we visited the actual dzong. It is a very big building and it is still the administrative centre for Paro so most is closed off to tourists. In any case, an office is an office. How much in the way of modern communications are present, I do not know.

We were allowed to look inside one large temple room, used as a classroom and sleeping quarters for young monks, but mostly we saw the courtyards.





On exiting, we then walked down a cobblestone pathway to a bridge, seeing great views back to the Dzong and also discovering some beautiful butterflies. One was a large

Swallowtail. Another was also large, with black wings and two bright blue patches in its hind wings.



Our final visit was perhaps the best of all. Both temples in the Jangsta Dumptseg Lhakhang were free of crowds when we were there. Indeed, we were not even disturbed by the rest of our party. We could soak in the atmosphere for the first (dedicated to Rinpoche) and the second, to Buddha. We thought this was perhaps the best of all the Buddhist sites we have visited so far. There will not be any pictures.



We are now in an exceedingly large and comfortable room overlooking Paro, looking across to the mountains and in the perfect place to see a storm come though just after we moved in and as we unpacked.



Reflections:

Hi all

We are now back in Paro and settled into a cottage above the town, facing the mountains and in what is really splendid comfort.

For those who may not have been on the last bcc list, the news is that two days ago a travelling companion woke up sick, did a RATS test, came up positive and the entire bus was tested. Faye and I also came up positive. We were isolated.

Now it shook Faye about. Yesterday, for example, she basically slept her day away in Thimphu. I also used the time to catch up on some sleep but had probably been positive for a while with what, to me, had been just a cold. It didn't feel any different except that short walks left me tired.

Well, today, we were back into action. As yesterday included a visit to an embroidery place and an art school, I didn't feel too much loss. Today, on the other hand, included another dzong (I think this one was a most impressive castle and it still functions as an administrative centre), a watchtower (a museum but within a building of historic significance), and a truly wonderful chorten/temple sited to pin down a demoness! Well, of course. Female demons are things to fear.

We thought this temple the best of all we have seen on this trip. Intimate and local, small, yet grand. Even if we were allowed to take photos in such special sites, it would not show why it is so special.

Faye is still weary but did everything on offer today, has her appetite and seems strong. I suspect I am now no longer contagious and am much stronger. Whether I am so much better to walk to the Tigers Nest, at altitude, tomorrow, I do not know. But having our own, much more comfortable taxi, today and over the pass from Punakha to Thimphu, has been a blessing. That bus was crowded and uncomfortable.

I am enjoying Bhutan. Not so excited by group travel (except if they are all good friends already).

But all good, I think.

Brian and Faye (now napping before dinner)



Day 12: Wednesday 4th October 2023

A summary: Paro

Today, take the opportunity to hike up to one of Bhutan's most revered monuments, Taktsang⁴, more commonly referred to as the Tiger's Nest Monastery, one of the great Himalayan architectural masterpieces. Built on the side of a mountain overlooking Paro Valley, it is an ancient site connected to great Buddhist masters such as Milarepa and Guru Rinpoche. This optional four-hour trek offers spectacular views of this sacred monastery perched on a cliff face 900 metres above the valley floor.

Please note: this is a strenuous activity and should only be undertaken if you are confident about your physical ability to do this.

The remainder of the afternoon is at leisure to continue your exploration of Paro at your own pace. You might want to visit Ka Ja Throm, the farmers' market gifted by His Majesty the King to the people of Paro and inaugurated in October 2022.

Tonight, celebrate the conclusion of the tour with a special farewell dinner with Alex and fellow travellers.

As it transpired:

Faye was too unwell to consider walking to the Tiger's Nest Monastery and while I thought about it, heavy rain overnight and more this morning convinced me that this would be a futile exercise. I did go for the early morning breakfast but quickly decided to pull out. The forecast of 90% rain over the entire nation of Bhutan was enough to tip the scales. I have walked up and over enough mountains in all sorts of weather and there is still more holiday ahead.

⁴ Paro Taktsang (Dzongkha: ཐཱ་མཱ་སྤུང་མཆོད་པོ་, also known as the Taktsang Palphug Monastery and the Tiger's Nest), is a sacred Vajrayana Himalayan Buddhist site located in the cliffside of the upper Paro valley in Bhutan. It is one of thirteen Tiger's Nest caves in historical Tibet in which Padmasambhava practiced and taught Vajrayana.

A later monastery complex was built in 1692, around the Taktsang Senge Samdup cave, where Guru Padmasambhava meditated and practiced with students including Yeshe Tsogyal before departing the kingdom of Tibet in the early 9th century. Padmasambhava is credited with introducing Vajrayana Buddhism to Bhutan, which was then part of Tibet, and is the tutelary deity of the country. Today, Paro Taktsang is the best known of the thirteen taktsang or "tiger lair" caves in which he and his students meditated.

The shrine dedicated to Padmasambhava, also known as Gu-ru mTshan-brgyad Lhakhang or "the Shrine of the Guru with Eight Names", refers to Padmasambhava's Eight Manifestations and is an elegant structure built around the cave in 1692 by Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye. It has become the cultural icon of Bhutan.

According to the Namthar of the Lhakhang, it is believed that Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) flew to this location from Singye Dzong on the back of a tigress.[9] This place was consecrated to tame the Tiger demon

The party did make it but, on their return, they were wet and bedraggled. The morning had some periods of no rain but most of the day it has been raining steadily and visibility was low.

Two others did not walk either, but we have not seen one around since she went shopping. The other decided not to risk her cracked shoulder, which was wise. She also let out that the group had decided to force the three of us apart. That amused me. We were outcasts, treated like lepers, blamed for our illness. Entire histories have been written about such blaming. And Alex and the Company appear to have acquiesced. If I felt like it, all might face actions of discrimination.

In the meantime, we have been in a prime location to watch the incoming flights to Paro and the much steeper take offs.



We have also seen more Brown Treepie and the odd Blackbird.

This evening, before dinner, Blue Poppy arranged drinks and a cultural floor show. There was dancing, music, a crazy yak and even participatory dance at the end. I locked my little finger with the little finger of a lovely Bhutanese dancer but never got my fingers or feet exactly in sequence.











At dinner I confronted Alex about the method of decision making that had the group exclude those who were positive but then expect us to carry the cost of that exclusion. Ale, as much as he could, admitted it was not based on either Bhutanese or Australian regulations but on groupthink. The actual money for us was not relevant but the principle was put that there could well be a case of discrimination leading to loss. Pippa, especially, had to pay more and we all did not enjoy the entire set of activities available, which surely broke our contract when we purchased the tour.

Day 13 Thursday 5th October 2023

A summary: Depart Paro – Arrive Bangkok

Depart Paro – Arrive Bangkok

After breakfast, transfer to Paro Airport for a morning Druk Air flight to Bangkok (flight included in tour price). Tour arrangements conclude upon arrival in Bangkok.

Our hotel is the Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel, right next to the airport.

As it transpired:

In fact, the flight was a 4.30pm flight, arriving in Bangkok at 8.00pm, Thai time. We had the morning in Paro, first visiting the Kyichu Lhakhang, the small temple in the shape of a chorten, where we quickly discovered the force behind our isolation. One member demanded we keep away in a very nasty tone. I don't think he expected me to speak back and he demanded an apology. He got no such thing. His wife deliberately held back from him and said how sorry she was for his behaviour. I told her she had nothing to apologise for. One learns about people in unusual ways!



Apart from that rather nasty taste, the visit to this temple was very special. There was an outer ring, an inner temple and two steep ladder climbs up to see some very ancient thangkas. They were kept in low light to preserve them.





The remainder of the morning was spent in the tourist strip of Paro. Apart from taking a few photos on Main Street, Faye and I escaped to the edge of the river, walked along it for a while (no birds), discovering the recycling centre and, I am afraid, some garbage piles as well.

Our last luncheon together was on a covered outdoor setting high over the valley. The setting was airy. The food was just average. But it was here that we thanked and farewelled our guide, Drukpa, and the two drivers. I know Tshering better than Sultram but both were wonderful, and that team is a monument to Blue Poppy.

Before we leave Bhutan, I must mention that our waitress who became quite relaxed and friendly with me over the time we were in Paro, willingly shared email addresses with me today. She was exceedingly pretty but, more importantly, she was sweet and kind.

As soon as we were able, we collected our luggage, put it through to Bangkok, had our seats allocated, went through immigration and security and found a window seat to await our flight. It duly arrived and left on time too and right on time we also arrived in Bangkok. The slowest part of the entire process was waiting for our luggage. But now we are in our room, ready for sleep.

Reflections

Hi all

The trip to Bhutan is now officially over. Partly sad that it is! Bhutan is a truly beautiful country and the local Bhutanese people are wonderful people. The chance to see so many local religious festivals and dances, the scenery and the many temples, chortens and stupas was priceless. And even though any birdwatching was incidental, we still managed to refresh our identification of Himalayan birds once more. Just a bird list of some 35 species but we had few chances to really do more. Dave Darlington has promised to put me in touch with the best bird guide in the country!

Partly happy to also be finished. Our bout of Covid, while not really serious (Faye had one exhausted day where she slept and slept) brought out the worst traits of judgemental humanity in several members of our party. While there were very nice people in the group, it left both of us determined never to undergo group travel again, unless it is our own specific group. In fact, of all the people who we met, the only person I suspect I'll stay in touch with is one lovely, caring Bhutanese person. I'll say no more about the nasty obscurantism of one person in particular.

So it was with relief that we arrived at Paro airport, boarded the flight, discovered we were sitting with normal Bhutanese people and landed here in Bangkok on time, whisked to our hotel and found our bed.

Storms overnight! Pretty standard for Bangkok. Breakfast downstairs. An early wakeup call tomorrow and a taxi booked to take us to the other side of this sprawling city.

Bird List – Bhutan

1. Rock Dove
2. Oriental Turtle-Dove
3. Green Imperial Pigeon
4. Green-billed Malkoha
5. Ibisbill
6. Eurasian Hoopoe
7. Indian Roller
8. Black Drongo
9. Brown Shrike
10. Grey Treepie
11. Black-billed Magpie
12. Eurasian Nutcracker
13. Red-billed Chough
14. House Crow
15. Large-billed Crow
16. Common Raven
17. Asian House Martin
18. Black Bulbul
19. White-browed Fulvetta
20. Rufous-vented Yuhina
21. White-throated Dipper
22. Brown Dipper
23. Common Myna
24. Eurasian Blackbird
25. Blue Whistling-Thrush
26. Plumbeous Redstart
27. White-winged Redstart
28. Golden-fronted Leafbird
29. House Sparrow
30. Eurasian Tree Sparrow
31. White Wagtail

And one unidentified Pipit and one unidentified Forktail and an unidentified small raptor.