

Bhutan transforms visitors and itself

By Randy Myers
Contra Costa Times

I lost it on a hillside trail overlooking Thimphu, capital city of Bhutan.

Halfway through a nine-day journey to this remote Asian nation, a torrent of intense feelings overcame me. They grip me to this day.

I felt it while walking through a serpentine-like processional of hundreds, perhaps thousands of ferociously flapping prayer flags.

Nearby was my partner -- who less than a year ago lost his mother to cancer -- and just behind him a close friend, whose wife had died a few years back.

None of us needed to speak; each of us needed to leave something behind on that hill.

We walked through the whiplashing flags in silence, powerless witnesses to these swirling masses of cloth that held the remembrances, wishes and dreams from days and decades past.

Some flags were weathered and worn to mere threads; others resilient and resplendent in their bright reds, blues, yellows and greens. Most impressive were the stoic white ones -- attached to trees or poles in memory of the dead.

Everywhere I turned these fluttering specters reached out to me. I was staggered by this awesome spectacle, overwhelmed by my reaction to it. I thought about how many of these prayers still struggled to be set free, and I began to cry. If only I could help deliver them to their final resting place.

I knew I couldn't. This was much bigger than I.

A spiritual awakening such as this becomes part of the itinerary on a trip to the mystical land of Bhutan. This remote Asian country, steeped in Buddhist tradition, makes a habit of changing or transforming visitors. You simply can't prepare for what will happen to you; but you should expect to dig deep into your soul and expose something long buried there.

Nation of change

Lately, this holdout in a mostly modern world has been undergoing an incredible transformation of its own.

Protected by the sentry-like Himalayas and bordered to the north by China and the south by India, this isolated nation has been off the global radar. Until now.

In 2005, the nation's monarchy boldly announced its intentions to embrace democracy, a stunning development given the popularity of its king. In 2006, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck handed the throne over to son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who is working on this transition. His coronation is still in the works.

News about this curious country, which is about one-half the size of Indiana, fueled a blitz of international media coverage.

For the first time this spring, tiny, quiet Bhutan landed on the front page of American newspapers.

To the outside world, this relatively smooth political shift from monarchy to democracy seems downright bizarre. To Bhutan, it seems only natural. This, after all, is a country that uses a Gross National Happiness barometer, not a Gross National Product.

But it is also a nation that realizes its harmonic image can put money in the till. Whether it's a T-shirt featuring a cartoon image of a goofy-looking monk and the words "Gross National Happiness begins with a smile" on it or a key chain of the same — I own two — there is some, but by no means a lot, of tchotchkes for sale.

That might encourage cynical snickers at Bhutan's expense, but when you hear what is behind the Gross National Happiness movement, which includes promoting well-being and good health care, you realize that something much more is at work here.

Undeniably, Bhutan is changing and modernizing. You see it in how people dress, the dirt roads being paved over in asphalt and the eyesore of satellite dishes cluttering up tiny villages.

A more cosmopolitan feel wafts through Thimphu, where designer jeans and logoed T-shirts are slowly replacing the gho — the

traditional robe-like dress for men.

Given all these changes Bhutan manages to retain much of its old-style charm.

Even though 100,000 people live in Thimphu, the capital city still lacks a traffic light. Instead, traffic cops, celebrities in their own right, direct vehicles in the square.

Other evidence of sticking to tradition can be found on the exteriors of homes adorned with paintings of erect penises, a real eye-catcher for tourists. The image pays homage to the phallus of Lama Drukpa Kunley, the divine madman. The Bhutanese revere this Tibetan-born saint, who wielded his “flaming thunderbolt of wisdom” to kill demons.

Maintaining control

These factors — the environment, the culture, the religion, the people, the traditions — play major roles in enticing travelers to jack up their credit card and travel to what has been dubbed the real Shangri-La.

Backpackers, though, might want to reconsider hopping online to reserve plane tickets.

The only way to get to Bhutan is by booking through a tour company. The country realizes it possesses something unique and precious, and is vigorously courting travelers while vigilantly trying to maintain control of how and where tourists venture.

Some criticize shutting out backpackers as being too elitist, with only the rich allowed to visit. That is certainly debatable. Yet there is no denying that the environment is pristinely protected.

Most tour groups concentrate on the western midsection, traveling first to Paro, then Thimphu, and later the Punakha valley. That’s probably born out of necessity because there you will find more services, along with hotels. Numerous trek packages also are available, the most arduous being the nearly month-long Snowman Trek.

I traveled with the Berkeley-based **Backroads** tour group, where my partner works. Two of the active travel company’s guides led the trip along with the seamless support from local guide Namgay Tshering and his staff. They answered numerous questions and provided insight into this magical land and its people. They led us on some spectacular hikes that traversed farmlands

and unspoiled countryside, and then showed us some of Bhutan’s most beautiful and amazing dzongs (monasteries).

The Punakha Dzong, built in 1637, was one of my favorites. Jacaranda trees lit up the outside of the building in gorgeous purple, welcoming us to walk over the bridge to a religious site where clergy spend their winter. Be sure to carve out a chunk of time marveling at the magnificent murals inside the Assembly Hall that detail the life of Buddha.

Highlights in Paro included touring the modest home of a local doctor and watching an archery contest. We even sampled some yak cheese (nasty, hard-as-brick stuff) during a stop while winding our way up in coasters over to the Punakha Valley.

Culture up close

One of my favorite experiences was a hot, somewhat strenuous hike up to the Chorten Nebu monastic school for orphaned boys in the Punakha Valley.

The monks — or monklets as we affectionately called them — took a break from school, asked to wear our sunglasses and caps, and hammed it up for pictures.

Later, we ate lunch outside, barely finishing before a powerful downpour hit. During the storm, we wandered through the monastery’s buildings and looked at an amazingly old and dusty altar.

I took a break from the group and walked out on a balcony that overlooked the school.

A teen-aged monk came and started to talk to me. I was surprised at how well he spoke English.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“California,” I replied.

Blank stare.

“Uh,” I said, arching my eyebrows in a questioning gesture. “San Francisco?”

His eyes lit up.

He paused, then looked around me. “Where’s your wife?”

“I don’t have one,” I replied.

Never missing a beat, he asked: “How old are you?”

“44.”

He just stared at me and then walked away. Later, one of the guides explained that if you

weren't a monk, then you surely must be married.

As the trip continued, we met even more welcoming people and learned more about the culture.

Our tour ended with a spectacular two-hour hike up to Bhutan's best-known image — the Tiger's Nest or Taktshang monastery. Built on the rock face of a cliff, the Tiger's Nest requires a little legwork to get there — with its 2,165-foot elevation gain — but it must not be missed. Those with an aversion to heights might have to fight back their fear, but it's worth it.

This beautiful spiritual heart of Bhutan was built near the cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated for three months.

To say it was a magical spot seems trite. But with those prayer flags whipping around us as we trekked up to the monastery, I experienced yet another humbling moment.

I almost felt like I had found my own lost horizon. And the prayer flags led me there.

If you go

•Getting There: In order to visit Bhutan, it will cost you. You need a visa, which costs a minimum of \$200 per day. Your Bhutanese guide/tour operator will coordinate this, along with your itinerary. The Berkeley tour group Backroads (www.backroads.com) works with a local tour group, and together they arranged our air transport in and out of Bhutan, visas, hotel accommodations, treks and dinner reservations.

Be sure to allow some pad time before and after your trip in case Druk Air -- the only airline that flies in and out of Bhutan -- might have to adjust times or cancel flights due to mountain weather conditions. At least one day is recommended. Flights depart early in the morning from Bangkok and a handful of Indian cities, then land in Paro. For details, go to www.drukair.com.bt.

•Where to stay: Most tour operators can arrange and customize accommodations based on your needs. Hotels range from rustic to chichi luxurious. My favorite is Zhiwa Ling, a strikingly beautiful Bhutanese-owned lodge in Paro (www.zhiwaling.com) that authentically reflects the country's intricate architecture, generous spirit and natural habitat. For those wishing to be totally pampered in Paro, unwind at the 29-room Uma Paro (www.uma.com.bz). The refined and refreshingly spa-scented Uma oozes class in its hotel, lovely restaurant and

delicious spa. If you really want some enlightenment, book their amazing Hot Stone Bath, which reduces you to insta-putty. Thimphu is adding even more hotels. Although a work-in-progress, the Taj Tashi Hotel promises to be the capital city's most elaborate hotel. One of its best features is its small downstairs restaurant, which serves tasty and nicely prepared Bhutanese dishes -- the momos are to die-for.

(www.tajhotels.com/common_pdf/Taj-Tashi-Bhutan.pdf)

Before heading to the Punakha Valley, you should pack away all your expectations of fancy hotels. The Meri Puensum is a clean, beautifully landscaped but scrappy hotel in an idyllic setting. It boasts a breathtaking view of the mountains from its gazebo, but offers simple amenities, along with a buffet-style restaurant that serves exemplary fare. For the Ritz crowd, it will be roughing it.

•What to do: To truly enjoy your Bhutan experience, plan everything out before you get on that plane. It can be difficult to give into your spontaneous whims. This "Land of the Thunder Dragon" offers numerous activities for the athletic traveler -- short to long treks, mountain bike rides and rafting options. Just tell your tour operator beforehand what your interests are.

For those seeking a more restful and/or cultural sojourn, take advantage of the spas, shops, dzongs (monasteries) and museums. A real treat is watching an archery competition (we were spectators in Paro). Whatever you do, save up your energy for the trek to the Takstang Lhakhang (The Tiger's Nest), one of the world's greatest and most staggering marvels.

•More info: Visit the country's main tourism Web site at www.tourism.gov.bt. For a detailed itinerary of the Backroads Bhutan trip, visit www.backroads.com. Our local guide Namgay Tshering and his staff also specialize in operating customized tours, including treks. Visit his site at www.nat.com.bt. To get you into the Bhutan mood, check out my friend Karma Dorji's coffee-table book about growing up there and then moving to the U.S., "Dreaming of Prayer Flags: Stories and Images from Bhutan," available at prayerflagsbook.com.

Reach Randy Myers at rmyers@bayareanewsgroup.com or 925-977-8419.