

# travel

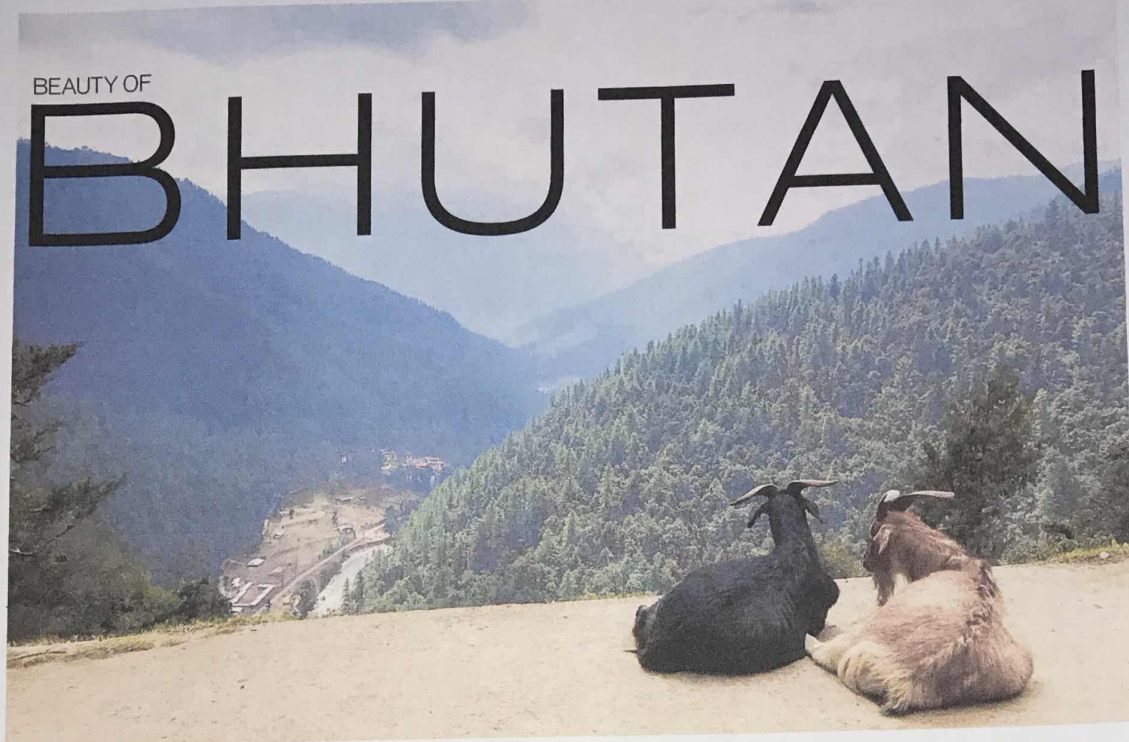


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BEAUTY OF

# BHUTAN



*Mystic mountain moments and vibrant culture  
reward trekkers to the Thunder Dragon's Land*

Story and photographs by Julie L. Kessler  
Special to the Star-Advertiser

## IF YOU GO

### Bhutan

>> **Best way to get there:** Connecting service from Honolulu to Bangkok is offered on United via Tokyo or ANA via Seoul starting at \$1,404 round trip. Boundless Journeys offers one-week, escorted tours for small groups in April, October and November departing from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan, entry visa, accommodations, meals, excursions, local guide and driver, and all ground transportation. 800-941-8010, BoundlessJourneys.com

>> **Don't forget:** Weather can change from 35 to 70 degrees on the same day depending on elevation, so layering is key. Comfortable walking shoes are critical, especially for trekking. Bhutan tourism is in its infancy, and outside Thimphu, Wi-Fi is not always available. Bhutanese meals are mostly vegetarian, with an abundance of red chili. Pack protein bars and other snacks for hiking and long drives.

>> **To learn more:** For general information and trip ideas, tourism.gov.bt

Arriving in Bhutan is not for the faint of heart. The Airbus 319 made its final descent into Paro through a narrow mountain opening, hugging the snow-capped, jagged-edged Himalayas. My awe at the captain's skills was overshadowed only by the racing beat of my pulse. I knew these were noninstrument, visual landings. Flights cannot enter or depart Paro in inclement weather or darkness.

Bhutan is not easy to get to from the U.S. It requires flying to Bangkok and staying overnight because flights to Bhutan leave at dawn to best hedge against cloud cover. There is a brief stop in India — Kolkata, Bagdogra or Guwahati — before finally arriving in Paro.

Long curious about this tiny Buddhist nation, where well-fed dogs roam freely and outnumber Bhutan's nearly 800,000 people, I joined a group of five for a one-week jaunt organized by Boundless Journeys, a travel company specializing in off-the-beaten-track destinations.

### A royal history

Remarkably, Bhutan has never been colonized. In the late 19th century, Ugyen Wangchuck consolidated power among disputing factions, and in 1907 he was elected Druk Gyalpo — Dragon King. The Wangchuck clan has ruled Bhutan ever since.

In 1971 the beloved fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, declared that "gross national happiness," or GNH, was a more important measure of a nation's prosperity than its gross domestic product. Singye focused his attention on education, government decentralization and controlled economic development. King Singye was so revered that when he called for democratic elections in 2001, the Bhutanese protested, wanting to remain an absolute monarchy. But convinced of democracy's progression, King Singye abdicated the throne in 2006. Two years later Bhutan's constitution was enacted by its first elected parliament under the reign of Singye's son, the current king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. GNH remains at the heart of all

Two wild goats rest near Cheri Gempa monastery at the top of Jigme Dori National Park overlooking Thimphu Valley, above. Below, the sacred monastic retreat of Taktsang, known as Tiger's Nest, built into a cliff at 10,200 feet near Paro, Bhutan. At right, the Rama VIII Bridge, an asymmetrical cable-stayed bridge, spans the Chao Praya River.

The Rama VIII Bridge, an asymmetrical cable-stayed bridge, spans the Chao Praya River.



## Gross personal happiness includes a layover in Bangkok

Departures to the kingdom of Bhutan are at dawn, so if heading there from the U.S., travelers must overnight in Bangkok. Given Bangkok's notorious 24/7 traffic, it's best to overnight outbound near Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Fortunately, it's also home to Novotel's Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel, just a five-minute stroll from the terminal's underground walkway and less by complimentary 24-hour hotel shuttle.

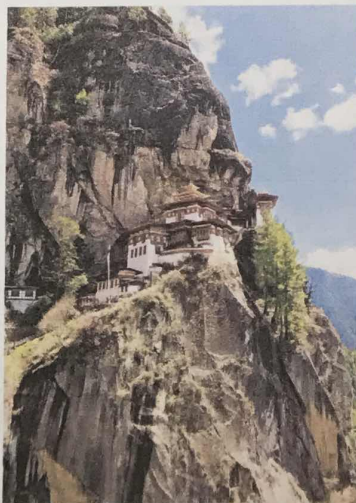
Novotel's rooms are large and comfortably appointed. Its beautifully landscaped pool ends jet lag, and its swim-up bar serves excellent satays. The 24-hour gym and candlelit Vous spa with excellent Thai massages prepare travelers for trekking rigors. Perhaps most important, it serves breakfast from 3 a.m., has a great shopping arcade and a "24-hour flexi" program that allows guests to check in whenever they arrive and check out 24 hours later. Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel Bangkok. novotelairportbk.com. Phone: 800-668-6835.

After trekking adventures in Bhutan, a bit of R&R was necessary. Nothing feeds a sense of happiness like the comfort of visiting a dear friend, which is how one feels on arriving at Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok.

Perfectly situated on the Chao Praya River bank, the Shangri-La has access to river taxis to sight-see, the Sky Train to zip around greater Bangkok, two glorious pools with river views, an excellent health club and wonderful shops just steps away. A mealtime, there are Thai, Chinese and Italian restaurants, or take a Horizon dinner cruise and enjoy the sparkling lights of several landmarks as you glide by. The ship also offers a wonderful afternoon high tea featuring delectable desserts prepared by executive pastry chef Claus Olsen.

To manage those post-trekking kinks, I headed to the hotel's Chi Spa for a Journey Retreat. After a massage and facial in an enormous treatment room with shower, Jacuzzi, changing room and king-size bed, I had tapped into my own gross personal happiness by returning to Bangkok's Shangri-La Hotel. shangri-la.com. Phone: 866-565-5050.

Julie L. Kessler, Special to the Star-Advertiser



Please see BHUTAN, D4



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## BHUTAN

Continued from D1

governmental policies — economic, legal and social.

How could one not want to visit a country where its focus is happiness and kindness is practically a legal requirement?

### A capital town

With a population of just 100,000, it often seems there are more dogs than people in Thimphu — probably because there are. The pooches are gentle and well-mannered since the predominantly Buddhist populace treats them so well. But they are everywhere, sleeping, stretching and holding cute canine courts. It becomes an issue only at night when collective barking interferes with sleep.

Thimphu has narrow streets, a few cafes and some little shops, many selling carved-wood phalluses of various shapes and sizes. There are also enormous flying versions painted near entryways of many homes. Said to ward off evil and protect fertility, this was the brainchild of 15th-century Tibetan Buddhist monk Lama Drukpa Kunley, known as the Divine Madman.

Thimphu, as all of Bhutan, is without a single traffic light. The city once had a few stoplights, but people objected that they were too impersonal. The lights were removed and replaced with uniformed, white-gloved policemen, perched in brightly painted, gazebo-like structures. They direct traffic with robotic movements much like 1980s disco



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dancers.

Thimphu's attraction extends beyond the intersections. At Changlimithang Archery Ground, men in traditional "ghos" — knee-length, belted, kimono-style wraps with internal pouches — were competing in Bhutan's national sport. Targets were 420 feet away and the arrows so fast that we could tell who scored only when participants started singing and dancing.

The Thimphu Dzong — fortress, government offices and monks' quarters — is the city's landmark. Rebuilt after a fire in traditional fashion — without nails — its massive, three-tiered, red-and-gold roofed, whitewashed structures are impressive. Inside are colorful, intricate "thangka" religious paintings.

At Jigme Dori National Park, we trekked 3 miles round trip to Cheri Gampa, a monastery built in 1620 by Shabdrung, a high lama and Bhutan's great unifier. At 9,200 feet elevation, it pro-

vided panoramic views of Thimphu Valley. While taking photos I tried to steer clear of two wild goats, but one decided the mountain-top was his alone and charged, abruptly stopping an inch from me. That pretty much made a second cup of coffee unnecessary.

At Choki Art School, students from 14 to 20 learn traditional arts of thangka religious painting, woodcarving and weaving to become employable and fulfill a pillar of GNH by preserving tradition. The results were labor-intensive and beautiful.

Our final stop was Buddha Dordenma, where the 154-foot bronze statue dipped in gold is one of the world's largest. A gift from China, the Buddha took seven years to build.

### Pleasant Punakha

Driving the 55 miles from Thimphu to Punakha took about three hours. Dodging meandering cattle and dogs, and navigating hairpin turns through the Dochula Pass in the eastern Himalayas, elevation 10,320 feet, require a driver with the precision of a neurosurgeon. However, the rewards for enduring acrophobia are stellar views of snowcapped mountains.

Parking by the Mo Chhu River the next morning, we walked across a narrow suspension bridge, then ascended several switchbacks to Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Temple.

The trek was nearly as colorful as the temple itself. The sight of blood-red rhododendrons, glistening emerald rice terraces and monks in saffron-colored robes carrying pink umbrellas as shields against the

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PHOTO BY JULIE L. KESSLER, SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

Masked dancers honoring the Great Treasure Master who discovered the relics of Guru Rinpoche.

sun seemed like mirages.

The three-story temple, built for King Khesar by his grandmother, sits in a flowered courtyard, featuring images of religious deities and intricate Buddhist carvings. From the third-floor terrace, visitors see more breathtaking views.

Next we visited the 200-year-old Nalanda Buddhist Institute responsible for educating and housing 110 monks. We were fortunate to have tea with head monk Lama Pem, who commenced his studies 35 years ago at age 10.

Additional highlights were the Punakha Dzong, perhaps the most beautiful in Bhutan, containing elaborately detailed thangka paintings of Buddha's life from birth to enlightenment, and a pleasant hike to Chimi Lhakhang, a temple dedicated to the Divine Madman and known for unusual methods of teaching Buddhism using humor and sexual overtones.

#### Paro and environs

Driving from Punakha to Paro — 78 miles as the crow flies — took four hours. I soon realized we did not

have a great driver, but an automobilist rock star. Riding in the jump seat, I caught frequent glimpses of the abyss just beyond the crumbling blacktop at the road's edge as well as some hilarious road signs to help drivers keep their wits. My favorites: "If you are married, divorce speed" and "Safety on the road means safe tea at home."

The journey's apex was the trek to Taktsang, a sacred, monastic retreat known as Tiger's Nest and the image of Bhutan best known to foreigners. Lore has it that Guru Rinpoche flew to the mountain on a tiger's back to subdue the local demon, then meditated there for three months.

The temple clings as if by magic to the cliff-side at 10,200-foot elevation. Hiking slowly to appreciate the magnificent views took several hours round trip. Twice on the path, for about 15 minutes, I was completely alone, suffused with ethereal sensations. Without doubt this was the most spiritual place I visited in Bhutan.

Near the top, additional rewards were a mammoth

rushing waterfall, swaying, multicolored prayer flags and an ancillary structure unimaginably built between two craggy mountain crevices.

Driving 90 minutes the next day on hairpin turns up to Chele La Pass at 12,500 feet, we spotted several enormous yaks, including a nursing baby the size of a large pony. Atop, we trekked a bit higher, placing prayer flags in view of Sikkim's mountains to the west and Tibet to the north.

During my week in the Land of the Thunder Dragon, it became abundantly clear the Bhutanese are a kind and resilient people with spiritual generosity and ready smiles despite, or perhaps in spite of, an often extremely challenging natural environment. Its GNH policy probably doesn't hurt, either. For this and so much more, "kadengche la" — thank you.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer, attorney and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight."

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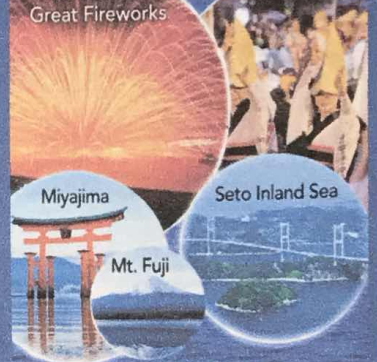
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