

Monday Morning on the plane to Paro; Oct 22

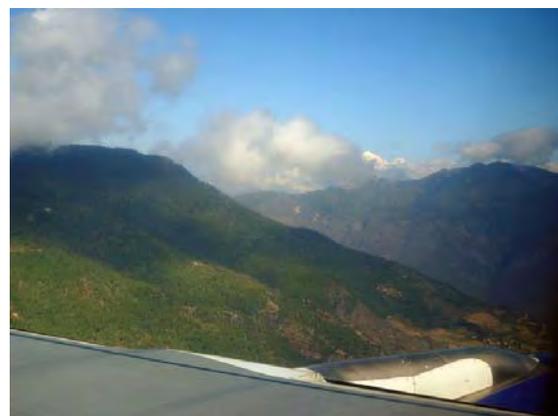
Last night we flew into Bangkok, arriving at 5:30 (with a one hour time change from HK, so now we were only 12 hours different than home). We made our way through customs and immigration (remembering the last time we did this we had to wait for Phyllis to prove she did not have Yellow Fever). We stepped outside to catch the shuttle to the airport hotel and were hit with a wall of heat. My glasses fogged up. I had forgotten the heat/humidity of Thailand. We spent the night at the Novotel, a large (really large) airport hotel, where Andy and I had stayed once before. The lobby is beautiful in the Thai style, with trees and sculptures of lotus flowers. We went to our room, and by 8:00 were fast asleep. Good thing as we had to get up at 3:00 (AM!!) to catch our morning flight to Bhutan. We had our breakfast buffet (which opens at 3:30 – lots of travelers here with early morning flights) and shuttled back to the airport to check in with Druk Air, the Royal Bhutan Airline. (Druk in Bhutanese means Thunder Dragon). There were surprising a lot of people there for 4:30 in the morning. We checked in and asked for a window seat as Alvin told us the view flying into Paro was amazing. I asked the agent specifically not to be sitting on the wing. We were driven by bus to the plane. And guess where we ended up sitting? On the wing. But the plane is small (only 30 rows) and just about every row is on the wing.

The plane is an Airbus 319 (Jeremy probably already knew that). The flight was not full and Andy and I had 3 seats for the two of us. We were served a lovely breakfast with a choice of an omelet (not veggie) or noodles (veggies). The noodles were delicious.

This was not a non-stop. We flew about 2.5 hours and landed in Guwahati. In case you are wondering where that is, I had to look it up. It is a major city in Eastern India. So I guess now we have been to India! From here it will only be a 35 minutes flight. The excitement is building. But so is the nervousness. There will be altitude (although we have taken our Diomox and have tingling toes to prove it); there will be long car rides over winding roads (although the views are supposed to be spectacular); there will be steep paths and mountains to climb. There is the unknown – more so than in any other trip we have taken. I just finished reading (no really, just a few minutes ago), *Beyond the Earth and Sky* (which by the way means Thank You). It was written quite a few years ago by a Canadian woman who spent 3 years teaching in Bhutan. That description does not do justice to the book, as it is really about her experiences and life in Bhutan. I learned much. One of the things I learned was to be present in the moment (mindfulness). Not to worry about the flight home and the short connection time and whether we will miss our flight. Not to worry about whether I can make it up to the Tiger Nest Monastery. What will be will be. Que sera sera. Be in the moment. Enjoy where you are and what you are doing. Remember it. I guess that is the Buddhist way. Sounds good. But I am not a Buddhist. Nevertheless, there are always lessons to be learned and I will try to stay in the moment. Yes, the excitement is rising.

Monday evening (actually early Tuesday morning)

So it was indeed only a 35 minute flight from Guwahati to Paro. As we began our descent, the pilot came on over the PA system to assure us that if we saw the mountains closer than ever before, that was normal and he knew what he was doing. And indeed, the plane maneuvered between the mountains like a mountain goat. It was spectacular – even sitting over the wing (THANK YOU for the tip, Alvin).





When the plane landed, we all walked down the steps (no walkway here) into the bright sun and warm air and just stood on the tarmac, milling about, taking pictures of the terminal (one building – but what a spectacular building), the mountains and each other. Large groups were posing. I have never seen anything like this before. No rush to get to the immigration line. No one telling us to move away from the airplane. Be here, be now.

We entered the building and quickly made our way through passport control and immigration and out to get our luggage which was already waiting for us (when there is only one small plane, it does not take long to unload).

We went outside and found our guide holding a sign for us. His name is Jamyang and our driver is Kinzang. So now a brief lesson about Bhutanese names. When babies are 4-5 days old, their parents take them to the temple where the monk says prayers for the baby and hold out rolls of small sheets of paper, each with a name on it. The parents pick one (sort of like – pick a card, any card) and the name written on that paper is the baby's name. So most babies have the same name. Jamyang said that in school they were Jamyang A, Jamyang B etc to tell them apart. There are no surnames or family names, although some have second names (Jamyang's second name is Denzin).

While we are mentioning school, let's talk about education in Bhutan. Until the 1960's the only education was in the monasteries. Now grades 1-10 are free for all children, but if they live far from the school (for example a three day walk), it is unlikely they will attend. There are also boarding schools in different villages. Once they finish 10th grade, they have to take an exam and only the top get to go on with their education. There are two universities in Bhutan but no medical school. The mission of the educational system is "an educated and enlightened society of 'galyong gakid pelzom' at peace with itself, at peace with the world, built and sustained by the idealism and the creative enterprise of our citizens."



So, back to our trip. Both Jamyang and Kinzang were wearing the traditional Gho. Jamyang explained that the gho is the traditional and national dress for men, since the 17th century. The idea was to give a distinctive identity to the Bhutanese citizens. The gho is a knee-length robe tied at the waist by a cloth belt (kera). When entering a dzong (more on this later), they have to put on a scarf (taken from the tallit????) called a [kabney](#). The government of Bhutan requires all men to wear the gho if they work in a government office or school. Men are also required to wear the gho on formal occasions. But Jamyang said on weekends when he is not working, he wears jeans. The gho can be in any color or pattern, and in fact, most are quite colorful, but all have big white cuffs (Andy queried how do they keep them so clean?).

For women, the national dress is the kira, which is an ankle-length dress consisting of a rectangular piece of woven fabric, wrapped and folded around the body and pinned at both shoulders, usually with silver brooches, and bound at the waist with a long belt. The kira is usually worn with a [wonju](#) (long-sleeved blouse) inside and a short jacket ([ortoego](#)) outside. The cuffs for women can be any color.

OK , I said back to our trip. We climbed into our Toyota Land Cruiser and off we went. This was to be a long day (and today will be as well – but that hasn't happened yet) as we need to make our way over the mountains towards Jakar for the festival there on Wednesday.

We drove through the mountains to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. On the way we passed rice fields, and small villages, crossed bridges covered in prayer flags. We saw temples in the hills. There are no traffic jams in Bhutan, just cow jams and dog jams. Yes, there are cows everywhere (they belong to families, but during the day just wander around and at night they make their way home), and dogs everywhere. The rivers are full of fish, But the Buddhist way is not to harm anyone or anything. So no fishing allowed. You can't kill all the feral dogs roaming the streets. Yet, they import chicken and beef from India and eat it. Just a small contradiction.

Our first stop was at the point where the river from Paro and the river from Thimphu meet (Pa Chu and Wang Chu), join and head towards India. This is considered bad luck, so there are three stupas built there (Nepali, Tibetan and Bhutanese). Each is a place to pray to the god of compassion.



A stupa, or Chorten, means “basis of offering.” It is a symbol of an enlightened mind. Basically, it is a spiritual monument. The stupa represents Buddha's body, his speech and his mind. Each stupa has a holy relic in it.

There are three styles of stupa – the Nepali, the Tibetan and Bhutanese. The Nepali is based on the classical stupa, with the sides of the tower painted with a pair of eyes – the all seeing eyes of the Buddha. The part that looks like a nose is the number 1 in Sanskrit symbolizing the absoluteness of Buddha. The Tibetan style has a rounded part which flares out instead of a dome. The Bhutanese comprises a square stone pillar.

On the road, we saw many houses with red chilies drying on the roof. Very colorful. Chili is a staple here. Jamyang says they eat it to keep warm in the winter (the most common Bhutanese food is chili cheese). Most families grow their own chilies, milk their own cows (milk, butter, cheese), grow their own vegetables and are very self-sufficient. They also sell what they have grown along the side of the road. Free enterprise.



The mountains are covered in pine trees, juniper, eucalyptus. Jamyang named every tree. I do not remember them all. The road (yes, there is only one road between cities) is under construction. It is a narrow two lane road in most places, and at some parts they are blacktopping it, other parts are smooth as silk, and others are gravel with potholes. Made for an interesting drive. The roads are maintained by Indian workers, who live in government houses (shacks) along the road.

But the scenery was beautiful. Particularly the rice fields. Different shades of green. The sun hitting them and the shadows making shapes.

We stopped after about 1.5 hours for lunch in Thimphu. While the population of Bhutan is just under 700,000, the population of Thimphu is about 70,000. It is a small city, but expanding with buildings being built at the outskirts. There is one road in and one road out (as Jamyang said, you can't get lost). It is the only major capital in the world with no stop light. Instead, a police man directs traffic. And the signs of where to cross show a man in a gho.

We will be back here for two days later in the trip.

Lunch was at the Bhutan Kitchen restaurant. Lunch was a buffet of Bhutanese food – rice, beef in onions, spinach soup, egg and cheese, cabbage. And butter tea. The traditional butter tea, made from a tea leaf that makes the tea pink, with yak butter and salt added. It tasted like liquid salted butter.

The toilet in the restaurant was Western style (meaning you did not have to squat), but there was a large garbage can filled with water and a pitcher to use to flush it. I think this will be one of the nicer ones we see.

And then it was back to the car and on with the 2.5 hour drive to Punakha - our destination for the night. We went over the Dochhu La Pass at 10,300 feet and stopped to see the 108 stupas (really 109) built by the Queen Mother.



We then made our way back down the mountain to Punakha. The sun was at an angle and the light was magnificent. The rice fields just glistened. We stopped at our first dzong, a fortress-like monastery. The Punakha Dzong is called the Palace of Great Happiness and Bliss (Druk Pungthang Decchen Phodrang). And was built in the 17th century at the point where the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu rivers meet. It is also the country's most beautiful Dzong and it is indeed a magnificent structure. It served as the seat of the kingdoms government until the time of the second king and now is the winter home of the head abbot of Bhutan.. You will have to wait to see the pictures. The temple part, where photos are not allowed,

has three large gold statues of Buddha, of the Rangjung Kasapani who brought Buddhism to Bhutan and a third. In 1907, Punakha Dzong was the site of the coronation of Ugyen Wangchuck as the first King of Bhutan. Three years later, a treaty was signed at Punankha whereby the British agreed not to interfere in Bhutanese internal affairs and Bhutan allowed Britain to direct its foreign affairs. In 1987, the dzong was partially destroyed by fire. A covered wooden cantilever bridge crossing the Mo Chhu river was built together with the Dzong in the 17th century, but has been rebuilt a few times due to flash floods that destroyed it.

At the Uma Hotel



And then it was on to our hotel, the Uma. What an incredible place. Only 11 rooms. When you enter, you are seated outside overlooking the valley and served mint tea. They bring you your paper work to sign. And when you feel ready, they take you to your room, which overlooks the river, the rice fields and the mountains. We had dinner, came back to the room, and by 9:00 collapsed.



View from Uma

Oct 23 Road to Jakar, Tuesday



Last night was the best night's sleep since we left home. True, I fell asleep at 900pm and woke up at 400am, but I had 7 wonderful, uninterrupted hours of sleep. Andy was still asleep so I quietly moved to our living room area and worked on this diary. That's the part I sent this morning. When Andy woke up we opened the curtains and saw the river and the most beautiful mountains with a layer of fog and a snow capped top which glowed pink. We got ready and went to breakfast which faced the other way and had its own magnificent view of the rice fields and valley and the Queen's temple.

Breakfast was an incredible experience all on its own. We had



choices, which was hard, but we both started with mixed fruit juice (from fresh apples, pineapple, watermelon, guava, and I have no idea what else). They brought out a basket of freshly baked bread with fresh butter, homemade jam, honey and home made peanut butter with ground peanuts in it. DELICIOUS. I ordered a small

portion of yogurt just to taste (made from yak milk – once was enough), yak cheese (a hard yellow cheese surprisingly tasty) and oatmeal. Did I say oatmeal? That is not doing it justice. It was “original porridge with cinnamon injected apples and dried compote.” Which was figs and raisins and apples and oh my! Andy has the French toast. Did I say French toast? It was “French toast with apples and English cream.” Oh, and he also had the oatmeal. It was elegant, it was delicious, and we didn't want to leave. But the truth – it did not feel like Bhutan, or what I thought Bhutan should feel like.



I neglected to mention that the Uma Hotel only opened a month ago and the some of the owners just dropped in from Singapore. They asked how long we were staying and we said just the one night, but we had hoped to stay again on the way back, but it was full. He said he would see what he could do for us, but we are not really expecting anything to come of it.

But leave we did, as it was time to hit the road. We had an 8-hour drive ahead of us in order to make it to Jaker, in the Bumpthang Valley. So we got to talk about a lot of things.

I asked Jamtang about his wife and about marriage in Bhutan. His wife was working until they had their son. But soon she will return to work. They met at the University. Many couples just live together; a wedding is just a large festive meal with friends and family, where they wear their best gho and kira. There is no blessing by a monk and no visit to the temple. Since every home has a shrine room, they go into that room to give offerings to Buddha. However, the divorce rate in Bhutan is rising, so the law is now if a couple divorces, the husband has pay 10% of the salary to their children. The other difference in Bhutan is that in the villages, the husband moves in with the wife's family.

We asked about medicine and health care. All the main areas have the equivalent of a clinic and there are hospitals as well. Bhutan was once known as the “Land of Medicinal Herbs” and there is still a hospital for traditional medicine. In fact, even at the Western hospitals, traditional medicine is offered. I asked what they use for people who have trouble sleeping. Without hesitating, Zinyang said Lorezepam!

Today being Tuesday, it was a “dry day” and a “pedestrian day.” That means no selling of alcohol. And it means no driving (except for busses, tourist cars and odd (or even depending on the week) taxis. Everyone else has to walk. The idea is to prevent too much car emissions into the environment. Cars were parked everywhere along the side of the road, but at least we only ran into trucks along the ups and downs and switchback roads of the mountains.



We began the drive east, leaving Punakha at 4400 feet, and its landscape of cactus, banana, poinsettia and other semi-tropical plants. We will be back in Punakha in a few days. Punakha is the ancient capital of Bhutan. The valley is dominated by the impressive *Punakha Dzong*, which sits at the point that the Mo (female) and Po (male) rivers meet. Built by Shabdrung in 1637, this dzong is one of the holiest in Bhutan. It houses some of the country’s most sacred relics, including Shabdrung’s preserved remains. The main abbot moves from Thimphu to Punakha every winter as the lower elevation has a more temperate climate.

We climbed higher and higher into the mountains. Along the side of the road marijuana was growing wild (very illegal here but growing like a weed nevertheless). The road again was a mixture of black top, black top with potholes, and gravel where the road was being widened or fixed. Remember when hotels had “magic finger” boxes? You would put in a quarter and the bed would shake. That is what the car felt like. The road was so narrow at some points that I did not dare look. And we would see the Indian workers breaking rock, cleaning the road and working hard. Turns out they are not just cheap labor. They are brought from India because they are experts in building roads in the Himalayas and thus are brought into Bhutan to help. You see trucks from India all over the roads – decorated just the way an Indian temple is decorated. Bhutanese cars are not allowed to have any writings or pictures on them, but the Indians are.



We drove from Punakha to Wengdue where there was one of the oldest (from 1638) and most beautiful dzongs. Unfortunately it burned down a year ago and now only the shell is standing. Donations are pouring in to rebuild it, but not enough.

The drive took us along rivers, and afforded us the most beautiful views of the Himalayas, green, yellow, red as the leaves began to change. We saw more and more rice fields, until we began climbing even higher. Then the vegetation changed. The semi-tropical vegetation gave way to pine forests,

rhododendrons (which bloom in the spring, not now) and dwarf bamboo. We looked for grey langur monkeys, but did not see them. Maybe on the way back.

On the leg of the trip we cross over several passes – passes where we hit the summit and then head back down again. Our first pass was the Pele La (la = pass) at 11,268 feet. As in all the passes, there is a stupa surrounded by prayer flags. This is the border of the Black Mountain National Park (Singye Wangchuck) and the gateway to central Bhutan.



We continued on our way towards Trongsa, stopping for lunch at the Kuenphen Restaurant. Lunch on the road is starting to look the same. Rice, beef, mixed vegetables, cauliflower and a candy and tea for dessert. And then we continued and climbed higher and higher again. Then, 2 hours later, it was time for tea. We stopped at a small place clearly for tourists. We sat outside at wooded tables (live a tree log) and sat on smaller tree log “chairs.” And we were surrounded by dogs. They just sat there looking sad and staring at our cookies. Needless to say, they didn’t get any. Oh, and cows were walking all around us. It was a bit surreal.

I neglected to mention the prayer wheels. Along the road, particularly where there is a waterfall (small ones), there is often a small white building with a large prayer wheel in it, which is turned by the water. There are prayer wheels everywhere in fact. The revolving cylinders are filled with printed prayers (remind you of a mezuzah?) which are “said” every time the wheel is turned. They are often intricately decorated.

This is a good time to also talk about the prayer flags which are literally seen everywhere - hanging across bridges, in trees, along the side of the road – everywhere. There are four types of prayer flags. There is the house flag (goendhar) which is the smallest and are mounted on the roof of homes. Once a year the family replaces the flag. These are often white with small blue, green, red and yellow ribbons attached to the edges. These flags have the blessing for Mahakala, the main protective deity of Bhutan.



The second type of prayer flag is the wind flag (lungdhar). This is the one you see all over the hillsides or ridges. They are placed for good luck protection from illness, achievement of a personal goal or the acquisition of wisdom. They are printed with the Wind Horse (Lungta) which carries a wish-fulfilling jewel on its back. The belief is that the wind carries the prayers up to heaven. And they are everywhere!



The third flag is the Death Flag (manidhar). These are very long, very tall flags placed on bamboo poles and are placed on hillsides etc on behalf of a deceased person. On the flags are the prayers to the god of compassion (Chenresig). These flags are usually erected in groups of 108 and are at strategic high points from which a river can be seen. The belief is that the prayers will waft with the wind to the river and be carried on the long and winding journey. We saw them on the sides of mountains, in front of houses – everywhere, not necessarily near a river.

The last flag is the largest and is the god flag (lhadhar). It is placed outside the dzongs or temples and represents victory over evil. Unlike the other flags, these have no writing, but pictures of tigers and dragons.

But that is not the end of the story. The flags also come in five colors: blue (water), green (wood), red (fire), yellow (earth) and white (iron). They also represent the five meditation Buddhas, the five wisdoms, the five directions and the five emotions. The prayer for the flag is carved onto a wooden block and then printed on the flag.

And that is why wherever you go, you see these colorful flags everywhere.



Now, back to climbing higher and the changing vegetation. As we got closer to the top we saw yaks. Just like the cows were all over the road, now the yaks were all over the road. They belong to the farmers who during the summer take the yaks to the high pastures, but in the fall, they return to the lower altitudes (yes, 11-13,000 is a lower altitude). They roam around eating the “drop bamboo.” They farmers milk them for yak milk and cheese. Very cool!

This area is also known for its bamboo weaving of baskets, fences, houses etc. It is very hard to break the bamboo, so they lay it down on the road and cars and trucks drive over it, breaking and softening it.



Our first view of Trongsa (at 7300 feet) and the Trongsa Dzong was from across the valley. But it was another 12 miles down the mountain, across a bridge and up the other side before we actually reached Trongsa. The Trongsa Dzong is the largest in Bhutan. It was strategically placed so as travelers walked from the east to the west, they had to pass through here and pay a tax to the government. Often they would pay which whatever they were going to sell - woven goods, vegetables, etc. Above the Dzong is a watchtower (now a museum) where they could see everyone coming through.

The Dzong is on the hillside overlooking the Mangde Chhu.

We did not stop to see the Dzong as we will do that on the way back (yes, we have to do this long 8-hour trek again on the way back). It was time to climb the mountain once again on our way to Jakar in Bumthang (which is at 9000 feet). We crossed two more mountain passes, Yutong La (11,155 feet) and Kiki La (9515 feet),. At each pass there is a stupa and it is good luck to circle it, so Kinzang, our driver would drive around it in a circle before continuing on our way.

At this lower elevation the main crop is mustard seed and so the ground looks yellow as you look down from the mountain into the valley.

As we left the mountains and entered the Chume Valley of Bumthang, the road finally straightened out. We saw a large crowd, and being curious I asked what was going on. Well, it was an archery tournament. How lucky were we? Archery is the national sport, called datse. The targets are 140m apart (let me tell you – that is FAR). Players are in teams with half standing on either side. They shoot from one side to the other and then



back again. The ones near the target call out if the shot was good or bad. If the player hits the target, his team mates did a slow dance and sang praises (more like yelled). When he missed, they mocked him. It was very entertaining and we felt very fortunate to run into it.

The next stop was a handicraft shop which Jamyang said was the best in the country (kick back? Maybe but I am ok with that). I managed to find everything I was looking for at this shop, including a mask worn at festivals, some fabric and a few beads.

And finally, finally, we were in Jakar. Jakar is spacious and surrounded by tree covered mountains, and the valley in which Jakar is located (Choekor Valley) is considered to be one of the most beautiful in all Bhutan, commonly referred to as "Little Switzerland". The cluster of villages below the dzong, which are collectively known as Jakar Town, have a population of around 5,000. The main bazaar was

been destroyed in three successive fires in 2010 and 2011 and currently consists of two rows of temporary single-story structures. The whole town is two parallel streets, each about two blocks long.

We arrived at our hotel, the Yoezerling Lodge (which is not actually in Jakar but a 20 minute walk away). We were again led to the dining room and served tea and cookies (we thought it was something the Uma did, but maybe all hotels in Bhutan do it). While we had tea, the staff went to light fire to warm the room. When they were done, we went to our room.

As fancy as the Uma was, this one is simple. It is a classic Bumthang hotel (or so the guide book says), made of simple pine and family owned. The rooms are heated with a wood stove (bukharis) which are lit with a bit of kerosene and the wood is added to keep the fire going. Problem is the pine is a soft wood and burns very quickly so you have to keep adding wood. Why do you need a fire you ask? Because at night it is very, very cold, as low as 32 degrees expected tonight.

We were expecting something simple, but this went beyond our expectations. We will be here for 3 nights, so we thought we could finally unpack. Except there is no closet and no drawers. Luckily we brought some shampoo with us to wash clothes, but will use it to wash our hair as the only amenity is a very small bar of soap. The towels are also very small (I forgot to mention that at the Uma, the towels were on a warming rack - maybe we just got spoiled). And in Jakar, the hydrothermal power (which is the number one resource in Bhutan) is very weak so the lights often go out. That happened this evening as we were sitting and reading. We had to search around our suitcases in the dark for our flashlights. It lasted about 20 minutes.

And dinner was – guess what – rice, beef, mixed vegetable. Are you seeing a pattern here?

So now we are back in our room, fire lit to keep us warm, lights back on. I am done writing for today. But there is no internet, and we are here for 3 days, so I have no idea when this will actually get sent.

Wednesday Oct 24, Jakar

We slept quite well last night under down comforters which kept us warm as the room was quite cold. In the morning, Andy lit the stove so that when I finally got up, the room had warmed up. We got dressed and headed for breakfast, which was waiting for us. There was apple juice (perhaps fresh from the apple orchard right next door), a plate of Swiss cheese (not even yak), jams and honey from Bhutan, an egg, toast and buckwheat pancakes. Did I mention that buckwheat is the main crop grown here? Well, it is. Turns out it is not very tasty.



Today was day 3 of the Jakar Tshechu, or festival, the main reason we rushed to reach Jakar. Festivals are held once a year in each district and take place usually in the Jakar Dzong. They are not staged for tourists (in fact there were many more locals than Westerners today), but rather serve both religious and social functions. People come from all over the district and it is a time to socialize with old friends. One of the tenets of Buddhism is that you need to collect good deeds as the good and bad deeds you perform are counted at your death and that determines what happens to you. Attending a tshechu and watching the ritual dances counts as a good deed.

This one was in the Jakar Dzong. The Jakar Dzong, is also called the 'Fortress of the White Bird.' It was built in 1667. Apparently, when a group of lamas (priests) were in the area searching for a suitable site for the new dzong, a single white bird continuously circled overhead before settling on the top of a hill. This was considered a good omen, and the hill was selected as the site for the dzong and White Bird was adopted as its name.



We drove up the mountain (remember, a dzong is a fortress so it was always built in a strategic point with a watchtower to look out for enemies). We walked into the main courtyard which was already filling up with people, and the dances had begun. We made our way to one of the sides and found "seats" on a narrow concrete ledge. Many people were sitting on the floor, and the "community police" (locals assigned the role for the day) kept moving the crowd back to make enough room for the dancers. The smart people in the know brought pieces of foam or carpet to sit on.

The festival is all dances mostly by masked men (monks) with magnificent costumes and special shoes. There were local folk dances in between while they change costumes. Basically the dances are performed in honor of Guru Rinpoche (more on him later). I am sure each dance tells a specific story, but we could only guess. But the costumes, the masks, the colors, the people, the excitement (and not just ours) were all beyond what I imagined. The dances we saw were Balkor Chham (a mask dance), Shazam (a stage dance where the dancers all have large horned stag masks), Guru Tshengyu (eight manifestations of Guru), Ringa Chudrug and Ngachu Cham (dance of the sixteen fairies) and then we left for lunch.

I can only give you the story of some of them. The eight manifestations of Guru (Rinpoche) represent the 8 forms of Guru Rinpoche each accompanied by his two consorts, Yeshe Tshogyel (always on his right) and Mandarava (always on his left). This is both a dance and a play and begins with Dorji Drolo entering, followed by a long procession with the eight manifestations. By manifestations, they mean different personalities that he assumed along with different names. Since initiation is like a new life, each manifestation is considered a rebirth.

In the drum dance, the dancers wear animal masks and knee-length yellow skirts and carry a large drum in their right hand and a drum stick (which is curved like a hook) in their left hand. It is based on a vision.

Lunch back at the hotel – same menu but chicken instead of beef this time. Oh, and they gave some traditional Bhutanese food to try – chilies and cheese. I did not fall for it, but Andy liked it.

Then it was back to the festival for more dances. We stayed just for one, Ging Tsholing Chham (a wrathful dance) as it was starting to get quite cold.

The Wrathful dance, also called the Dance of the Wrathful Deities, the deities are the entourage of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. They are armed with special daggers that execute and therefore redeem the evil spirits. This represents the Buddhist teaching on the liberation of consciousness from the body.

Now, this seems like it would take about an hour. Well, each dance was over an hour long. Particularly the eight manifestations of Guru where the lama (high priest), dressed as Guru Rinpoche with a large gold mask, sat on a throne and the what seemed like the entire population, lined up to be blessed. Being blessed consisted of offering money into a large aluminum bowl (like a big salad bowl), have some holy water poured into your hands which you drink and put on your head, and receiving a string (yellow, red or blue – whatever they hand you). I have no idea if the color means anything or not. I think not.



There were also some dancers with masks that acted like the fool or clown, called atsara. They wear masks with long red noses and wear the shoes for the monks, but are played by lay people. And their antics made everyone laugh. For example, there was a rooster in the middle of everything (Jamyang later explained that the rooster lives there as a symbol of the monks never marrying). The fool would chase the rooster and the rooster would chase the fool. And the people laughed and laughed.

The best part was watching all the people. There were old people and young people, and little children and babies. They were all dressed in their finest ghos and kiras and the colors were breath-taking. The faces of the children were beautiful (I took lots of pictures of faces). There was one older woman sitting on the ground front of us with her daughter and grandchildren (or so it seemed). She had the most wonderful smile that lit her whole face up, but her teeth were all broken and red from chewing beetle nuts – a common practice here. And she was so self-conscious that she would cover her mouth whenever she smiled. I asked if I could take a picture of her, and she agreed, but she refused to smile and kept her mouth closed firmly.



Now, about Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava, meaning born from a lotus flower), also called the Precious Master. He is the most important figure in Bhutan's religious history. He is the central figure in Tantric Buddhism, and is believed to have visited the Bumthang valley in the 8th century. He is credited with converting the King of Bumthang to Buddhism in 746. All temples in Bhutan had statues of him. He is also believed to be a second Buddha with miraculous powers, including the ability to subdue evil spirits and demons. As he traveled around, he hid treasures of enlightenment, called terma, throughout the valley and Bhutan. Once these terma are found by a "revealer," the benefit inherent in the treasure is dispersed and a monument commemorates the great event.

On the way out of the festival, we walked through an area where there was a sort of flea market set up. Really it was a miniature (very, very miniature) Del Mar fair with stalls of clothes and toys, stalls of food and stalls with games (archery, darts, games of chance). The kids all seemed to be having a good time. I was quite surprised, giving the killing is not part of the Buddhist way, that many of the little boys had toy guns. I noticed in during the festival and again at this "fair." I asked Jamtang and he said his 5-year old son had lots of toy guns too. No explanation. Maybe this is just something boys do all over the world.

We also walked through the town of Jakar, but as I said before, it is a very town and it only took about 20 minutes. What was interesting however was peeking into the shops which seem to sell everything from clothes, to household goods to whatever else you might need. The items are all over the floor and in boxes.

Then it was back to the hotel for tea and a bit of relaxation and having our stove lit to warm up the room. While we were the only ones in the hotel last night, tonight it has filled up. We ate dinner next to 3 people from Huntington Beach. Such a small world. Our dinner started with warm Ara with eggs as Jamyang ordered it for us. Ara is the local Bhutanese alcohol. It can be had straight and cold, warmed up, or with mixed with

scrambled eggs and poured back into a glass. Jamyang and Kinzang said we had to try it, especially since today was a festival day. And so we did – with the eggs, thinking it would be easier to drink. Well, I could barely tolerate the smell. Andy and I each took one sip. It tasted like kerosene (or what you would expect kerosene to taste like). Must be an acquired taste, like so many other things here. Dinner started with a puréed chicken soup which was served, but the rest of dinner was a buffet. A bit of variety tonight. We had rice, fish (remember no fishing here, so it has to be imported), potatoes with mushrooms, broccoli and cauliflower, and chili cheese. It was actually quite tasty (except for all the small bones in the fish and the chili cheese which again Andy ate, but not me).

Tonight we are resting and catching up on writing and pictures (I have lots of editing to do – over 700 pictures today).





Thursday Oct 25, Jakar and Ura

This morning we were picked up at 6:30 to go to the last day of the festival where a large scroll is unrolled and everyone is blessed – all before sunrise, or at least before the sun hits the scroll.



Figure 2 the Jakar Dzong at sunrise

We got to the dzong before the festivities started so we were able to walk around and take lots of close-up pictures. We also watched the monks set up the pulley system for the scroll. The ceremony took place in the same courtyard as the dances, but now it was set up with an altar similar to the one seen in the temples (where pictures are not allowed). There are ritual cakes (very elaborate – looks much like a Mexican chandelier), bowls of water and butter lamps. Across from the altar was a throne for the head abbot (lama) and two long lines of carpets where the monks would sit. At exactly



Figure 1 Ceremonial cake

7:00am, the procession began with monks dressed in costumes (no masks this time except for the two clowns who were there again) playing horns, beating drums and carrying the scroll. The scroll was laid on the ground, a long rod was placed through loops at the top and slowly, slowly it was raised until it covered the entire wall of the dzong. It was magnificently embroidered with Guru and dragons and flowers and fish and, and, and. The monks seated played conch shells, and bells and drums. Other monks began coming out to serve the monks tea and rice. This took about an hour.

We then left as the people were starting to line up for their blessings and we would have a hard time getting out. The line was already out the door. It was perhaps the highlight of the trip so far, and it wasn't even on our itinerary. Jamyang suggested it and we jumped at the opportunity. And we are so glad we did.



Figure 4 warming my hands at the wood burning stove in dining room

But that was just the start of the day. We went back to the hotel for breakfast and were picked up again at 9:30 to begin our 90-minute drive to the Ura Valley. Once again the scenery was beautiful and the landscape changed from fields of red buckwheat and potatoes to pine trees and other trees covered with lichen (Jamyang said when you see lichen on trees, you know you are in a higher altitude). We passed small villages, we passed stupas, we passed lots of death flags. The road was narrow and again parts were black top and parts were gravel. We passed Indian workers working on the roads and saw their houses, which are brown and white and totally different from Bhutanese houses. We were hoping to see Bhutan's highest peak, Gangkhar Puensum, from the summit, but it was not clear enough. When we reached the Shertang La pass (11,465 feet), we left Kinzang and started hiking down to the village of Ura, at an altitude of 10,300 feet. So, you can see we hiked downhill. The hike took about an hour (and yes, I have pictures to prove I did it). Jamyang had walking sticks for us which made it much easier. At the top of the pass it was quite cold and we were all bundled up. About half way down, we began to shed the layers. The path at times felt like a pasture and at our times was steep and narrow. The views were tremendous and you couldn't help but stop and just stare (it also allowed my knees to rest). I kept imagining how not so long ago, walking on these paths was the only way to get from village to village. I pictured children walking with their books (if they had any; many had no books) these paths to school; women carrying their vegetables from one village to the next; neighbors walking to visit other neighbors.



Figure 3 the start of the hike

It was so quiet, except for the wind (really a breeze) blowing through the pine trees and ferns. We saw trees turning red and yellow. We saw one little purple flower, the Himalayan primulus.

We did not see any cows or yaks, but we saw lots of signs that they had been





there – in other words, look where you walk. We passed one water-driven prayer wheel and the water was cold and refreshing on our necks (the locals stop and drink the water – we drank our bottled water). We passed about three mani walls. A mani wall is like a chorten but rather than being built up like a stupa, it is a long wall which also brings good luck to those circling it.

We reached the bottom which put us in the village of Ura. The Ura valley is the highest of Bumthang’s valleys and is believed to be the home of the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan. The village of Ura is

considered one of the more interesting villages in Bhutan. The land around Ura is not particularly good for crops and so the villagers here raise livestock for mild, cheese and butter from cows and yaks and use the yak hair to weave. We visited the temple which like all temples, had a courtyard leading up to the temple itself. There was a large prayer wheel at the entrance, and then a smaller chamber where we could remove our shoes. The inside was small but beautiful with one large gold Guru, one Buddha (god) of compassion, one of longevity and one of the future (who sat western style with his legs down instead of in the lotus position – the belief is that one day this Buddha (god) will convert the whole western world to Buddhism). There was the typical altar with the ceremonial cake, bowls of water (for blessings) and butter lamps (which it turn out are no longer burning butter as it is too expensive. Rather they import vegetable oil from India and mix it with wax). The walls were painted with the eight manifestations of Guru, using pigment from the ground.



On the way out there was a beautiful 86 year old woman (who looked at least 102) who allowed me to take her picture, along with her beetle nut red teeth. There was also a father and son who allowed their pictures to be taken. The children especially here are beautiful.

We then drove through the town, trying not to hit any cows, up into the hills where, after visiting Mr. Bush (ie, no indoor



Figure 5 cow comes to visit us during picnic

facilities available), we found a spot for a picnic. Seems this spot is actually a cow pasture, but all of Bhutan is. There were no cows when we sat down, but one came to visit later on. The picnic was hot food – rice, mixed vegetables, chili cheese (which I did taste this time – but never again) and a fried beef which was sort of like eating beef jerky.



Right before we sat down for the picnic, a group of five young boys (maybe 8 or 9 years old) were walking up the road from school, along with 3-4 cows. I took their picture with my long lens, and as they got closer and saw me, they laughed and started running. They then turned around to see what I was doing. I waved at them and they waved back. My new friends.



Our next step was the Sacred Burning Lake of Tang, a

place where nature, religion and mythology all are intermingled. It was up a very rough road which dead-ended at a path leading down to the Tang Chhu river. This is the spot where Pema Lingpa), the great treasure discoverer revealed his first treasures (treasures that Guru Rinpoche had hidden). The story goes like this. Perma Lingpa had a dream that told him to find a place where the river forms a pool that looks like a lake. He jumped naked into the lake and entered a large cave where there was a throne with a life size statue of Buddha. A one-eyed old lady handed him a chest and he suddenly found himself back on the rock holding one of the treasures. But that is not the end of the story. He returned to the rock to find another treasure but the people around him thought it was a trick. He told them that he would take a burning lamp with him if he returned with the treasure and the lamp still lit, he was for real; otherwise he would perish in the water. He jumped in holding the burning lamp. He was gone long enough that the skeptics thought he really was a fake. But suddenly he appeared on the rock, holding the treasure, a statue and the burning lamp. Thus this part of the river is called the Burning Lake (Membartsho).

We walked down a path (dirt and rocks and quite steep at times). At the end of the path is a small shrine covered with candles and butter lamps. There are also hundreds of small clay offerings (called tsha-tsha) lining niches along the walls. We ended up at a wooden bridge which crosses the gorge which is crisscrossed with prayer flags. On the other side of the bridge is a large rock ledge from which we could see the "lake." While it was not spiritual for us, this is clearly one of the most important places for the Bhutanese. As we were leaving, several more tour cars pulled up. And both Jamyang and Kinzang believe it is a sacred place.

Our last stop of the day was the Kurjey Lhakhang, the monastery where Guru Rinpoche meditated, and according to local lore, one can see the imprint of his body in the rock where he sat. Kurjey Lhakhang is actually a complex of three temples. The first is the Guru Lhakhang and is the oldest built in 1652. This was built over the cave with the rock with the imprint of the Guru's body. The temple sanctuary has a thousand small statues of Guru Rinpoche plus large statues of Guru in his eight manifestations. The second temple was built in 1900 and has a painting of the circle of life. The third temple was built in 1984 by the Queen to the third King (the current King's grandmother).

We got back to the hotel at about 4:00. We lit a fire in the room, they brought us tea and cookies and we have been relaxing. Tonight we pack as tomorrow we hit the road again. As much as a shock this hotel was after the Uma, it has grown on me, and despite no closets, it is comfortable, even cozy with our wood burning stove, our down comforter and the smiling women that work here. We even had our laundry done for us (by hand and then hung outside the dining room on a clothesline – the smell so good and it was so cheap).



Figure 12 The processional begins



Figure 11 the drummers



Figure 10 The scroll gets carried in



Figure 7 The fool



Figure 8 the musicians



Figure 9 the scroll rising



Figure 6 local dancers



