

Friday, Oct 26

Today we hit the road again heading back towards Punakha. We had lots of time in the car, so we learned more facts about Bhutan. But I'll tell you what we did when we weren't driving first, in case you don't want the "history lesson."



After breakfast we had an opportunity to take a walk down the road in front of the hotel. Those of you that have traveled with us, know that we love to walk, but we have not had much opportunity to do it here. Walking down the road we ran into a herd of cows. It seems that no matter where you are, in the towns, on the roads, high up in the mountains in what seems like the middle of nowhere – in fact just everywhere. You can't drive or walk more than 100 yards without running into a cow. And they have the right of way!



We also passed a clothes line that was covered in garments in the shades of the rainbow (all in order) and saw more houses with chili on the roof, the view of the Dzong in the distance, horses on the road and in the field, children playing in their front yard (and in the street), several women with their babies. The women all carry their babies on the back, held on by a large scarf. And in that way they work, they walk, they do whatever it is they need to do.

Jamyang and Kinzang picked us up on the road and off we went on another long drive. We headed west, out of Jakar, leaving Bumthang. Bumthang really was a beautiful valley and we ended up enjoying our quaint, very Bhutanese hotel, the festival, the hike and the quiet.

We headed back up into the mountains and watched the view pass by our windows. Most of you know how I love to take pictures. And don't get me wrong, I am taking hundreds of them. But some things you just can't capture. Like the expanse and beauty of the Himalayan mountains. The different hues of green of the trees, along with the red and yellow on those trees whose leaves are changing. The way the sun hits the mountains and they glow with this special light. Like the little huts along the side of the road, high up in the mountains with no village in sight, with women selling their vegetables. Like the one house which instead of having chilis on the roof, had a dog sitting on a blanket. Like the woman who stood in her front yard and was using her hands to shovel grain into a bowl or the woman who in her yard was using a basket sieve to separate something (I assume rice). Like the school children all in their ghos and kiras, walking back from school with their arms around each other, their books tucked into their gho, and carrying little lunch pails. Like the little boy trying to pull his cow by the hope and the cow was winning. Like the two men carrying their prayer flags up the mountain to hang them in the wind. These are the real pictures of Bhutan.

The Himalayas are hard to describe, but driving through them again today, I could not help but be speechless. They are so tall. They are so magnificent. And it is so hard to breathe if you are walking uphill or climbing stairs.

Since we had already been on this road on the way out, we actually began recognizing some of the landmarks. It was particularly interesting to see that the road workers from India never seemed to be working. On the way out we thought they were on a lunch break and thus just sitting by the side of the road. But today, they were still just sitting on the side of the road. Maybe that is why so much of the road is still a mess. We also learned today that these same workers are not allowed out of the area they are assigned to work in. There are several immigration points on the road (and remember – there is only one road). We thought they were checking the tourists. They are, but they are really checking the Indians to make sure they don't wander around the country.

Our first real stop (other than a few viewpoints – and by viewpoint I mean pulling over to the side of the narrow road), was in Trongsa to see the dzong. Those of you that have really been reading my diary, may remember that we stopped for a view of this dzong from across the valley on our way to Jakar, The Trongsa Dzong is the



spot on the side of the mountain really was.

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. The Trongsang Dzong is also the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family and is considered the most stunning dzong in Bhutan. And it was. We walked through the courtyard which was actually part of the trail that the travelers would have to use and where they would leave their goods as a tax. Jamyang told us that up until 1930, the third King was still into corporal punishment and death was by being thrown over the cliff. The trail leading from the east was easy to see from the windows and it was clear how strategic this



The dzong is very long and the different parts are connected with hallways, almost like alleys. The courtyards have beautiful paved courtyards and wide stone stairways.

Before a king can become a king, he must first serve two years as the Governor in Trongsang at the dzong, and this is also the royal winter residence.

In the entrance to the temple part of the dzong, there were several paintings, that in fact appear at the entrance to every temple.

There are paintings of the 4 gods of direction, painting of the wheel of life and a painting of the elephant, monkey, rabbit and bird.

The four gods of direction are of course, the gods of North and South (who are depicted together) and East and West. The god of the south is black and is holding a sword. The god of the north is holding a scepter in one hand and a mongoose with a jewel in its mouth in the other – representing wealth. The god of the east is holding a lute and is the god of music. And the god of the west is holding a snake and a stupa.



The wheel of life is basically what Buddhism is all about. There are 4 concentric circles and the large circle (wheel) is held in the jaws and claws of the god of death. The inner most circle has three animals which represent poisons and threats to a good life: a bird (rooster in some versions and other birds in other versions) representing desire, a snake representing greed and a mole representing ignorance. If you can avoid all three of these then you are guaranteed to go to heaven when you die. The next circle or layer has two sides to it, a white, good side depicting scenes of goodness and a black bad side depicting sins. The next circle is divided into 6 realms, three on top and three on the bottom. The three on the top represent

heaven (om) in the middle, human life (ma) on one side and demi-gods (ni) on the other. If you get to heaven, you have everything you desire. But if you forget to pray then you are thrown out. In the demi-god realm there is the roots of a tree but the top of the tree is in heaven so heaven gets all the fruit. The demi-gods and those in heaven are constantly fighting each other for the fruit. In the human life realm, there are four steps: birth, aging, sickness and death.

The bottom three realms are the animal world (pad), the hungry ghost (na) and hell (hum). In the animal world all animals are hunted by their predators. In hungry ghost, you have a very narrow throat and a big stomach so when you try to eat, it is hard to swallow and thus impossible to ever fill your large stomach. Sometimes the food turns to fire. In hell there are 16 divisions with 8 in which you burn and 8 in which you freeze.



When you die, you are in an indeterminate state (vardo) for 49 days after which everyone goes to hell. The god of death asks the god of goodness and the demon of evil to count up your good deeds and your sins, and depending on the outcome, the god of death decides where in the wheel you end up. But there is a Buddha in each realm, so if you pray to Buddha, you can be sent to a different realm (reincarnation).

The last circle depicts the different aspects of life such as precreation, birth, picking fruit.

And when they pray, they always say om ma ni pad na hum.

And the elephant, monkey, rabbit? Well, the short version is that it is a legend about how they all wanted to eat the fruit of a tree and each said they deserved it, but the bird said let's share, i.e., everyone should work together and help each other.

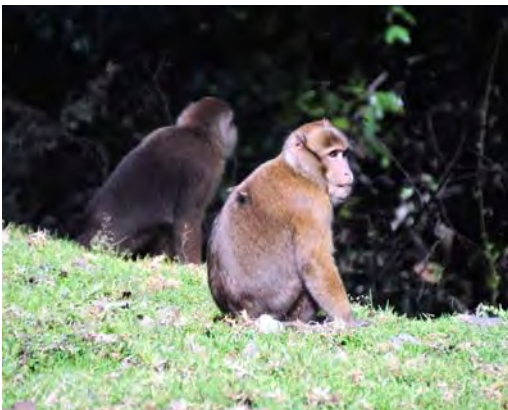
After visiting the dzong we drove around the mountain to have lunch at the Vangkhil Resort. The buffet lunch was the same as usual, but the view of the dzong and the mountains was magnificent.

We got back into the car and drove and drove some more. Driving on these mountain roads is not easy as there are constantly trucks (the ones from India) and other cars, all of whom think the road is theirs. And coming around curves, you never know what will face you. Passing cars means getting very close to the edge of the cliff. Get the picture?



I mentioned that one sight is the little vegetable stands along the side of the mountain in the middle of nowhere. We stopped at one and Jamyang bought a cucumber that was – without exaggeration – about 4 inches thick and about a foot long. I have never seen such a huge cucumber.

Now you might think that is pretty phallic. And Bhutan is in fact full of phallic symbols, representing fertility. In fact these symbols are paintings on the outside of houses all over the country. For those of us from the west, it is pretty startling to see a large penis painted on the side of a house.



Now I have already mentioned cows and dogs and yaks. But Bhutan also has monkeys and we got to see two of the three species. As we were driving along, Jamyang, who kept telling us we would see monkeys and we did not believe him as we did not see any on the way out on this same road, suddenly yelled "MONKEY" and Kinzang stopped the car (again not easy to do on a narrow road). And there were three rhesus monkeys, just sitting at the side of the road. We watched and they ran into the trees and jumped from one tree to another.



A little further down the road, I yelled, "MONKEY" and Kinzang again quickly stopped the car. There was a Macaque with a red face, just sitting on a branch posing for us. We were very excited to see them. The only monkey we did not see – today - is the gray lemur.

While we are on the topic of animals, over the last few days we also saw many different birds including an eagle, a Himalayan pheasant (5 of them in fact, all together) and magpies,



After the monkeys we also saw some more yaks, even black and white ones. It is quite fun to come to a country and see its natural animals in the wild. Not too many cows and yaks and monkeys wandering around our streets at home.

And then there are the walking trees we saw.....



The next time we got to get out of the car was at the Chendepji Chorten, built by the monk, Lama Shidaat at the side of river. He wanted to copy the stupa from Katmandu, so he went there and carved the shape onto a white radish (the long kind). When he got back to Bhutan, the stupa was built based on his carving, including the tip of the radish which is bent. There are actually three stupas here, including a Bhutanese style and a mani wall. The white, white stupa looked beautiful against the blue, blue sky with the mountains in the background with the tall tops covered in clouds.

We finally arrived in Punakha at about 5:30 – a 9.5 hour trip. We checked into our hotel, the Zangtopelri Hotel (tea and cookies while the key was brought to us). Jamyang decided that we should have “the best room in the house” and got us a room away from the main building in a cottage, with an amazing view of the Punakha valley. Except it was dark, so we will wait until tomorrow to see it.

The hotel is full of tourist groups. After the quiet of the Bumthang valley and our little hotel, the dining room sounded so very noisy. We miss our wood stove!  
But there is a wonderful view of the Punakha valley.



And now, the other things we learned on this long ride:

Bhutan, officially the Kingdom of Bhutan, is located at the eastern end of the Himalayas and bordered to the south, east and west by India and to the north by China. Bhutan existed as a patchwork of minor warring fiefdoms until the early 17th century, when the area was unified by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal who fled religious persecution in Tibet and is considered the founder of Bhutan. In the early 20th century, Bhutan came



into contact with the British, after which Bhutan continued strong bilateral relations with India upon its independence. In 2006, Business Week rated Bhutan the happiest country in Asia and the eighth-happiest in the world, based on a global survey (more on this later).

Bhutan's landscape ranges from subtropical plains in the south to the sub-alpine Himalayan heights in the north, with some peaks exceeding 23,000 ft (pictures of this on another day).

The fourth King, who abdicated the throne and turned the throne over to his son, the current King, changed the government from a monarchy to a democracy, with elections held last year. When he first announced it, the people were against it, so the fourth King went from village to village and town to town to explain why this would benefit them. The King is still the head of state, while the elected Prime Minister is the head of the government with an office in the parliament building, just across the river from the Thimpu Dzong.

In 1999, the government lifted a ban on television and the internet, making Bhutan one of the last countries to introduce television. In his speech, the King said that television was a critical step to modernizing Bhutan as well as a major contributor to the country's Gross National Happiness but warned that the "misuse" of television could erode traditional Bhutanese values. But not all the villages even have electricity yet although it is predicted that by 2013 everyone will. Cell phones arrived in 2002.

Bhutan's top two major industries are hydroelectric power (which is sold to India) and tourism. Americans were the most common tourists until 2010; now it is the Chinese and Japanese. The economy is also based on agriculture and forestry. Agriculture provides the main livelihood for more than 80 percent of the population. 70% of the country is covered by forest. For every tree that needs to be cut down for wood, 10 trees are planted. And you can only chop down trees in certain areas determined by the government.

The architecture remains distinctively traditional, using earth, stone masonry, and intricate woodwork around windows and roofs. Traditional architecture uses no nails or iron bars in construction. Most traditional homes in the villages are three stories with the livestock living below, the living rooms on the second story and the top left open for storage and ventilation. In more recent times, the livestock have been moved to their own huts.

As you drive through the mountains, you see villages on the mountain side, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. They are indeed in the middle of nowhere, with no roads. To this day, the villagers still have to walk long distances to reach the road. There is basically one road that follows the sides of the mountains around the country. Sometimes you see an isolated house and then, in what seems like a long way, another isolated house. But the distance between houses is determined by how far you can hear someone shout for help.

We asked about taxes. Only if you make greater than \$100,000 nu do you pay taxes. Everyone gets financial help if they need it from the Kings Welfare for the People. People are happy because they don't want for anything. If they can't afford a house, the king gives them land and money to build one.

And that leads us finally to the discussion about the Gross National Happiness (GNH).

The phrase GNH was coined about 30 years ago by the fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, "to suggest an enlightened Eastern alternative to the pressures of the materialistic West." Gross National Happiness," is about individual and environmental wellness over materialism

But when people now call Bhutan the "happiest place on earth" [my note - not to be confused with Disneyland], the current Prime Minister sighs exasperated. His goal is to prove to the world that GNH is more than just a utopian dream. "Bhutan used GNH as a broader and more nuanced measure than gross domestic product. Bhutan faces the same challenges as the rest of the world. The rural poor struggle to earn enough from farming so they migrate to overburdened urban areas; middle-class families' worry about young people graduating from college without job prospects. The elite fear that their kids are spending too much time on Facebook or with their iPads." Seems the West is reaching the East.

"Bhutan's solution is to build its society from the ground up using what it calls the four pillars of GNH: sustainable economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation of culture and good

governance. ...The first step in making GNH useful was measuring it. Bhutan's 2010 survey was 7 years in the making....Researchers translated the core idea into 9 equally weighted components of happiness. To measure them, they designed hundreds of survey questions and interviewed 8000 of the 738,000 Bhutanese to ask intensely personal and thought-provoking questions, such as, 'How many people can you count on for help in case you get sick? How often do you talk about spirituality with your children? When did you last spend time socializing with your neighbors? How comfortable are you with your level of debt? And the answers?' Well, the GNH was 0.743 on a scale of 0-1. Not bad!

On the Japan Airline flight to Hong Kong, I picked up a TIME magazine and found an article on Bhutan. Beshert. It was interesting to read that other nations are taking a lesson from Bhutan and are now also including measures of well-being (what those of us in my line of research have called it quality of life).

Oct 27 Saturday, Thimphu

Today would have been my father's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. He never made it past 52. I think of him now, remembering his sparkling blue eyes, his beautiful, happy smile, and how secure I felt when he held my hand. Happy birthday Daddy.

I am celebrating Dad's birthday in on the road to Thimphu. Back in the car again for a 5-6 hour ride. The road is familiar as we came this way, but there are always new things to see.



The day began with a beautiful sunrise and fog over the Punakha valley, which we watched from our hotel window. We were picked up at 8:00 and hit the road.



I have already mentioned how the villagers sell their vegetables along the side of the road on the mountain, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. This morning everyone seemed to be roasting corn and selling that. The air smelled wonderful and reminded me of Israel when they used to sell corn on the street.

After a few hours, as we neared the Dochula Pass (where the Druk Wangyal Chortens-108 stupa built by the eldest Queen Mother Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk is). When we were here a few days ago in the afternoon, the mountains were covered in clouds. This morning, we could see eight of the highest, unclimbed peaks of the eastern Himalayas. It was

literally breathtaking. As an aside, the Bhutanese government will not late mountain climbers ever try as they respect the mountain ("protect the environment").

We saw Khang Bum, Gangchen (Tiger Mountain), Masagans, Tsende Gang, Kangphun Gang, Tere Gang (Ax mountain), Jeje Kangphu and Table Mountain (no guarantee that I got the names right). These all average around 23,500 feet. As you can see from the pictures (although they do not really do it justice and I apologize n advance for sending so many. I just couldn't choose), it was amazing. We first saw them peaks from the side of the mountain road, and then we stopped at the summit and spend about 20 minutes just taking it all in and taking picture. The peaks were majestic. They were overpowering. They were brilliantly white.









And in between watching the mountains from the side of the road and reaching the summit, we saw another family of rhesus monkeys.

We finally arrived in Thimphu, the capital and largest city of Bhutan, with a population of about 120,000 people. Our first stop was the National Institute of Zorig Chusum which is a school for Bhutanese Art education. It was set up by the Government of Bhutan with the sole objective of preserving the rich culture and tradition of Bhutan and training students in all traditional art forms. Students stay anywhere from 2 to 6 years, depending on whether they are learning to carve wood, silversmith, weaving, embroidery, clay sculpture or painting. Some of the students were there and we got to watch them work. Basically they all make the same object or paint the same painting until they get it right. It did not seem like any creativity was allowed. More rote.

We then walked over to the Folk Heritage Museum where there is a traditional Bhutanese farm house. It is built as I described in one of my earlier emails, as a three storied structure with mud walls and wooden doors, windows and roof covered with slate. Since we don't get to visit a real home, this was a good idea of what a Bhutanese farmhouse looks like inside. It was basically as primitive as I expected, with wood floors, a kitchen area where in the winter everyone would sleep, a living area, a shrine room. The important thing about this museum however, is that school children from the city are brought to show them how their ancestors lived (and still live).



And then the fun began. After a typical Bhutanese lunch at the Folk Heritage Museum (which included butter tea – i.e. tea made with yak butter – served with puffed rice in it, and other rather spicy food), we departed for a 3 hour hike.

Yes, you read correctly – a 3-hour hike. And it was mostly up hill. We were going to see the Tango Monastery located near Cheri Mountain. And the only way to reach it is to climb the mountain. It is literally clinging to the Cliffside.

The Tango Monastery was founded by Lama Gyalwa Lhanampa in the 13th century and built in its present form in 1688. According to local legend, the location of this monastery is the holy place where Avalokiteshvara revealed himself as "the self-emanated form of the Wrathful Hayagriva". The form of the wrathful Hayagriva is deified in the monastery. The word Tango means "horse head" and gets its name from the shape of the rock outcropping.



Tango Monastery is built in the dzong fashion, and has a curved (semi-circular) outside wall and prominent main tower with recesses. It covers the caves where originally meditation and miracles were performed by saints from the 12th century onwards. It is now a school for monks, who spend at least 8 years studying here.



The hike up was basically an uphill, switch back climb up 1000 feet through the woods, all at a high altitude (Thimphu is at about 9000 feet). I do not mean to make it sound easy, as for me it was not. But then I looked at the monks who were passing us by, two of whom were carrying two large boxes clearly filled with something heavy (more on this later). I felt like a wimp. But then they are younger and they grew up in this altitude.





Figure 1 resting half way



Figure 2 I made it!!!!!!!!!!!!

We finally made it to the top in what seemed forever but was only an hour. We took off our shoes, switched off the cameras (no pictures are ever allowed inside temples – basically when you take off your shoes, no pictures allowed). And then we were greeted by the monks all chanting. We happened to catch them on a holy day and they were all lined up in rows in the temple, the abbot in his “throne” and they were playing drums, blowing horns and chanting. Very similar to what we saw on the last day of the Jakar festival. But his was in a small, dark temple and we were the only visitors there. Two of the monks were giving out food and drink to the seated Monks – handful of rice, small bowl of tea. And a bottle of Coke. Yes – a bottle of Coke. That is what the two monks were carrying up the mountain. Cases of Coke. It would have made a great Coke commercial. If only I could have taken the picture.

It was another one of those experiences that we could not have planned, but made the trip all that much more special. Seeing the natural customs of other cultures is always interesting and always mind-expanding. It does not matter that we do not believe or buy into their legends; it matters that we listen and learn and understand more about other people and about the world.

The hike down was faster but still hard on the knees. (And the next day I could really feel it in my calves.) But it was well worth it.





And on the way to the hotel – we saw two gray lemur monkeys! One was right on the side of the road, but ran off before I could get the picture. The other was in a tree but it was hard to see his face. But at least we got to see them.

We finally checked into our hotel, The Druk Hotel where we were given a suite for our two nights here. It is magnificent. Living room with a TV, large bedroom with a TV and a sitting area, very elegant, very comfortable. And we collapsed.

But we still had to have dinner, so after a hot bath, we went down to the dining room where we were greeted by the head of the travel agency in Bhutan, Chin Chu. It was a delightful dinner with him with great conversation. We had talked about the changes that will happen to Bhutan with Jamtang and he said they will preserve their culture. I think he is being naïve. But Chin Chu agreed that it will have to change as more young kids are exposed to the outside world, and more kids are educated. It will have to change. But hopefully not too drastically and not too fast.

Sunday Oct 28



This morning we woke early and went for a walk around the town – the largest city in Bhutan with 120,000 residents. So you would imagine a rather large town, right? Well, the town of Thimphu is one one-way street heading in one direction, a second one-way street heading in the other, and a third street. The streets are maybe 20 blocks long (if even). It is the only capital in the world with no traffic light. Instead they have a traffic policeman. That is the downtown. There are outskirts of course, and there are more and more apartment buildings going up as the town expands, but the downtown is quite small. The buildings are in the traditional Bhutanese style and are no higher than 3 stores. So our morning walk did not take long. Also, although it was about 8:30, the shops were all closed.



But it was Sunday which meant it was market day. The market is open from Friday to Sunday and has been moved from outside stalls to a building specially built for it. For many years merchants would come to the central square from all over Bhutan and market their goods and would sleep in the open air. However, in 1986, platforms were erected and in 1989 covered market halls were built over the platforms. It has two levels with stairs as well as a ramp for the wagons. The stalls are built in. The top level is for the locally grown vegetables.



Figure 2 onions



Figure 1 the ever present chili

There were loads of peppers both fresh and dried. There was lots of dried fish. And the largest zucchini I've ever seen. The bottom floor is for imported vegetables (mostly from India). There is also a separate building for grains (they call it cereal) and an annex for fruit and cheeses and yak butter and meats. We have been to many markets around the world. We love markets. But this one was a bit of a disappointment. Maybe because it was the last day. Maybe because we were too early (9:30). We don't know why, but there were no shoppers. There was no excitement.



The stall keepers just sat around, although some were shelling peas and some were cutting up beetle nuts. The most interesting part were the signs hanging there which showed the benefit of eating fruit and vegetables for your health. The other interesting part was the scales used to weight the vegetables. They used balance scales with weights on one end and the vegetables on the other.



I did see one mother with her child (see picture), and I got her to smile. Yes – she is a beetle nut chewer.



Figure 3 Beetle Nuts



Across the river, across the cantilever bridge is the handicraft and clothes sections. The clothes were t-shirts, shoes, regular clothes. Not interesting. The handicrafts were a bit more fun. Prayer wheels. Masks. Wooden bowls. Weavings. All the same things we have been seeing in the shops, but here we could bargain and the prices were a bit better.



From the market we went to the National Memorial Chorten. This was built by the Queen in memory of her son, the beloved third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who was very ill and died while being treated in Kenya. The third king is the one who abolished serfdom and is credited with encouraging the modernization of Bhutan in the 1970s. He had started the Stupa and the Queen Mother finished it. It is a large, beautiful Stupa which can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. It has a golden spire on top and a smaller gold spire above the front porch. On the outside of the gate are three carvings in slate of the symbols for compassion, wisdom and power. On the top of the stupa itself are statues of the four gods of the North, East, South and West, along with a statue of Buddha. Four stone snowlions (which symbolizes fearlessness and unconditional cheerfulness) guard the four corners and are tied to the Stupa to keep them from running away.

While the chorten itself was beautiful, the more amazing part is that it is used as a daycare center for older adults. The aged are dropped off, with their lunch, in the morning by their families, they spend the day there walking around – circumambulate - the chorten (the more time you walk, the more prayers fly to heaven), sitting and whirling hand-held prayer wheels, or sitting around and spinning the 4 large red prayer wheels. In the evening, on their way home from work, the families pick them up again. Just yesterday nurses from the local health center came and measured everyone's blood pressure. What a lovely way to care for the grandparents.



This chorten however is not just for the old. It is the focus of daily prayer for many Bhutanese living in Thimphu. In the morning you see children stopping by to pray on their way to school. All day it is full of people circumambulating. (This is the perfect word as they do walk round and round).

Our next stop was the Motithang Takin Preserve. This area was originally a mini-zoo, but the King decided it was not in keeping with the Buddhist belief of how to treat animals. The animals were all released in the wild, but the Takins were so tame, they wandered around the town looking for food. So they were brought back to the preserve.

Now, unless you have been to Bhutan, you probably don't know what a Takin is, or at least you have never seen one. Even some visitors to Bhutan have never seen one. I already explained how the Bhutanese believe in the myths and stories of their culture and religion. The divine madman, Lama Drukpa Kuenlay, was known for his outrageous antics. One day his devotees were gathered to observe his magical powers and they asked him to perform a miracle. Before he would do it, he asked to be fed a whole goat and a whole cow. Once he finished eating all that and only the bones were left, he placed the goat's head on the cow's body. He uttered a

command, and to everyone's amazement, the animal came to life, ran to the field and began to graze. The animal was called dong gye tsey or Takin. The Takin is Bhutan's national animal. It is a high altitude animal, but there are nine in the preserve.



It is such a rare animal that toxicologists have put it in its own category – *budorcas taxicolor*. It has a large body with dense, long brownish hair, stocky legs with large two-toed hooves, with strong claws which are adaptive for the mountains. It has a large head, large nose, and large horns which are about a foot long and curve out, back and up at the tips. It is one of the strangest animals you will see, looking like a cross between a gnu and a bison, or a goat antelope.

We walked over to the large (REALLY LARGE) enclosure but there were no Takin's to be seen. So we started walking up hill (of course it had to be up hill) around the enclosure. We walked two thirds of the way around and there it was! A Takin right by the fence. What luck. (It seems that this whole trip was full of luck as we got to see many things in the wild that not everyone runs into). We watched him (her?) for a while. Andy fed him. We could have stayed and watched for hours, but we did not have that kind of time. So we said good-bye to the Takins and went onto our next adventure.

Our next stop was the Zilukha Nunnery. We have visited lots of temples which house monks, but this was the first nunnery we visited. It was much smaller and more run-down than the other temples we visited. The nuns are dressed the same as the monks in scarlet robes, and their heads are shaved. I thought they were monks until I was corrected. We took off our shoes and hats as is the custom whenever you enter a temple, and the rule is when your shoes are off, no photography allowed. We walked into the anteroom and there were three nuns making ceremonial cakes (which I think I told you about in one of the earlier blogs. These are cakes made of buckwheat and beautifully decorated with dyed butter, and then placed on the altar.) Now I mentioned how lucky we have been. They gave me permission to take pictures of them making the cakes (we were not in the temple itself yet), and they gave me a piece of dough to roll. What a rare opportunity to witness this. Oh, and once again, there was the ever present empty coke bottle.



me permission to take pictures of them making the cakes (we were not in the temple itself yet), and they gave me a piece of dough to roll. What a rare opportunity to witness this. Oh, and once again, there was the ever present empty coke bottle.

But the day was not over yet. It was time for lunch at an oriental restaurant in town. Then it was on to visit the



Thimphu Trashi Chhoe Dzong. Andy says we were dzonged out already, but we still had two dzongs to go. This dzong sits in the Thimphu valley rather than on a mountain side like the other dzongs (remember dzong means fortress). This is also where the coronation of the current 5<sup>th</sup> King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, took place and is the seat of government. As in all dzongs, the center tower separates the administrative wing from the religious wing. Here the administrative wing is completely off limits as it houses the King's offices. Across the river is the Parliament building. And the King's palace is on the grounds as well. When you hear palace you think of something like Buckingham Palace. Well this is a small unassuming,

traditional Bhutanese home with lots of grounds and Royal Guards.



The part of the dzong open to visitors has the usual paintings of the four guardian kings (of the north, east, south and west). The large courtyard was used for the festivals, but got so big that after the first day it is now moved outside to a stadium type, open air structure.

It was finally time to go back to hotel for some "free time." We got to walk around alone for a bit, although as I mentioned the town is pretty small. This time the shops were open and streets were full of people. We stopped at the Ambient Café where for \$3.00 we shared a large piece of cake and had espresso and tea. This café is full of ex-pats, and young ones at that. Young adults often volunteer two years to work in Bhutan and this seems to be one of their hang-outs.

Oct 29 Monday Timpbu to Paro

Not really much to say about today. More dzongs. More temples. National Library which does not house many book but does store scrolls.

The library was planned as "a major scriptural repository and research facility dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the rich literary, cultural and religious heritage" of Bhutan. On the ground floor there is a book reported to be the heaviest in the world, weighing 130 lb, known as "Bhutan: a Visual Odyssey Across the Last Himalayan Kingdom". Traditional books and historic manuscripts written in Tibetan style, on handmade paper bound between wooden flats and tied together are also preserved here.



Highlight of the day was meeting the executive director of the Textile museum. This had been arranged by my colleagues at Ferring Pharmaceuticals as they are large donors. The museum is expanding and they have built the most beautiful structure with help from the Sackler in D.C. Opening in June if anyone wants to go. They not only showcase weavings (which are unbelievable) but they also teach weaving so the art is not lost.



Then more driving. Got to Paro. Town with international airport is about 10 blocks long and 3 blocks wide. Staying outside of town in the most beautiful hotel I have ever seen. In the forest. Mountains all around us.

Not much else to say about today.

Oct 30, Tuesday Tiger's Nest

Finally. Finally it was our day to hike up to the Tiger's Nest. Even if you know nothing else about Bhutan, you have seen pictures of the Tiger's Nest Monastery built into a cliff about 10,240 ft feet up. I was dreading it. I was excited about it. I wasn't sure if I could make it. I was sure I would try. After all, the rock slopes are very steep (almost vertical) and the monastery buildings are built into the rock face. We were picked up at 7:30 and drove about 15 minutes to the parking lot below the monastery. With advice from our friends Alvin (who is reading this), we opted to take horses up part way.

As you may or may not know, I have only ridden a horse one other time in my life. I tried to be one with the horse. It didn't work. I tried to relax into the horse, but found myself in a death grip on the saddle (which had two wooded dowels to hold on to). My horse was Tinken. He knew what to do. He knew where he was going. I knew not to be worried. It was safe even though he constantly opted to walk as close to the cliff edge as possible. Andy was on the horse in front of me, and Tinken just followed. The "pony man" walked along beside us, and Jamyang carrying my camera and being our private photographer.



Notice the uphill...



Yup, we are riding horses



I look happy. You can hardly notice the death grip



Imagine walking up instead of riding!



The ride went through the forest. All you could hear was the sound of water and the sound of the bells around the horses' necks (luckily you can't hear death grips). You could smell the blue pine trees. You could also smell the horses. But that is not a bad thing. And the path was covered with prayer flags, some of which must have been shot across the canyon with arrows. Not sure how else they could have done it.

As with everything else in Bhutan, there is a legend associated with Tiger's Nest. It is believed that Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) flew to this location from Tibet on the back of a tigress. This place was consecrated to tame the Tiger demon. There is a second legend that says that a former wife of an emperor, known as Yeshe Tsogyal, willingly became a disciple of Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) in Tibet. She transformed herself into a tigress and carried the Guru on her back from Tibet to the present location of the Taktsang in Bhutan. In one of the caves here, the Guru then performed meditation and emerged in eight incarnated forms (manifestations) and the place became holy. Subsequently, the place came to be known as the "Tiger's Nest".

If I thought the car ride over the gravel roads was bumpy, that was nothing compared to this horse ride. But, he got us up the mountain, at least to the second view point. The ride took about 30 minutes to the first view point where we stopped for tea and cookies and a 'facilities' break as they call it here. From here we could see the Tiger's Nest up on the cliff, still so far away from us.



We got back on the horses and rode for about 30 more minutes to the second view point. From here we had to walk. It was a short walk to the start of the steps. There are somewhere between 700 and 800 steps (sorry Sarah – I did not count them). The first part is down and encompasses about 2/3 of the steps. The steps were made of rock, but were a good depth so they were easy to use. There was also a handrail which was installed a few years ago. Good idea as we were walking along the edge of the cliff. And the whole way we could see the amazing sight of Tiger's Nest.

At the bottom of the stairs is a giant waterfall which dropped 200 feet and ended in a sacred pool and we moved into the shade of the mountain. Now it was time to start climbing up. And up. And up. And up some more. The handrail again came in very handy. At last we reached it. We had made it to the Tiger's Nest Monastery, 10,240 feet above sea level and 3000 feet from the Paro Valley where we started.



First rest stop at restaurant where we had tea and then lunch later in the day

See that little white spot on the mountain. That's where we were headed



The steps down; remember you have to come back up again



And back up the other side



I am not sure I would have made it without Tinken's help and I am grateful to Tinken for carrying me up most of the way up and to Alvin for suggesting we rent horses.

The official name of Tiger's Nest is Paro Taktsang. It is a very sacred Buddhist site and temple complex, and it is most famous among the world because it is located in the cliffside of the upper Paro valley. The temple complex was first built in 1692, around the Taktsang Senge Samdup cave where Guru Padmasambhava is said to have meditated for three years, three months, three weeks, three days and three hours in the 8th century. Padmasambhava is credited with introducing Buddhism to Bhutan and is the main deity of the country for that reason.

We had to check our backpacks, cameras and hats at the entrance and walk up even more stairs (which don't even count as part of the 700). We visited three of the many temples that are part of this complex, including a small one built on the ledge where the tiger landed carrying the Guru. It was very quiet and very peaceful up there, almost in the clouds.

And then it was time to hike back down. You don't get to ride horses down hill as it is too slippery and dangerous. So we walked. We walked for about 30 minutes to reach the first viewpoint (where we had tea) and we got to have lunch while staring at the Tiger's Nest way above us. After resting and eating, we headed the rest of the way down. Having walking sticks helped as it was rocky, and at places slippery (never mind covered with horse sh...).



Andy took this beautiful shot on our hike back down, through the pines and lichen.

All in all, with rest stops, and photo stops, and visiting the monastery and lunch, it took us five hours. What a way to end the trip.







But wait. It was not over yet. We had scheduled a typical Bhutanese hot stone bath. They literally take river rocks, heat them up, and put them in one section of a wooden tub. The other side has water which is warmed by the rocks. And green leaves that smelled really good (and I have no idea what kind they were). It was for two, and Andy and I soaked away our aches and pains. Now that was a way to end the trip.

As this is my last diary entry, let me finish with some final thoughts about Bhutan and some advice for future Bhutan visitors.

So what did I think of Bhutan?

Bhutan is a trip for people who can afford an expensive trip. The average MO of visitors is retired and in the mid-60's. There is a daily tariff which is constantly going up. This is on purpose to keep out "backpackers" and people that might not respect the country. You cannot go anywhere without your guide, not because they are hiding anything, but to make sure you don't hurt the environment (the guides volunteer their time on their days off to hike the trails picking up garbage).

Having said that, Bhutan is a gentle country. It is a peaceful country (last invasion was in 1646). It is a country full of contradictions (don't kill anything, not even a fly; but it is OK to eat meat and very few Bhutanese are vegetarians). It is a religious country and that religion is based on legends and myths which everyone believes. And the religion is evident everywhere, every day, from the temples and shrines and stupas seen along the side of the road, from the sound of the monks chanting, to the thousands of prayer flags fluttering in the wind.

The Bhutanese also believe that man can only survive and truly live by being in touch with the past. And their past is evident everywhere in the dzongs, the temples, in what they say and in the way they act.

And are they happy? So much is made about the Gross National Happiness Scale. They are happy with what they have, good or bad, in part because they believe they earned it in their last life. And there is always the next life which might be better if they live a meritorious life now. And they believe anything their King tells them. But what the GNH really means is economic development, and with that will come change.

So yes, Bhutan is also a country in transition. Despite what they may think, Bhutan is changing. You see monks walking with cell phones held to their ears. You see women in kiras and men in ghos talking on cell phones. You trek and you hear cell phones ringing. More and more children are getting educated and they will not want to go back to the farms. Who will be the farmers? Men and women wear their ghos and kiras to work, but on the weekend, they are in their jeans. TV and internet has reached Bhutan and they will see what is going on in the rest of the world. They can't help but change.

But hopefully the beauty will remain. It is physically, breath-taking beautiful. The green, green forests filled with monkeys and birds. The Himalayan Mountains with the high peaks covered in snow. And the people are honest, open and giving. They believe in praying for others and in compassion and that in turn will bring goodness back to them. I won't easily forget the sights of the children walking with their arms around each other. The faces we saw at the festival or just on the street. After all, it is not the trees and the rivers that make a nation. It is the people.

If you come here:

- Bring some warm clothes. It gets very cold in the mornings and at night. Bring gloves. Layer.
- Bring a sink stopper if you want to do your own laundry. Many hotels do have laundry service, where they wash your clothes by hand.
- Bring a flashlight. The light does go out in many places.
- Our guide had a walking stick for each of us, but I like using two and luckily brought my own. So you may want to bring a walking stick.

- Bring lots of tissues. Many facilities have no toilet paper.
- Some hotels did not have shampoo.
- Take Diamox (acetazolamide) – it helps with the altitude.
- When in Punakha, stay at the Uma. Don't take no for an answer. The most elegant hotel I have ever stayed at.
- When in Paro, stay at the Zhiwa Ling. Don't take no for an answer. The most beautiful hotel I have ever stayed at.
- Avoid staying at the Zangtopelri Hotel in Punakha. See note above – stay at the Uma.
- There is now an airport in Jakar in the Bumthang valley. This is one way to get to central Bhutan. The runway was closed so we ended up driving from Paro to Jakar, and of course back again as there is only one road. There are pros and cons. The pro is obviously saving time and not backtracking. The con is that there is so much to see along the road, like monkeys and yaks and people. You are not guaranteed to see them so driving in both directions increases your chances. I vote for driving. But make sure you have enough time to do it in smaller bites and not 9 hours at a stretch the way we were forced to do in order to make it to the festival.
- Make sure you plan your trip during a festival. Not to be missed. While Paro and Thimphu have large famous festivals, but they will be crowded. The dances are the same at each festival, so I would suggest one of the smaller ones.
- Don't bother changing dollars into nu. Everyone takes American dollars. But they prefer new bills and the bigger the denomination, the better the exchange rate, so take some \$100 bills as well as twenties, tens and ones.
- Read *Beyond the Sky and Earth* by Jamie Zeppa before you go. It is about the Bhutan of about 15-20 years ago, but it will be a great background for the trip.