

OLD BODY, YOUNG FACE

Bhutan, home of the new Taj Tashi resort, is one of the world's most closely guarded secrets but for those who manage to get there, a land of youthful innocence mixed with ancient wisdom awaits, as Gustasp and Jeroo Irani discovered



Our first view of Bhutan, tucked in the folds of the mighty Himalayas, was from way up in the sky and through a parting in the clouds.

The Druk Air aircraft sailed over mountains needled with pine trees before aligning itself with the country's only runway at Paro, situated at 7,500ft above sea level. Images of the town flashed by our window as we sailed through a corridor of mountains: gilt roofed monasteries and fortified dzongs; archaic bridges spanning the silvery grey glacier-fed river that cuts through the valley; quaint wooden houses floating in a sea of green paddy fields...

We had landed in a valley caught in the time warp of enchanted yesteryears. Soon we were on our way to the capital city of Thimphu, 65km from Paro, driving down a modern two-lane highway that fluttered like a ribbon across the rugged terrain. A sprightly young river kept us company through most of the journey and every so often we would cruise past suspension bridges swathed in colourful prayer flags, swaying across its gushing waters. The hills around us were peppered with whitewashed chortens (memorial shrines) and rustic settlements marooned in the middle of terraced fields that rippled down the mountain slopes.

What struck us almost immediately was the fact that the locals only wore traditional

LEFT A buddhist monk in a bird mask at a festival in Paro
BELOW Children huddle in a doorway, wearing traditional dress, as is still the norm for everyone in Bhutan



Bhutanese wraparound tunics; the men's garb stopping at the knees and that of the women reaching down to their ankles. We expected to see more Western influences once we reached the outskirts of Thimphu, but it became apparent that Bhutan is still deeply rooted in its past. It was like stepping into a living heritage theme park, where hilltop monasteries looked benevolently down at a modern city in which every building conformed to traditional architectural norms, and monks in bright orange robes strolled down the streets spinning prayer wheels and worry beads through their bony fingers.

In the distance the Taj Tashi resort beckoned. Though contemporary in every sense, in terms of the structure and facilities it blended seamlessly with its setting. In fact, the 66 room hotel that rose dramatically over the city's main

street seemed as though it had been around for centuries as it evoked the spirit of a Bhutanese dzong (the fortified outposts that once served as the administrative and spiritual strongholds of the different provinces).

Our room, decorated with classical hand-drawn Buddhist murals, captured the essence of Bhutan in an exciting and tangible way. From every room in the Taj Tashi – which comprises deluxe rooms, luxury rooms, deluxe suites, duplex suites and luxury suites – you can look out at the mountains and the Thimphu valley. Some have private sit-outs where you can commune with nature and sip steaming hot cups of tea, while the suites combine the luxury of space, romantic canopy beds, home theatre systems and spectacular views.

We dined that first night at Taj Tashi's authentic Bhutanese restaurant Chig-ja-gye,

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which set our taste buds alight with traditional delights, such as Ema Datshi, Doem, Hontay and Kharang. These dishes were conjured and served with Taj style finesse amidst an ambience of traditional gold-leaf paintings and horn instruments called dhungs.

The next morning we drank authentic butter tea (a local brew and the perfect way to balance the bracing Himalayan chill factor) amidst all-embracing mountain views from the serene Rimps tea lounge, where murals of double *dorjes*, which represent enlightenment and wisdom, plunged us into Bhutanese culture right away.

Later we stopped by at the hotel's travel service desk and found ourselves spoilt for choice: local sightseeing that included a stop at a National Memorial Chorten; religious tours to exotic hilltop monasteries; a visit to the imposing dzong that serves as the administrative and legislative hub of the country; folk heritage and textile museums; a local textiles and crafts tour;

ABOVE Laying the tables at Chig-je-gye restaurant
LEFT View through the pines of Taj Tashi resort



Photography: (opening pages) Photoflibrary



or a visit to the local zoo to admire the curious looking takin (which resembles a cross between a cow and a sheep). We opted for a nature trek up to Cheri Gompa, a Buddhist monastery some 15km north of Thimphu.

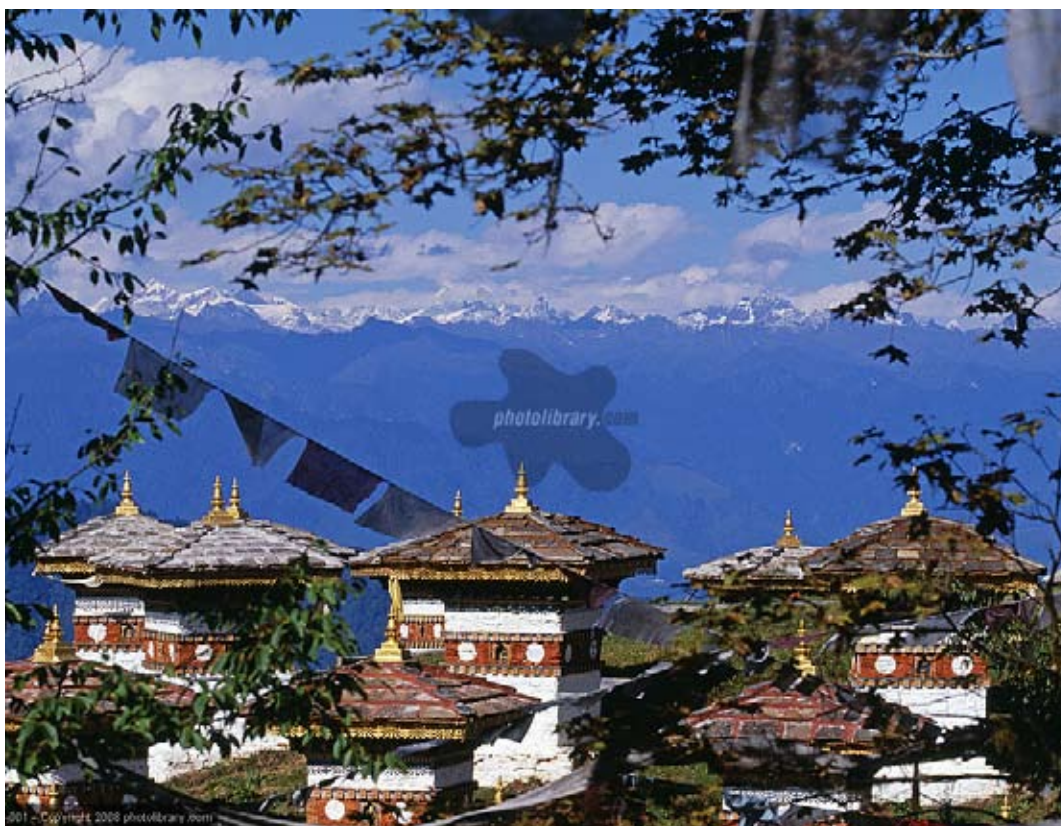
Leaving the city behind, we drove through a valley flooded with paddy fields. This, our guide informed us, was what Thimphu looked like before it became a trifle urbanised post 1961, when the little rural settlement was chosen by the third king of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, the father of modern Bhutan, to be the new capital of the country.

Some 10km down the road, tucked in a fold of the land, was a huge flat-faced rock on which the image of Guru Rinpoche was painted in vivid colours. The guru, believed to be the reincarnation of Lord Buddha, first arrived in Bhutan from Tibet in the year 747AD and was responsible for bringing Buddhism to the country. However, it was only in the 17th Century, with the coming of Ngawang Namgyel, the person responsible for building Cheri Gompa, that Bhutan emerged as a country.

We had been driving for some time but had not passed a living soul for miles when suddenly we spotted a speck of orange on the asphalt dead ahead. A lama. We drove past the elderly priest and pulled up at a clearing in front of a quaint little bridge that straddled a gushing stream. The last stage of the journey would have to be on foot and it was going to be a steep and demanding trek up to the monastery, which is still an important seat of religious teaching where monks come for refresher courses and spiritual retreats.

The trail led us into an enchanted forest of moss-covered trees and thick undergrowth. The air was dense with the musty aroma of life regenerating itself. The crunch of leaves underfoot mingled with the strains of songbirds. Ignoring the protests of our legs and lungs, we pushed on till we finally reached our destination. Here we relaxed under the shade of a tree and soaked in the peace and quiet of the setting. A

ABOVE Prayer flags flutter from a mountain monastery
LEFT One of the deluxe rooms at Taj Tashi resort



day, the panoramic windows present views of the ubiquitous prayer flags fluttering against a backdrop of misty hillsides.

We reminisced about our brief vacation and the little cameo that we had witnessed at the local market: a young lad of around seven bought a peach from a young girl vendor. The hint of a smile lit up the little girl's face, which the boy saw as an invitation to help himself to one more fruit. "Hey!" protested her elderly father, who was selling yak milk cottage cheese at the neighbouring stall. The beaming smile that cracked his weather-beaten face betrayed his amusement.

This little vignette seemed to capture the spirit of Bhutan: a country as old and wise as the hills, yet young and innocent; rugged and hardy like the yak milk cottage cheese, and then again soft and beautiful as a peach.

LEFT Buddhist memorial shrines (chortens) compete for attention with the Himalayas looming in the background
BELOW LEFT A Bhutanese couple hang out their prayer flags

rustling in the bushes above made us look back and we found ourselves gazing at a spotted deer with large, liquid eyes. Yes, this was the land of innocence and we had the privilege of entering it, if ever so briefly.

Later we returned to the capital city just in time to witness the end of an archery tournament (the national sport of Bhutan) on the central archery grounds along the banks of the river. The archers of both teams and their women had formed a large circle and were singing, dancing and ribbing each other.

We left the happy celebration to browse in the local market, which brimmed with colour, and then we retreated to the cool sanctuary of Taj Tashi. That evening we nursed a drink at the Ara lounge bar and watched an exhausted sun drop between two peaks and surrender the darkening sky to a crescent moon and a million stars. This was followed by a meal at the all-day dining restaurant Thongsel where, in the



FACT FILE

Paro International airport, the only airstrip in Bhutan, lies 65km east of Thimphu. Druk Air, the national carrier, operates flights to Bhutan from Delhi, Kolkata, Kathmandu, Bangkok and Dhaka.

A modern highway connects Paro to Thimphu. Thimphu is also accessible by road from Phuntsholing, which is within striking distance of Bagdogra Airport in India.

Taj Tashi, Thimphu, is located in the centre of the capital city, a short walk away from the golf course. Aside from luxurious rooms, it has a heated indoor swimming pool, a fitness centre and conference and banquet facilities. The Jiva Spa offers Indian and Bhutanese holistic treatments.

For more information visit:

www.tajhotels.com