

Land of the Thunder Dragon

Text and photos by Dr Krishna Prasad Giri



Dochula Pass, which comprises 108 stupas, is located along the route from the capital Thimphu to Punakha

ASA little boy growing up in Bhutan, I was very curious about cars. Whenever I heard the roar of an engine, I would run towards the road in hopes of glimpsing one. However, the car would have already driven off long before I could reach the street. I was seven when I finally set eyes on one.

I was 18 when I first saw a computer, and 21 when I got my first laptop. At 26, I arrived in Singapore to join Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH). On my first day at work, I had no idea how to use an access card to open doors. I also frequently got lost in the hospital during my initial days there. My struggles might sound funny now, but they were very real back then.

Introducing my homeland

Bhutan is derived from the Sanskrit word *bhu-uttan*, which means “highlands”. In Dzongkha, the national language, Bhutan is called Druk Yul, or “Land of the Thunder Dragon”. Widely regarded as one of the happiest places on earth, the country is a small Himalayan kingdom with a population of about 800,000, and landlocked between two giants – China and India. It is a constitutional monarchy, with the Prime Minister as the head of government, and the King as the head of state. The latter is highly respected and loved by the people of Bhutan.

In 1971, Bhutan was recognised as a member country by the United Nations. Foreign tourists were allowed into the kingdom for the first time in 1974. Limited television and internet access was later introduced in 1999. Bhutan came into the media limelight in 2008, when famous Hong Kong actors Tony Leung and Carina Lau held their wedding there.

Home to many flowing rivers and fertile valleys that are lush and green, the kingdom is blessed with great

scenic beauty. Since 72% of Bhutan is under forest cover, its environment holds great importance and has been given topmost priority by the state. Therefore, its natural surroundings have never been sidelined in the name of development. For example, anyone caught killing a member of an endangered species would face the harsh sentence of life imprisonment. Besides that, Bhutan is the only nation in the world where the sale of tobacco is banned.

Bhutan is a carbon sink country that emphasises measures to reduce carbon emissions. It sells hydroelectricity to its neighbours, making it the sole nation whose largest export is renewable energy. Other major sources of revenue are agriculture and tourism.

Many believe that only a fixed number of tourists are allowed into the kingdom every year, but this is not a hard and fast rule – there is no actual limit. However, according to government regulations, anyone who wishes to travel to the kingdom must book their trip through a licensed Bhutanese tour operator. (For more information about licensed Bhutanese tour operators, please visit <http://www.tourism.gov.bt/directory/tour-operator>.) Backpackers are not permitted to enter the country on their own.

Winter in Bhutan is extremely cold and the land would be blanketed by snow; while summer brings heavy rains, along with cloudy and foggy skies. The best time to visit is in March, during spring; and October, when it is autumn. Here are some attractions that you cannot miss!

Taksang Monastery

Taksang Monastery, also known as Tiger’s Nest, is built into a cliffside above the valley in Paro (the city where the



Above A splendid view of Bhutan's second oldest and second largest fort, Punakha Dzong
Left Dr Krishna's nieces and nephew in traditional Bhutanese costumes

country's only international airport is located). You will need to hike a few hours from the road – a steep uphill climb – to reach this spiritual place.

It is believed that in AD 746, Guru Padmasambhava, a famous Buddhist teacher, flew on the back of a tigress from Tibet to this cliff. In 1692, a temple complex was built at the spot where the guru was said to have meditated for three years, three months, three weeks, three days and three hours. This monastery is a tourist favourite, and regarded as a place of great sanctity and religious value.

Chimi Lhakhang

The legend of Tibetan saint Lam Drukpa Kinley started in this monastery, built on a hillock in Punakha District. He had an unconventional way of teaching Buddhism, through humorous singing and behaviour that included sexual undertones. Known as the Divine Madman, he emphasised the usage of wooden phalluses and paintings of such symbols. The temple houses a wooden phallus decorated with a silver handle, which is believed to have belonged to Drukpa Kinley. Today, it is used to bless people, especially women who hope to bear children. (You can still spot paintings of phalluses on the doors or walls of Bhutanese shops and houses, though they have become less common nowadays. They are meant to ward off evil, and should not be seen as surprising or shameful.)

According to myth, Drukpa Kinley created the national animal of Bhutan – the takin. It is said that when the Divine Madman visited Bhutan, he was asked to perform a miracle. So he demanded both a cow and a goat for lunch, which he devoured almost entirely, leaving only the bones. After finishing his meal with a large burp, Drukpa Kinley placed the goat's skull on the cow's skeleton and clicked his fingers. The beast immediately took form and began grazing on the mountainside.

Punakha Dzong

Punakha Dzong, or Pungthang Dewachen Phodrang (Palace of Great Happiness), is the second oldest, second largest, but most gorgeous fort in Bhutan. It is two-and-half hours' drive from the capital, Thimphu.

The fort was built strategically at the confluence of the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu ("male" and "female" rivers respectively). The water in each river is noticeably different in colour. Punakha Dzong, joined to the mainland by an arched wooden bridge, contains many precious relics from the days when successive kings ruled the kingdom from this valley. As the Punakha region is blessed with a temperate climate, lovely lilac-hued flowering jacaranda trees can be found around the fort during spring. A picturesque sight indeed!

Gangtey Valley

Called the Shangri-La of Bhutan, Gangtey Valley is one of the most stunning valleys in the Himalayas. After a hard ascent through dense woodlands, you will find yourself standing on a wide and flat area without any trees – an extremely rare experience in the country as most of its valleys are tightly enclosed. You can then go on a moderate trek that passes through the villages of Gogona and Khotokha; meadows and fields; and forests of juniper, magnolia and rhododendrons, which would be in full bloom in April. Do stop by the historical Gangtey Monastery and the Black-necked Crane Information Centre in the vicinity. During winter, you may even be able to catch the graceful black-necked cranes in action as they head to the valley to roost. ■



Dr Krishna came to Singapore four years ago. He is currently working in Department of Neurosurgery in TTSH, and wants to be trained in General Surgery.

