

BIG ON BHUTAN

WELCOME TO POSSIBLY THE
HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH

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THE ART OF ROBATAYAKI

IT'S MORE
THAN JUST POSH
JAPANESE BARBECUE

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BEST THINGS UNDER S\$10

VERNETTA LOPEZ CAN'T GET
ENOUGH OF LOCAL HAWKER FARE
(OR LIVE WITHOUT CHILLI)

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travel



PHARRELL'S SONG ABOUT GETTING HAPPY COULD HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF BHUTAN

IN HIGH SPIRITS

Send in the clowns: People having fun at the Paro Festival. PHOTOS: BRYAN FERNANDEZ

BRYAN FERNANDEZ IN BHUTAN
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Happiness Is A Place. At least that's the official slogan of the Tourism Council of Bhutan; and I was determined to find out if it was merely hype and a clever marketing gimmick or truly a way of life in Bhutan.

As soon as you land at Paro airport, you know you're in for something completely different. Even the ramp

service agent waving the planes off is dressed in a traditional costume — basically everyone is.

Here's what we know about the country: It is landlocked and located along the eastern end of the Himalayas and flanked by both China and India. It is relatively small in terms of its population (about 750,000) but its land space is roughly 38,000 sq km (about 50 times larger than Singapore). It gets approximately 50,000 international visitors a year (that's about the number of visitors to Sentosa a day).

> This trip was made possible by Druk Asia.

Bhutan is also popular for its Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy: It measures the nation's success not by GDP but by the well-being of its people. Bhutan is sometimes referred to as the last Shangri-La, because it is said to be relatively untouched by modern culture and western influence.

There are some things to note before you fly off to Bhutan for a holiday. Firstly, you have to fly by Druk Air which currently has two flights from Singapore to Paro a week. Secondly, look for a reputable travel agent that specialises in Bhutan: He or she will be able to sort everything out, including getting visas and customising an itinerary. You'll have to get a prepaid travel package (approximately US\$250, or S\$309, per person per night) and this includes a hotel room, a dedicated guide and driver, meals and entrance fees to attractions. So it's kind of like a full board vacation.

Our two weeks there saw us travelling from town to town; through valleys, over mountains and across rivers. There are no malls, McDonalds, Starbucks, cinemas ... nothing that defines

a modern city. There aren't even any traffic lights — and hardly any street signs. If you do see one, it would just point you in the general direction of where the next town is. (I asked the locals how they would arrange to meet someone or find their way around. They said they would just describe it, accompany it with a familiar landmark and find their way, no problem.)

SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS

To fully understand Bhutan though, you should truly have a basic understanding of Buddhism. It permeates everyday life in Bhutan. The majority of its citizens are Buddhist and it is evident when you look around. Buddhist culture has penetrated into every aspect of their lives. Colourful prayer flags and prayer wheels and stupas (structures containing Buddhist relics) can be seen all around.

The lines between myth and legend are blurred. Listening to some of the stories made me feel like I was travelling through the pages of Journey To The West. One of the first

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Bhutanese architecture.

sacred sights we visited was Chimi Lhakhang, or “the temple of the divine madman”. According to legend, Drukpa Kunley, aka the Divine Madman, subdued demons with his phallus — which is why you will see images of giant phalluses adorning the walls of building exteriors all over Bhutan: It is said to drive away evil spirits.

The Divine Madman was also known for his outrageous and often obscene methods of spreading enlightenment to the common man, but he is credited by some for creating the Takin (Bhutan’s national animal) by taking the head of a goat and placing it on a cow’s body. Local women visit the temple to pray for fertility.

As a director/videographer (for digitalcandymedia.com if you must know), I’m always on the lookout for stunning sights. And the one sacred site that no one should miss — even if you don’t care for Buddhist history — is Taktshang Monastery, or the Tiger’s Nest. The sheer beauty and magnificence of this monastery will take your breath away. Built on the side of a cliff overseeing Paro valley, this dramatic and highly venerated religious site was the highlight of the trip. But be warned, there are no roads up this mountain and the Tiger’s Nest is approximately 10,000 feet above sea level. You may find yourself trekking for hours just to get there. Then again, we saw plenty of elderly tourists hoof it without any problems.

GET DZONG’ED OUT

Next up was Punakha, the ancient capital of Bhutan. At the centre of it all is Punakha Dzong, a stunning example of Bhutanese architecture. Dzongs once

served as fortresses, housing temples and courtyards, and were the district’s social centre. Today, they function as administrative offices and house monks, and tourists come to marvel at the craftsmanship and murals that grace the walls. It is the Bhutanese equivalent of a medieval city. Trongsa Dzong has a watchtower that has been converted into a museum that narrates its history and that of the royal Wangchuck dynasty.

But if you want an interesting night out, then head to the town of Bumthang in central Bhutan. It is a long drive there, but you’ll be rewarded at the end of it. We went to a drayang, where girls in traditional costumes go on stage to dance to modern music (I kid you not). Next, we went to a club called Pulse. This was quite the experience. Fifty or so people, mostly local farmers and tradesmen, along with a handful of tourists, were crammed into a small room with a dance floor, as the DJ played a mix of Hindi dance and contemporary hits (Pitbull’s Timber was on high rotation). We warmed ourselves by a bonfire outside the club. Drinks cost about S\$2 and it is not just the young ones who frequent Pulse: I saw a 60-year-old lady with her daughter seated in a corner — and they did not look out of place at all.

Of course, festivals or tshechus are a big draw for visitors to Bhutan. Paro Festival in particular, is an annual event that is marked on everyone’s calendar. Thousands join in the celebration, with most, if not all, dressed in traditional outfits — kiras for women and ghos for men. The fancy ones come in intricate patterns and are handmade; but they are generally

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IN HIGH SPIRITS

● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 49

cheap and can be bought in the shops around town. Even the king and queen grace this event; they are often seen sitting and chatting with the people, be they tourists or locals.

The food in Bhutan is pretty delicious and healthy. Just a tip: Look for restaurants where the locals eat. Bhutan hopes to be the world’s first fully organic nation. However, if you’ve been weaned on Big Macs and Cokes, be warned: The Bhutanese like their food really spicy. Hotels pretty much dish out the same fare as restaurants but tame the flavours to suit the tourist palette. Chilli cheese or ema datshi is a staple that I quite enjoyed, although I would skip the “tender” beef — the Bhutanese dry their beef out so much, it feels like leather. If you’re ever in Thimpu, look out for The Zone. It’s the Hard Rock Cafe of Bhutan and they serve a mean yak burger. Yeah, you read that right.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

While Bhutan is a scenic and spiritual destination, I think what really made it an unforgettable journey is the people that we met along the way. The Bhutanese are warm and friendly, and almost everyone speaks Eng-

lish. We were chatting with a local at a festival and he invited us to join his family for lunch — they had a picnic spread and his whole family, from his grandmother to his nieces and nephews, looked on with glee as we sampled their home-cooked food.

Yes, people are indeed happier in Bhutan — happy to lead a simple life and satisfied with what they have but always mindful of their environment and the people around them. It never once crossed my mind that the Bhutanese people were backward village folk (even though they only had televisions since 1999). They are as modern a society as any that I can think of (they have iPads and Internet access, and they know their pop culture). They’ve definitely got their priorities right as a society.

So is happiness a place? Yes.

It’s a place where your heart and mind meet to enjoy the simple beauties that this world has to offer.



Farm kids in Bhutan posing for the camera.