

Mysterious and magical

The mountainous kingdom of Bhutan lives up to its reputation as a place of isolated, pristine beauty although changes are underway

Malcolm Mcleod
In Bhutan

The first glimpse as we begin our descent in the airplane is unforgettable. A range of blue, dark green mountains shrouded in white clouds and swirling mist.

The plane banks left, the horizon disappears, reappears and we are within door-knocking distance of squat, white-washed farm houses halfway up a near-vertical hillside.

Then we are on the tarmac.

Fly into Paro, Bhutan's only international airport, on a clear day and you can see the world's highest mountain, Mount Everest.

Drukair, Bhutan's national carrier, is the only airline to fly here. Paro lies in a valley at an altitude of 2,200m and from there, pretty much everything else in Bhutan is up.

Its hilliness helps explain its once near-total isolation. The country, bordered by China and India, has never been colonised or successfully invaded.

Bhutan practises something called high-value, low-volume tourism. Visitors – except those from India, Bangladesh and the Maldives – must pay US\$250 (S\$313) in advance. The cost includes visa, meals, accommodation, a guide and transport within the country.

Our 20-hour flight arrived via Thailand and India with an overnight stopover in Bangkok. From Sept 2, however, Drukair introduces twice-weekly flights from Changi – with a short stopover in Kolkata – which will slash travel time to 5½ hours.

Our party of eight journalists are met by a pair of grinning guides who drape white silk scarves around our necks. Tshering and Kinley are in their national dress – the dark, loose, knee-length robe known as the gho. A pair of knee-length argyle socks complete the outfit.

The road to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, winds dramatically along the magnificent Paro River valley. Sheer drops down to a swirling river and countless stray dogs, cows and horses keep things interesting.

We stop at a rebuilt traditional swinging bridge opposite a temple (the Tachogang) straight out of the 15th



A Bhutanese schoolboy (left) heads home after class in Thimphu. On the walking track to Taktshang monastery, a man suddenly appears (above) with a load of wood and a string of mushrooms which grow wild at this time of year.

century. The non-traditional chicken wire covering the bridge walkway affords a knuckle-whitening view of the monsoon-rain-swollen river rushing underfoot.

After all the natural beauty, it comes as a bit of a shock to see ugly, half-completed four- and five-storey apartment buildings dominating Thimphu's outskirts. Dwarfing these modern structures is the massive 18th-century Trashi Chhoe Soon Dzong, a fortress-like edifice at once impressive and intimidating.

Every major town in Bhutan has its dzong. They serve as the prime religious and administrative headquarters – a sort of temple, monastery and city hall

combined.

We arrive at Trashi Chhoe to a cacophony of trumpets. There is a flag-lowering ceremony in progress and bewigged trumpeters dressed in vibrantly coloured gowns are leading a troop of soldiers carrying the furred state flag of Bhutan on a slow march into the dzong.

Accommodation for the night is at one of Bhutan's poshest hotels, the Amankora Thimphu.

The decor is Bali-meets-Scandinavian with locally sourced champ hardwood floors and soft coloured furnishings. The room is the size of a two-room HDB flat, with an imposing log-burning fireplace in the middle.

The view outside is of uninterrupted, pristine greenery. The only sound, snatches of birdsong. There is a great spa. There is Wi-Fi. I never want to leave.

After dinner, there is time to explore the town. Thimphu's Hong Kong market in Norzin Lam, the main street, is an eclectic collection of shops catering to locals and tourists.

At the Clock Tower square, there is an amphitheatre and, this being a Sunday, there is an open-air concert. Hundreds of people have gathered for a fund-raiser to rebuild an ancient monastery destroyed by fire last month.

The next day, we head for the former capital, Punakha, stopping at Dochula pass with its 108 stupas and stunning views of mountains and mist-draped forests.

At the nearby village of Sopsokh, we traverse a muddy track through green rice fields to Chimi Lhakhang temple, founded to honour one of Bhutan's most revered lamas, Drukpa Kunley, known as the Divine Madman for his unorthodox teaching methods. He is said to have banished demons by whacking them with his phallus.

The temple is a pilgrimage site for barren couples. Many of the houses in the area are cheerfully decorated with phallic images and in the village, a specialist

shop sells faithfully rendered wooden replicas.

We stay at the three-star Meri Puensum. It is clean, friendly and has excellent views of terraced rice fields and the beautiful Wangdue valley. It is also very quiet until the screaming starts. We are sampling a bottle of Special Courier scotch whiskey when, from quite nearby, an unearthly, full-throated scream rips through the still night air.

"Do not worry, they are just banishing an evil spirit. Someone has died in the middle of the week and it is bad, very bad for the village," explains Tshering.

No visit to Bhutan is complete without a pilgrimage to Bhutan's iconic Taktshang monastery, also known as Tiger's Nest, which is 900m above the Paro valley floor.

The hike takes four hours up and down. We recover from our exertions at the beautiful Uma Paro, a luxurious boutique hotel in a parkland setting. It is here that Hong Kong celebrities Carina Lau and Tony Leung Chiu Wai were married in 2008.

All too soon it is our last night. To celebrate we go clubbing.

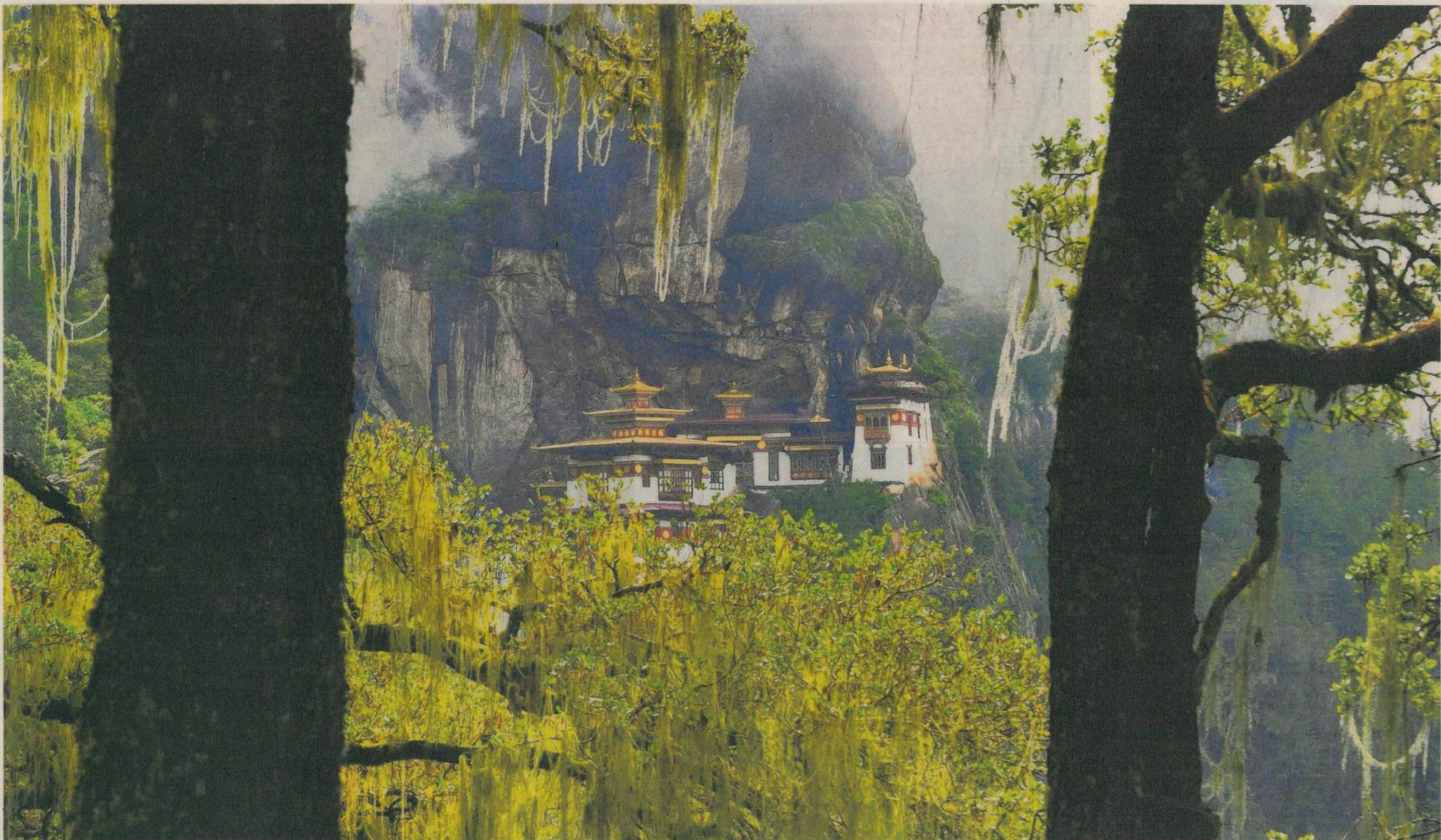
The next morning, mist and low clouds obscure the surrounding hills. Some of us are praying for a flight delay so we can spend just one more day in Bhutan.

Alas, it is not to be. Hugs all round and we are off. "See you next week," jokes Tsering. I wish. Bhutan really is majestic, mystical and quite magical. Go there and see it for yourself.

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The writer's trip was sponsored by the Changi Airport Group, Drukair and Druk Asia.

Druk Asia (www.drukasia.com) and the Tourism Council of Bhutan (www.tourism.gov.bt) have more information on visiting Bhutan.

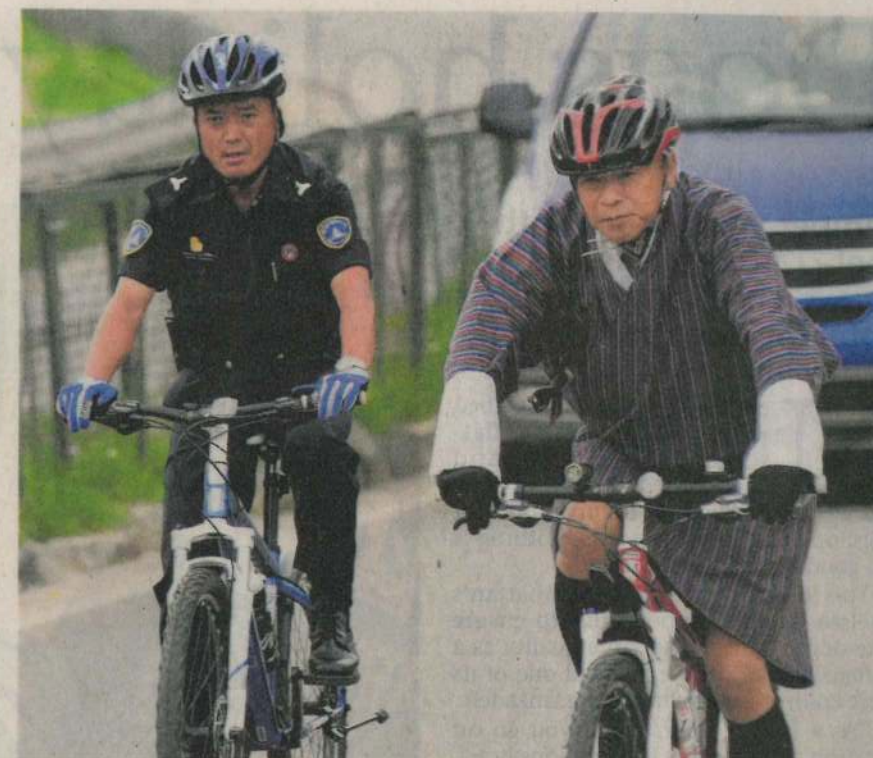


Bhutan's iconic Taktshang monastery, or Tiger's Nest, is 900m above the Paro valley floor and can be reached after a two-hour hike.

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Novice monks (above) in front of prayer wheels at the Trashi Chhoe Dzong in Thimphu. The Phunakha Dzong (right) at the confluence of the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu rivers in western Bhutan. It was the administrative centre and seat of government until 1955.



Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Thinley (above), a cycling advocate, cycles in Thimphu with a police outrider. Every year, Bhutan hosts the 268km Tour of Dragon across the inner Himalayas.



Bewigged trumpeters (right) dressed in vibrantly coloured gold-embossed gowns lead the flag ceremony at the Trashi Chhoe Dzong in Thimphu.