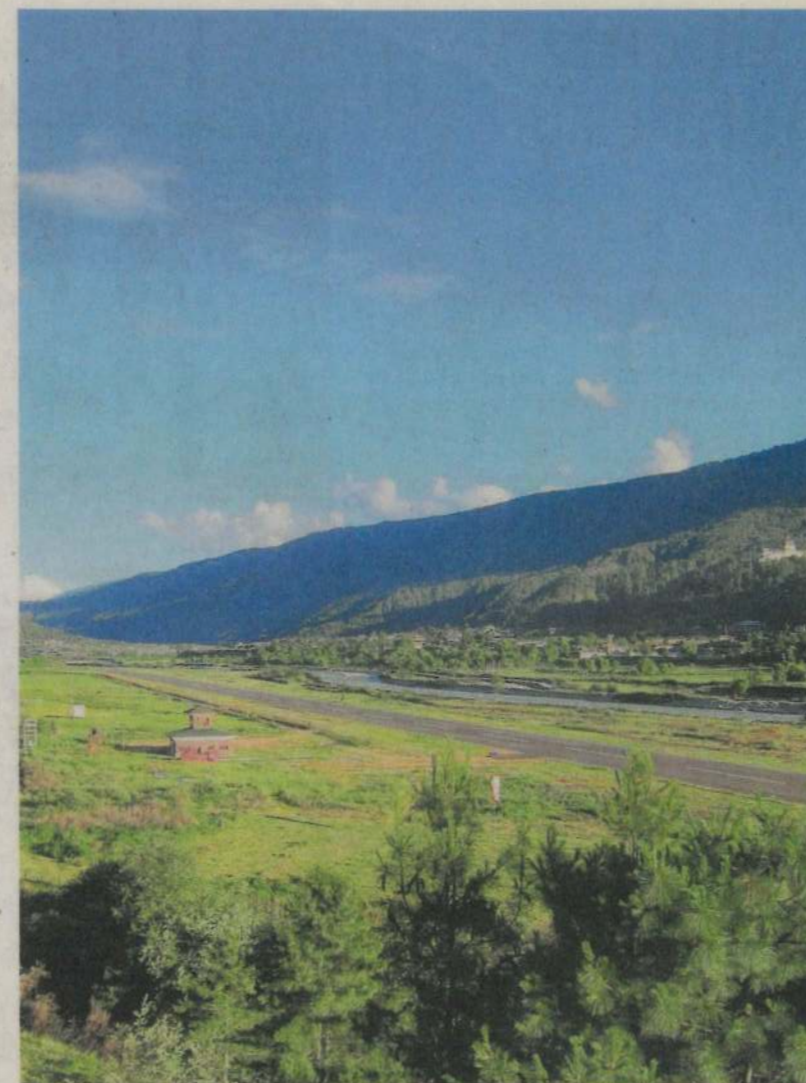




ST PHOTOS: MARIA ALMENOAR

Bumthang (above) in Central Bhutan is called the spiritual heartland of the kingdom as it is where some important Buddhist sites are found.

At a festival (left) at Kurjey Lhakang monastery in honour of the saint, Guru Rinpoche, a 30m-wide, three-storey-high tapestry depicting Buddha and his eight manifestations is hoisted up for display before the sun rises.

Tapestry of celebration

Witness the tradition, culture and faith of the Bhutanese during their colourful festivals

Maria Almenoar
In Bhutan



The kingdom of Bhutan is best known by the outside world for being the happiest place on earth.

And it is easy to understand why once you experience the pristine environment, blue skies and gushing river that runs through this country nestled between India, China and Nepal.

But it is not just the lush environment that keeps the Bhutanese happy, grounded and content.

The 750,000-strong population, made up of a vast majority of Buddhist followers, is deep-set in its faith and exudes a strong sense of tradition. This deep-rooted faith translates into laws that protect forests and forbid hunting or the exploration of sacred mountains.

The strong sense of tradition is seen in festivals where Bhutanese gather, regardless of their socio-economic background, to show their devotion to their faith.

There is really no better way to experience their culture and spiritual fervour than by visiting the place during a festival.

For visitors, there is a chance to do so every 10th day of the lunar calendar month when one of the 20 dzongkhag (pronounced zong-kah) or districts holds a festival in honour of the birthday of Guru Rinpoche, the saint who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century and is regarded as the second Buddha by the Bhutanese.



Intricately hand-painted religious murals fill the walls of temples in Bhutan.

For the month of June, the honour of hosting the tshechu (pronounced che-choo), or festival, goes to Bumthang in Central Bhutan, a half-hour domestic flight from the country's international airport in Paro in the west.

Bumthang, which sits at between 2,600m and 4,000m above sea level, has a population of about 40,000.

It is often described as the spiritual heartland of the kingdom because it is home to some of the most significant sites for Buddhists. Guru Rinpoche and his lineage of treasure finders made Bumthang their home from the 8th century onwards and this led to the building of more than 40 temples there.

Guru Rinpoche hid a number of secret teachings in the lakes, caves, fields and forests of the Himalayan region to be

discovered and interpreted by these spiritual treasure finders.

Over three days in Bumthang, our group of six journalists wander through six monasteries and temples, all of which hold special prayers for Guru Rinpoche.

It is a little after 6am when we arrive at Kurje Lhakang monastery, about 15 minutes' drive from Jakar airport in Bumthang. Almost 100 people have already gathered on the sidelines waiting for the start of the tshechu, while another 50 or so are hurrying about for the preparations.

Kurje Lhakang is built around a cave in which Guru Rinpoche is said to have spent most of his time meditating and left an impression of his body there.

Towering over the temple is a grand cypress tree which is said to have grown from the wooden staff that Guru Rinpoche lodged in the rock.

The early start for the festival is necessary to protect two rarely seen tapestries – one said to be more than 100 years old – from the harsh rays of the sun.

The larger tapestry, which is about 30m wide and covers entirely a three-storey building on the monastery grounds, has a large picture of Buddha encircled by his eight manifestations.

This intricately painted cloth is covered in white linen and kept all year long in the temple, away from the curious eyes of visitors. It is revealed only during this festival and those who are lucky enough to see the tapestry in its full glory are said to be blessed and cleansed of all their sins.

Almost 25 monks carry the rolled-up tapestry over their shoulders, down three flights of steps and into the courtyard where visitors wait.

The local men, including our guide Tsering Penjor, 30, and driver Sanjay Namgay, 54, chip in to hold the tapestry up while others help to insert a long metal pipe through the top of the tapestry to keep it taut.

Nobody has actually weighed this tapestry but it takes between 30 and 40 large Bhutanese men to handle it.

Finally, after half an hour at about 7am, six nylon ropes thrown down from the top of the building are used to hoist the grand tapestry.

There are no claps or "oohs" and "aahs" but just a reverent silence as everyone pauses to admire this precious sight.

Soon, a procession begins, led by the head lama from Central Bhutan. Monks chant and make offerings, including a modern-day three-tier birthday cake covered in white cream that says "Happy Birthday Guru Rinpoche", and then offer blessings to the 200-strong crowd which includes 20 to 30 tourists.

These tshechus are becoming increasingly popular with tourists, notes Mr Penjor.



ST GRAPHICS

GETTING THERE

Drukair, the national carrier of the country, flies to Paro, Bhutan, from Singapore twice a week on Thursdays and Sundays. The flights are six hours long with a stopover in Kolkata, India.

Half-hour flights from Paro to Bumthang run three times a week on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.

WHERE TO STAY

Richenling Lodge about 20 minutes from Jakar airport is a family-run business which recently upgraded a set of rooms and plans to have serviced apartments with kitchenettes.

The lodge is reminiscent of a quaint English cottage but the rooms are spacious, with traditional Bhutanese wooden panelling.

Room rates are between \$50 (single) and \$120 (suite).

Dancing to fight evil

<<10

That afternoon, we also visit a smaller and much quieter temple, the Zhugdrak (pronounced zug-drak), where Guru Rinpoche is also said to have meditated.

This is Bumthang's version of the Tiger's Nest monastery, a popular tourist destination in Paro, Bhutan. Tiger's Nest, which was built in 1692, is also perched on a cliff and is where Guru Rinpoche is said to have meditated for three years, three months, three days and three hours in the 8th century.

The Zhugdrak, about a 40-minute drive from Jakar airport, is accessible by a steep 20-minute hike through a forest.

When we arrive, the monks have started their prayer rituals.

Despite the size of our group – 12 – we are given the privilege of observing the prayer session and are ushered into the larger of the two rooms (about 2.5m by 6m), which has a large altar and five monks conducting prayers.

The monks allow us to cram ourselves in and listen to the almost hypnotic ritual consisting mainly of chanting and the beating of traditional drums. In the corner of the room are two footprints and a handprint made by Guru Rinpoche.

As we leave, a monk bestows us with yet another blessing by tapping us on our heads with a prayer book.

A common event that is held by most dzongkhags during the monthly birthday tshechu of Guru Rinpoche is the Trelde Tsechu, which we experience on the second day of the trip.

Another festival site in Bumthang is Nimalung Monastery, which was built in 1935 and is about 40 minutes by car from Jakar airport.

From our van, about 1km from the festival site, groups of women are seen emerging from the forest either piggy-backing toddlers or carrying rattan baskets filled with picnic lunches or snacks for the festival. It is a community event as villagers take the opportunity to meet and catch up with friends.

Set against the background of rolling hills and mountains, the two-storey monastery is packed on both floors with an eager audience of at least 150 looking into the courtyard.



ST PHOTOS: MARIA ALMENOAR

There is a cultural song and dance by the women and also a Black Hat dance performed by monks who beat hand drums as they twirl in lively multi-coloured costumes to drive away evil spirits.

The highlight of the day's festivities is an elaborate three-part dance where 12 Bhutanese men and monks chase and subdue evil spirits while wearing masks representing various enchanted animals such as the garuda and lion.

Every movement is precise, timed and deliberate to represent the struggle between good and evil.

As we leave the festival, a 12-year-old village girl who shyly lingers near our group eventually says hello and asks for our names.

"Nice to meet you. See you next year," she calls out in a clear American accent as she runs to catch up with her friend.

I sure hope so.

✉ mariaa@sph.com.sg

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



Twelve men and monks wearing animal masks (above) perform a three-part dance at the Nimalung Monastery where they chase and subdue evil spirits.

Monks beat handheld drums during the Black Hat Dance (left), which wards off evil spirits.



Other Bumthang sites worth visiting

■ **Chamkar river** (above) runs through the Bumthang district and is very inviting. Roll up your pants and dip your feet into the cool clear water and then lie back on large, flat rocks and stare into the blue sky. Those who are a little bit more adventurous can swim in the river, just like the monks.

■ **Tamshing Goemba** is a small, quiet temple built in 1501 by a local Buddhist saint called Pema Lingpa, who spent his life revealing precious spiritual treasures that Guru Rinpoche had hidden.

The highlight here is a 20kg metal chain wrap that visitors can wear around their

shoulders before walking three rounds around the internal perimeter of the temple to atone for their sins. It takes about three minutes to complete the rounds.

■ **Burning Lake** is where Pema Lingpa found many of Guru Rinpoche's treasures. It is a short walk to the lake from the car drop-off point, but the views down to the water are spectacular throughout – steep rock faces, a gushing river and colourful prayer flags flapping in the wind.

Lie face down on a 5m-long stone, which juts out just above where Pema Lingpa is said to have dived into the water to gather treasure, and imagine what might still be buried deep in those waters.