



Legend has it that Tiger's Nest was established in the 16th century by a saint, Guru Padmasambhava, who rode a flying tiger to this site and who brought Buddhism to Bhutan.

DAYS OF THUNDER

Shamilee Vellu heads to the mystical kingdom of Bhutan to discover the secrets of happiness.

Many travellers to the kingdom of Bhutan or Druk-Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon), inevitably make their way up to Gangtey from the capital city, Thimphu. Thanks to a winding, rock-studded road, the journey is, at best, bumpy, and at worst, one that threatens to rearrange all your internal organs. Steep drops, blind corners and two-lane traffic on a path made for one all conspire to make the drive feel longer than it really is.

Night falls at 5pm in winter, so when my group finally reaches Amankora Gangtey, part of Amanresorts - our hosts on this trip -

darkness cloaks us. Inside the lodge though, a warm fire and bed await.

Rising early the next morning, I'm greeted by breathtaking, sweeping views of the verdant Phobjikha valley, stretching as far as the eye can see. Perched on a nearby hilltop is Gangtey Gumba Dzong, a spectacular fortress-monastery dating back to the 17th century. This is hiking country, and I set off across a terrain that changes from Spanish moss-garlanded blue pine forest to undulating tussock plains in the gentle bowl of the valley. In this idyllic landscape with its whistling winds and winding rivers, people are few



and far between, and the vista punctuated only by the occasional farmhouse and grazing horse.

It's a fittingly awe-inspiring introduction to the long-eulogised "last Shangri-La", or land of Gross National Happiness, which relies on key happiness indicators rather than economic ones to measure progress. Particularly important among these indicators are the preservation of tradition and culture, and protection of the natural environment.

"Being a small country, if you lose these two, you lose everything," says Mynak Trulku Rinpoche, a respected monk and religious leader my group met in Thimphu for a candid discussion of Bhutan and Buddhism.

According to him, heightening expectations is an issue increasingly faced by this formerly isolated kingdom that had been closed to the world until 1974 when it welcomed its first paying tourists. Television and Internet access were only allowed in 1999, and many places still don't have electricity and roads. Traffic lights were tested, then rejected. "We tried them once, but people said they were difficult to use," my guide, Tashi Wangdi, explains.

This quaint isolation, however, is precisely what makes Bhutan so appealing to high-end tourists, many of whom (like celebrities Jack Nicholson, Sting and Leonardo di Caprio) are seeking refuge from the iniquities of a stressful modern life.

"Bhutan is the ultimate hideaway," says John Reed, Amankora's country manager. "No one recognises them (celebrities) here," he adds, citing the time he spotted *Pirates of the Caribbean* stars Keira Knightley and Orlando Bloom dining incognito in a local restaurant. "By the time any paparazzo gets wind of it and comes in, they're long gone."

NATURAL STRONGHOLD

Bhutan may not possess a cosmopolitan city, but there are plenty of wild experiences to be had here. Mythical yeti aside, Bhutan's forests (and occasionally its country paths) are the stalking grounds of an assortment of magnificent predators such as the brown bear, leopard, black panther and Bengal tiger. An extremely rare species of butterfly was recently discovered here.

No species, however, is more celebrated than the black-necked cranes, whose arrival from mid-November to early March is highly anticipated. Nervy, beautiful and standing tall as a man, the birds make their way down from the Tibetan plateau when it gets too cold. The Japanese, who are enormous crane fans, have donated many resources to the local Crane Observation Centre (where you can observe the birds through a high-powered telescope) and even paid for a local school to be moved when it was deemed to interfere with the

birds' natural migration path.

The government, too, has taken great pains to ensure Bhutan remains a natural paradise. By law, at least 60 per cent of the land must have tree cover at all times, and cutting down a tree generally requires a permit. As we dine on a sumptuous riverside Western-style barbecue prepared by Amankora Punakha's chef, we can't help but notice the crystal clear waters close by are teeming with fat, gleaming trout, a direct result of the government's ban on fishing.

To reach out to new types of nature-loving travellers, the government in 2010 introduced the Tour of the Dragon, a gruelling 268km mountain bike race that takes riders from elevations of 1,200m to 3,340m above sea level. Winners rightfully get bragging rights as Son of the Dragon for one year.

Bhutan's isolation is precisely what makes it so appealing to high-end tourists.

Bordered by pine forest, Amankora Thimphu offers a peaceful sanctuary for corporate warriors to unplug and rejuvenate in.



A CULTURE APART

For most tourists, Bhutan's number one attraction is its numerous *dzongs*, or fortress monasteries. These are dotted throughout the country, with many dating as far back as the 15th century. Walking through Gangtey Goemba, my bare feet feeling the chill of the cold stone floor, I step into a small room to watch junior monks learn to blow *dung chen* (long horns). The low, sonorous bellows are interrupted only by the sounds of chuckling when one of the younger ones parps his comically.

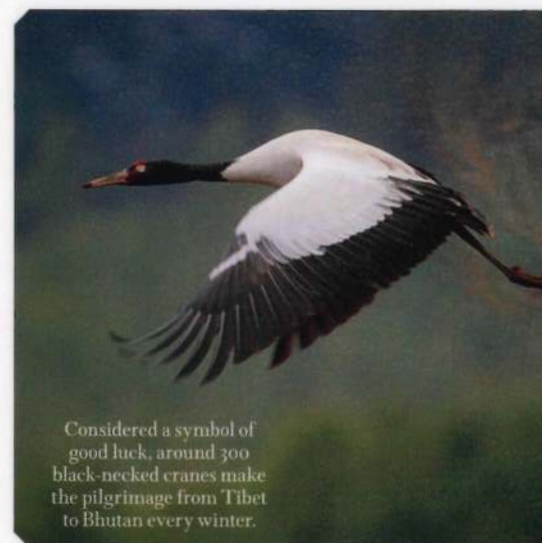
On our fourth day, we stop at Punakha Dzong, arguably Bhutan's most beautiful monastery. It's a humbling, colourful feast for the senses. Giant, rippling beehives hang from its top rafters, and every surface is intricately carved and hand painted. It's also

where Bhutan's youthful king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, was crowned in 2008. Inside, we admire the giant Bodhi tree in the courtyard (similar to the one under which Buddha attained nirvana), and gaze down into chambers where seated rows of saffron-robed monks chant vigorous prayers for a recently deceased devotee.

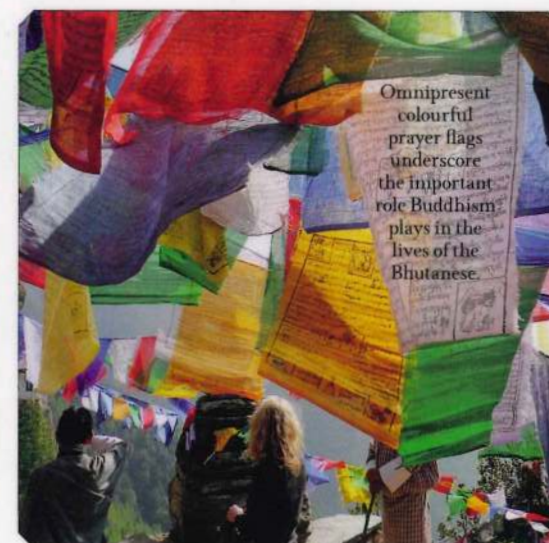
Bhutan's deep-seated religion stands at odds with some of its more unorthodox traditions, such as its infamous practice of "nighthunting". More common in the east, it involves young men making covert arrangements to break into a woman's home for a nighttime tryst. If caught, the man is usually compelled to marry her.

"Sometimes the girls are very tricky. They ask their father to sleep in their bed, so the man will be caught and has to marry her," says Tashi. One of his friends spent

In summer, the fertile river valleys of Punakha are covered with carpets of Bhutanese red rice, a russet-hued grain with a nutty, earthy flavour.



Considered a symbol of good luck, around 300 black-necked cranes make the pilgrimage from Tibet to Bhutan every winter.



Omnipresent colourful prayer flags underscore the important role Buddhism plays in the lives of the Bhutanese.



a week courting a woman who wasn't as keen on him as he hoped. The amorous suitor ended up mistakenly climbing into bed with her grandmother.

Many visitors are also astounded by the country's enthusiastic display of phallic art. Carved from wood or painted next to doorways sometimes up to 3m high, these are generally depicted in startling anatomical detail. They in fact have protective connotations, and are a homage to Lama Drukpa Kunley, a revered 15th-century saint also known as the Divine Madman, who wielded his instrument to great effect to overcome demons and beautiful women alike. He was also fond of his drink, which surely must have included *arra*, the local sake-like liquor that is sometimes consumed with diced fried egg.

Much like the locals, Bhutan's food is robust and unpretentious, and not for the gastronomically unadventurous. The country's de facto national dish is *ema datse*, a sweat-inducing combination of chilli and cheese that seems almost designed to repel Western palates. Strolling through Gangtey village, I snack on treats like "chilli chop", a tempura-like large green chilli dipped in salty yellow batter and then deep fried, as well

as a local beef sausage encased in a chewy, waxy skin.

Both "regular" and toned-down versions of Bhutanese cuisine can be enjoyed at the Amankora lodges. With their *dzong*-inspired architecture, each lodge is designed to blend into its environment. No TV or omnipresent muzak is found here – just the sounds of nature.

Along with every creature comfort offered (hot water bottles tucked into your bed, handwritten notes welcoming travellers to each lodge), Amankora's guests are invited to get up close with Bhutanese tradition. A monk blesses us and ties a *sungkay* (sacred thread) around our necks at the beginning of our journey, and each evening I return to find some sort of cultural invitation – to watch deer-masked dancers leap and twirl in the light of a brazier fire, or enjoy a refined Bhutanese dinner in a traditional potato shed.

On our second last night, we make traditional prayer flags. These are tied wherever it's windy, preferably on higher ground, so prayers reach the heavens more easily.

My flags accompany me on my last day in Bhutan, when we head to Taktsang Monastery, or Tiger's Nest, Bhutan's most famous destination.



It's closest to Paro, our final stop in Bhutan. With its wooden storefronts, Paro has the charming ramshackle appeal of a Western frontier town. Change, however, is in the air. Enterprising ex-guides have established shops catering to souvenir-hungry tourists, with prices to match. A Western bakery has just popped up, set up by an ex-Amankora kitchen employee, and Paro's nightclubs spin the beats of Korean sensation Psy's *Gangnam Style*.

All these observations are on my mind as I make the gruelling three-hour hike up a steep dirt path to Tiger's Nest. Shrouded in clouds and hanging precariously from the sheer cliff face with colourful prayer flags streaming from its eyrie, it is a vision right out of a fantasy movie. At the last stage of the climb, I unroll my prayer flags and tie them to those furiously fluttering in the stiff breeze.

The wind quickly catches them, carrying my wishes and prayers with it. I'm thinking back to that talk with Mynak on our first night. "Bhutan needs modernisation, but it also needs to find a balance," he had said.

I have just two wishes. One is to someday return to this remarkable land. The other, that the Land of the Thunder Dragon does indeed find this precious "balance" somehow as it may well be the key to its survival. 🐉

Above (from left): young Bhutanese at play in Paro; chilli is incorporated into practically every dish in local menus; a monk on his way to Tiger's Nest.

FAST FACTS

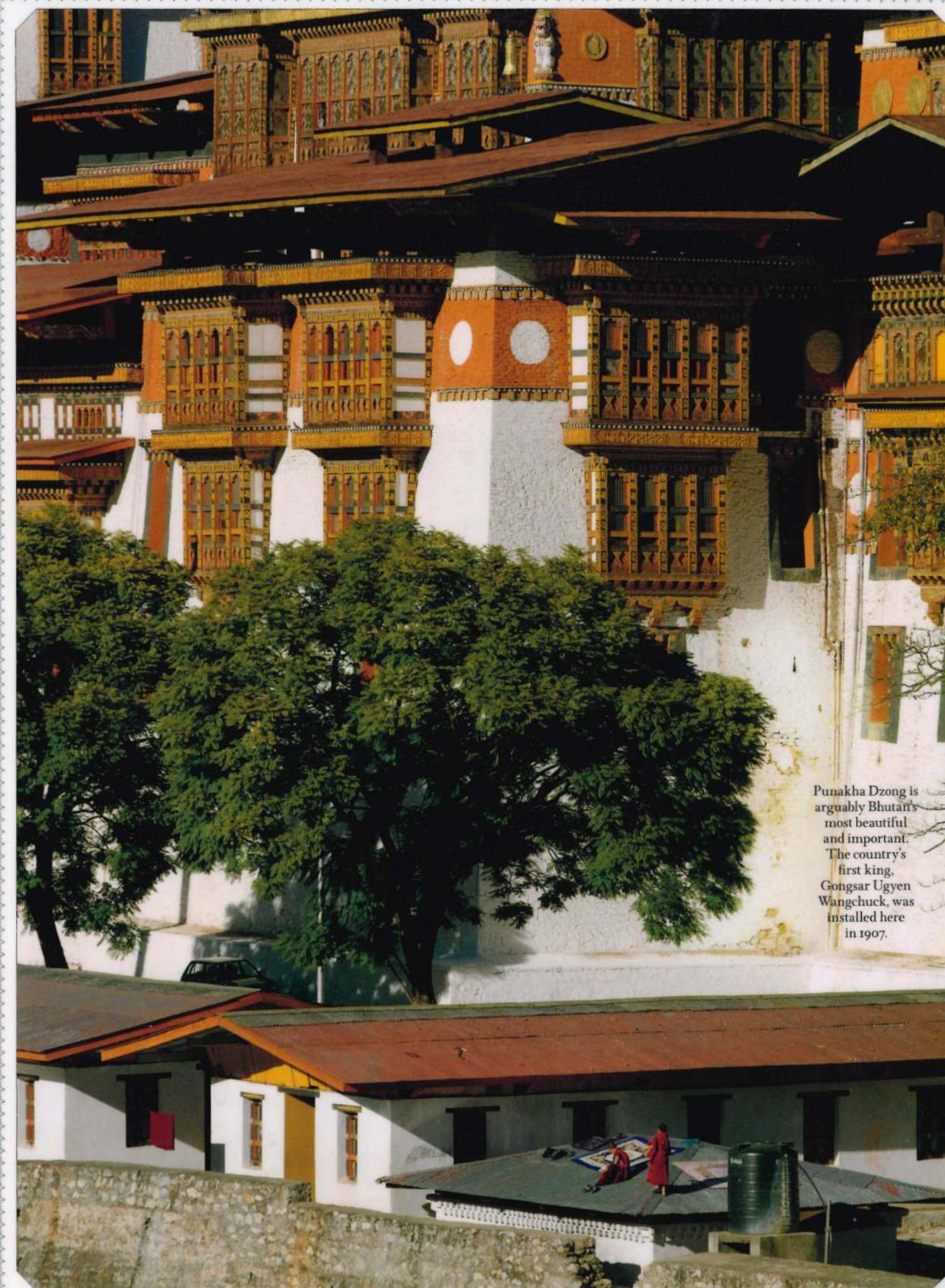
Airline: Druk Air is the only airline that flies direct from Singapore to Bhutan. Flights are twice a week.

Currency: Ngultrum, but US\$ is also widely accepted.

Accommodation: Amanresorts operates five lodges. Rates start from US\$775 (\$949) per person, including meals and airport transfers. A driver and guide are included in the rate for those staying at least seven nights.

Visa: A high-season tariff of US\$250 per person per night applies from March to May and September to November. A low-season tariff of US\$200 per person per night applies from January to February, June to August and in December.

When to go: Spring and autumn are peak seasons, but mild winters mean fewer tourists and comfortable hiking.



Punakha Dzong is arguably Bhutan's most beautiful and important. The country's first king, Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck, was installed here in 1907.

Travelling with... *Georgina Chang*

Top of the world: Georgina on her way to the Taksang Monastery — or Tiger's Nest — in Bhutan last year.

The radio DJ-turned-exec on how she once fought off a mugger in Paris — with her 'hot yoga' vice grip!

The Globe-Trotter:

Georgina Chang, "BLISSFULLY 28", VP, MEDIACORP RADIO (ENGLISH)

TRAVEL PHILOSOPHY: "To discover a new city every year. It's inspiring and it always gives me a fresh perspective. Tasting a new cuisine is always delightful!"

FLIGHT PATTERN: "I like spur-of-the-moment trips, and getting word-of-mouth recommendations on where to eat. I once thought that package tours are the worst ways to experience a country, but a trip conducted by Trafalgar Tours two months ago to San Francisco and Yosemite National Park changed my mind. They ensured that the locals guide us and we ate at popular local restaurants. I work so hard at home so when I go on a holiday, I want to relax and



not worry about the logistics. They took care of everything, so I only had to show up at the appointed time."

Wish you were here: With her 'friends' on The Big Island, Hawaii, in 2002, and posing in front of Australia's Ayers Rock in 2004.

AISLE OR WINDOW?

"I need the aisle seat, as I must walk around several times during a flight. I drink a lot of water, imagining that that will keep my skin hydrated. But I'm sure it all went down the loo."

LONE WOLF OR WOLF PACK?

"I do both, and enjoy them equally. I went to Kerala [in India], Angkor Wat [in Cambodia] and Pulau Gaya [in Sabah] alone and those were wonderful places to spend some quality me-time. Hanoi, Bali, Hongkong, Bangkok and Paris were fun places to go eat and shop with my friends."

STAY CONNECTED OR STAY OFF-THE-GRID?

"I prefer to zone out of the real world when I'm on holiday, and usually keep my phone turned off!"

Unbroken in Spain: "This picture was taken after I was pickpocketed," says Georgina. "At least I still had my camera to capture my brave smile!"

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT:

"Hawaii is a very special place. It was the first family holiday I had, even though all we did was stay in a hotel room in Honolulu and eat at Chinese restaurants. Years later, I visited The Big Island. The staggering beauty both excited and

A strong stomach:

In Jaisalmer, aka The Golden City, India, in 2007. "I've been to India many times — to Kerala, Bangalore, Delhi and Jaisalmer," she tells us. "I ate everything the locals did and never once suffered the infamous stomach ache that everyone complains about. What's wrong with everyone?"

scared me. I saw massive humpback whales when I was on a small fishing boat, and blistering lava flowing out of Kilauea Volcano. It was a spiritual experience. Uluru (or Ayers Rock) in Australia was another spiritual place filled with stories and tradition. I learnt to throw a spear. Now I

can hunt for my own food."
THIS HAPPENED TO ME: "I was in Barcelona alone in 2008 (above), and my wallet and phone were pickpocketed. I had little money left, and could not shop or eat much. But I decided not to let that spoil my trip, and so I visited as many free sights as I could. Then in Paris, a snatch thief tried to grab my bag but he could not get it away from my vice grip, a skill honed from years of hot yoga. So he hit me with pepper spray. It hurt like a b****! He was about 1.8m, so he must be embarrassed that he could not get a small bag from a small Asian lady."
NEXT DESTINATION: "I'm hoping to go to Cape Town in South Africa, New Zealand or Greece. I'm waiting for one of my friends to organise it!"

GEORGINA SAYS GO HERE...

BHUTAN ➔

"It's a must-see and must-experience place. The scenery is pure and the vibe is positive. All my friends and I returned home really feeling happy and at peace."

NEW YORK

"I lived there on and off for almost a year, and had several 'New York moments', situations you'll never experience anywhere else. One time, I was in an exclusive club in Tribeca and Benicio del Toro was at the next table, flanked by these blonde Russian models. I was thrilled but of course too cool to ask for a picture. This was in 2004, before phone cameras. Then suddenly everyone moved to the glass door of the club. Benicio and I followed them and realised that we were watching a couple in the apartment across the street having sex."

HAWAII

"The Big Island in Hawaii is awe-inspiring. You'll return with a different view of life."