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de to happiness

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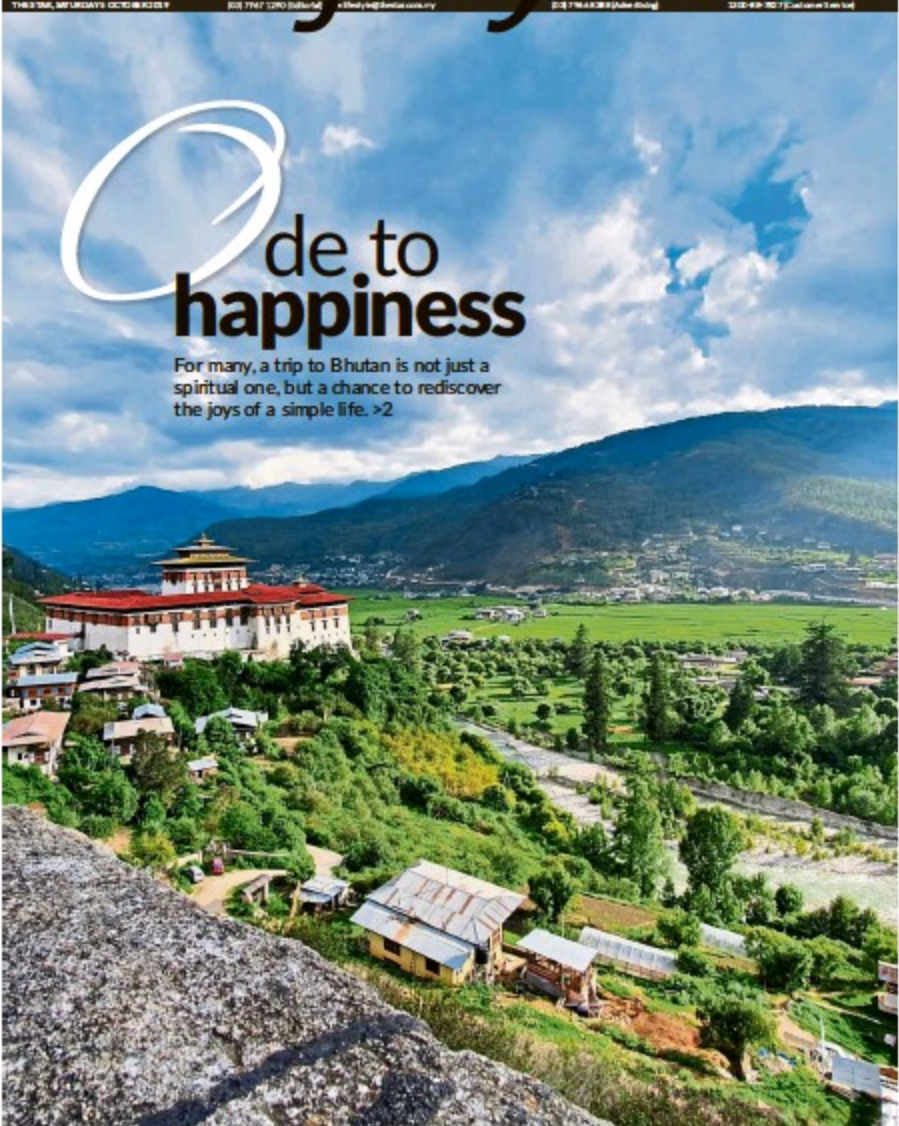


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By MELODY L. GOH

Ode to happiness

For many, a trip to Bhutan is not just a spiritual one, but a chance to rediscover the joys of a simple life.

THE air is cool and the water in the stream even more so. Wildflowers are everywhere – mostly yellow, though there are some white and lilac ones too. It makes me think of little Laura Ingalls and her sisters running downhill through the field of daisies.

God, I am that old.

I pick up a bunch of flowers to make a bouquet for myself. Because that's what you do when you're happy and surrounded by so much beauty. This is the effect that Bhutan has on me. It is a little unnerving, but I am getting used to it.

"Have a strawberry," says one of our special companions, Rinpoche Ugyen Tenzin Thinley Lhendup (or Khedrupchen Rinpoche), who hands me a tiny red berry he happily plucked from among the bushes.

Khedrupchen has joined us on our hike through the beautiful Phobjikha Valley today. Later, we will go to a homestay to help prepare some ema datshi and ezay, two chilli-and-cheese dishes that are eaten at almost every meal in any Bhutanese household.

"What a beautiful place ... so peaceful. We're so lucky," says Khedrupchen as he carefully walks along the trail in the forest. He has two minders with him, and though they keep their distance, you can tell that they also watch his every move, holding his arm when crossing a stream, warning him of cow pats on the road and so on.

The Rinpoche is only 29 years old, but speaks like a man beyond his years and has the kind of demeanour one would expect from a Buddhist leader such as himself. After all, he is known as the fifth reincarnation of Khedrup Jigme Kundrol, one of the most respected masters of Buddhist teachings in Bhutan.

Khedrupchen's background story is interesting, to say the least. He showed signs of being "special" at age three; at age eight, he was officially recognised as a reincarnation of the said master. He graduated from Ngagyur Nyingma College in India in 2014 and usually travels around the world for speaking engagements and conferences. He also has a few monasteries and retreat centres in Bhutan under his care.

He has a cellphone, which he whips out to take pictures and selfies from the viewing point at Phobjikha Valley, and then later uses it to google some random information.

“Ah, technology. It’s convenient, isn’t it? You get to learn so much,” he says at dinner. He speaks English well and claims that he is self-taught in the language.

“Sometimes I don’t know the right words to use to describe something. I like meeting people like yourself because I can learn new words from you. Knowledge is the most indestructible wisdom,” he continues.

The Rinpoche collaborates with tour operator [Druk Asia](#) to offer travellers to Bhutan a chance to learn more about the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. “Buddhism isn’t a religion,” Khedrupchen says, “it is a way of life ... a way of living life in the best possible way.”

Our meeting with him gives us a preview of what to expect in the [Neykor Tour: A Journey of Spiritual Immersion in Bhutan](#), a seven-day curated trip organised by Druk Asia, happening in December.

Early the next morning, Khedrupchen gives us – together with the homestay staff and a group of villagers – a special blessing. Before he starts, he takes out his tablet, which displays the holy text. “I’m sorry but I have to use this. I don’t remember everything just yet and I can’t carry the ancient scrolls everywhere I go. Besides, it’s 2019,” he says with a cheeky grin.

He’s quite fond of smiling and cracking jokes, much like our local guide Ugyen Tshewang and designated driver, Ugyen Tenzin (whom we call Ugyen B). Ugyen, we learn, is a very popular name in Bhutan. Others include Kinley, Dorji, Tshering and Choden, and they are all unisex names.

“The name Ugyen is like ‘John’ in the Western world. Very popular,” says Ugyen.

The Bhutanese also traditionally do not have surnames or family names (except the royals), but each person does carry at least two names. Newborn babies are usually named by a religious leader or teacher. Some go to the Chimi Lhakhang Monastery in Punakha to get special names for their babies.

The monastery is also known as the Fertility Temple. Apparently, couples longing to start a family pray at this temple to increase their chances of getting pregnant. Ugyen shows us a scrapbook filled with photos of people from all over the world who have gotten pregnant after their visit to Chimi Lhakhang.

We reluctantly agree to a small blessing from one of the monks there. “Don’t worry! A blessing here is not just about fertility but also for good health and overall good life,” Ugyen assures us.

Ugyen is a wealth of knowledge. He gives us just enough general information at each temple, monastery or dzong (fortress or administrative centre) visit so as not to inundate us with facts –

after all, a trip to Bhutan means a visit to many, many temples, monasteries and dzongs – but he is ever ready to answer all our questions. Even silly ones.

“Do you wear pants under your gho?” we ask of the traditional Bhutanese costume for men.

“Just underpants. Some people wear shorts especially if it’s cold. In the old days, you don’t wear anything underneath,” he says, smiling. Both Ugyens wear the gho, which is a robe that’s tied in such a way it creates a special “pocket” in the midriff (and paired with knee-length socks and shoes), every day they are with us.

Women wear the Kira which is sort of like a sarong. The “half Kira” is where the sarong is worn as a skirt, while the full Kira looks like a strapless dress. There’s a loose short jacket that goes with the Kira, too.

Visitors to any of the dzongs in Bhutan, especially important ones like Punakha Dzong or Thimphu Dzong, would need to dress appropriately, preferably in the gho or Kira.

Locals have to wear scarves that vary in colour which signifies their rank or status in society; the Ugyens wear white scarves. Tour operators like Druk Asia would normally prepare a set of these traditional costumes for guests to use during their visits.

If you want to buy one for yourself, do ask your guide for recommendations. We went to [Craft Gallery](#), a shop that carries souvenirs made by members of charitable organisations like RENEW (Respect, Nurture, Educate and Empower Women) and Gawaling, both of which fall under the [Gyalum Charitable Trust](#). This trust was established by Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, the youngest of Bhutan’s four queen mothers.

At the shop, you can find a variety of gho and Kira made from locally-sourced cloth. Much like how songket weaving in Malaysia is an important part of our culture, cloth weaving in Bhutan is also a big deal. The basics of Bhutan weaving is taught to young girls in school, and they can learn how to create intricate designs later in college, namely the Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan.

“Do boys weave?” I ask Ugyen during a visit to a summer weaving class at the National Textile Museum. “They are not restricted from learning the art, but boys usually don’t take it up,” he says.

From a tourist’s perspective, men and women in Bhutan seem to have equal standing in society. Everyone gets to earn a living and have equal opportunities to study. Both men and women share the same responsibilities of caring for their families. But when it comes to religion and politics, apparently, it’s a different story.

“There are not enough women sitting in high positions in our government,” shares Tshering Uden Penjor, the executive director of the [Gyalum Charitable Trust](#). “It’s time to change that,

but to be able to do that properly we need to empower today's young girls and women first," she adds.

She chats with us about how the trust and its partner organisations are working together to do this and reveal a side of Bhutan most tourists wouldn't normally see – the social ills affecting today's youth.

"Drinking and drug abuse is becoming a real problem here. We do struggle to keep this in check and to say that this will completely go away is just not realistic," she says.

Driving through the winding roads from one town to another (we arrived in Paro and journeyed to Thimphu, Gangtey, Punakha and back to Paro in six days), I see many huge signs warning about driving under the influence that is literally set in stone. I wondered why they would make such a thing at first, but after that conversation with Tshering, I now understand.

Tackling the mountains

Bhutan is a small, mountainous country. There are not many airlines that fly into [Paro](#) (the country's only international airport). In fact, there are only two – Royal Bhutan Airlines or [Druk Air](#) and Bhutan Airlines. This is because the country is a difficult place to navigate in for a commercial plane and experienced pilots who can do it are very, very few.

Some visitors may have problems with the altitude at first and it would take some time to get used to. This is perhaps the reason why most tour companies would schedule the hiking of Paro Taktsang, or Tiger's Nest, on the second last day of your trip. You would need to acclimatise yourself properly so that you don't get sick mid-holiday.

The hike is not exceptionally difficult though it is long (about 4.5km each way) and there are a few sections that are steep. There is an option to take a horse up halfway to the tea house, but these days most people just make the climb themselves.

You definitely should go at your own pace but take the time to enjoy the scenery too. Greet other hikers and chat with your guide. "How many times have you climbed up this place Ugyen?" I ask.

"In a month, maybe three times, sometimes more," he answers. Ugyen has been a guide for 13 years. While I struggle to breathe during my hike, he just smiles and walks effortlessly along with me.

Hiking all the way up to the Tiger's Nest is not a must, although many tourists who have been to Bhutan will tell you otherwise. For me, it is just something I can brag about for days on end.

This is mainly because Bhutan means so much more to me than just a hike up Tiger's Nest. There's so much to discover about the country – culture, history, nature, cuisine, people. And in exploring this world, I discovered a way of life that is so simple and full of joy.

I guess it's true what Bhutan has been saying all this while, "happiness is a place".

