



Perched on the hillside, Bhutan's Six Senses Thimphu has swoon-worthy views. Photo: @sixsensesbhutan/Instagram

Why does Bhutan call itself the 'happy kingdom' – and is it really worth a US\$250-a-day tourist tax to visit?

To get to the heart of the landlocked South Asian nation, bordered by India and Tibet, one must cast off disbelief, embrace its myths, and pass on the kindness one receives



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Figures wrapped in swathes of saffron and scarlet shuffle soundlessly through steep stairways blackened by 500 years of soot from incense and yak-butter lamps at Gangtey Goemba. Young monks and nuns from other temples in western Bhutan have gathered here for a special ceremony.

One of them is 21-year-old Kuenzang Sangay Rangdrol. If not for the additional colours he wore and the onslaught of locals walking up to him for a blessing, he would have blended in with the other monks. Kuenzang was revealed to be the seventh Rinpoche reincarnate of Rinpoche Bhumthang Shrumstrang when he was five years old. (A Rinpoche is an honorific term meaning “precious one”). He is one of over 3,000 venerated rinpoches in a country of 700,000.

At Gangtey Goemba there is a room that houses what is supposedly a yeti’s arm. Like most Bhutanese, Tsering Pelden, my guide from Druk Asia, views the Himalayan creature as fact, rather than fiction. She believes in Rinpoche reincarnation and the stories which form a spiritual thread that ties the country together.

In Bhutan, known as the “happy kingdom”, is faith what brings happiness, or does happiness engender faith in the far-fetched?

The otherworldly vistas in Phobjikha Valley are enough to turn sceptics into believers. The mist that rises from the valley floor swirls aside, allowing me to see blue pine forests, fields with potato farms and stone houses, and lush wetlands where pot-bellied Bhutanese horses graze and endangered black-necked cranes descend every winter. In the face of such transcendent beauty, your cynicism wanes and you think that this fantastical place might be a place where magic happens.

Bhutan is unlike any other country. Although steeped in religious folklore, it is more progressive than many first world countries in some ways. Thanks to the forward-thinking commitment to preserve its forest cover at 70 per cent, Bhutan is the world’s first carbon negative country. Bhutan began advocating

mental wellness in 1972 when Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king of Bhutan, coined the term gross national happiness (GNH).

The lure of Bhutan was reaffirmed when *Lonely Planet* listed it as the top travel destination in 2020. Because of barriers to visiting, such as having to pay a minimum daily fee of US\$200 to US\$250 (in line with the government's vision of high-value, minimum-impact tourism), Bhutan tends to draw the affluent. The late David Tang, founder of Shanghai Tang, celebrated his 50th birthday at the Amankora lodges when the luxury chain opened in Bhutan in 2004.

The latest luxury resort brand to open in is Six Senses Bhutan. Its lodges in Thimphu, Punakha and Paro opened in April 2019, followed by Gangtey in October. A fifth lodge in Bumthang will open in March 2020. All the Six Senses lodges showcase the glorious beauty of each valley and the culture of the surrounding village. At 2,650 metres above sea level, the Thimphu Lodge offers vistas of Thimphu valley where a 164-foot Buddha sits on the horizon. The Paro property is built with rough-hewn rocks and finished so that the facade resembles stone ruins – a nod to the remains of a 15th-century fortress next door. Just as they have different design themes, each property has its own community programme which guests can join.

At the end of a 90-minute uphill hike to Talakha Monastery from Thimphu lodge, I am welcomed by a friendly abbot and the shy smiles of his charges, the youngest of whom is only five. Six Senses' staff help out at the monastery with maintenance work. Punakha lodge plants rubbish bins along the Chorten NIngpo hiking route which the lodge empties regularly. The staff also teach students at the village school about sustainable living. Because of Six Senses Paro's support, a derelict monastery is coming back to life, with the arrival of an abbot who blesses guests and villagers.

The concept of “what goes around, comes around” seems to be built into the nature of the Bhutanese. When Joni Herison, owner and founder of travel agency Druk Asia, started his company 10 years ago, his Singaporean partner absconded with the money. “Instead of berating me, my Bhutanese partner said it was okay, and not to give up.”

That sentiment moved Joni so much that [Druk Asia](#) is deeply vested in welfare causes in Bhutan. For every piece of feedback submitted online, S\$25 (US\$18) is donated to one of the four beneficiaries that it supports.

After returning from a hike up [Tiger's Nest](#), I wandered around Six Senses Paro where lodge manager Roy Todemann called out to me. Todemann went to Bhutan to work at Como Uma Paro. Nine years on, he says he cannot imagine leaving. His team has planted produce on the estate and a Six Senses project is introducing superfoods such as quinoa to the locals. Dirt-smudged, Todemann looks more like a farmer, but the joy he finds in giving back to the people is more palpable than any hotel manager I have met.

Happiness is real in Bhutan, it's plain to see. What goes around does indeed seem to come around – if you're willing to believe.

Getting there

The writer travelled with [Bhutan travel specialists Druk Asia](#). She flew from Singapore to Paro (with a 40-minute stopover in Guwahati) on the national carrier, Drukair. There are return flights from Singapore to Paro twice a week, and daily return flights from Bangkok to Paro.

