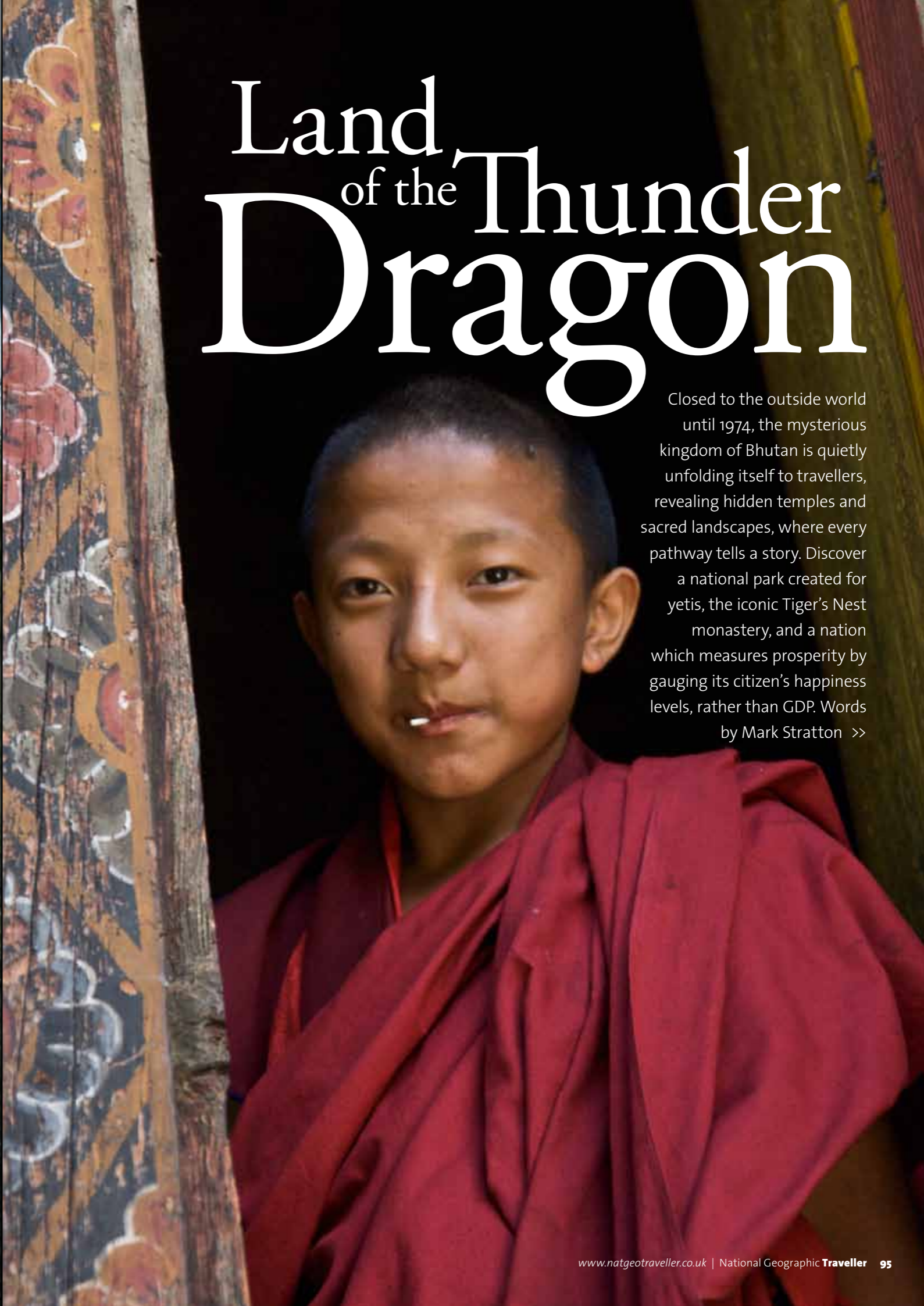




Images: Photographer/Image library here; photographer/image library here

Land of the Thunder Dragon

Closed to the outside world until 1974, the mysterious kingdom of Bhutan is quietly unfolding itself to travellers, revealing hidden temples and sacred landscapes, where every pathway tells a story. Discover a national park created for yetis, the iconic Tiger's Nest monastery, and a nation which measures prosperity by gauging its citizen's happiness levels, rather than GDP. Words by Mark Stratton >>



“Have you seen what are hanging under the roofs, asked Chhimi, as we wander by paddies of red rice ripening? I have. But given the Bhutanese are such conservatively polite people and Chhimi is female, I’m pretending not to notice.

“They’re big penises,” she volunteers, unabashed, “the symbol of the Divine Madman.”

Besides dangling wooden ones, every farmhouse’s facade, surrounding the Divine Madman’s hilltop temple near Punakha, is artistically frescoed with them. All are erect and most, let’s just say, in the act of issuing forth the seed of life. Not naughty graffiti but reference to one of Bhutan’s most respected deity.

Chhimi explains the 15th-century Lama Drupka Kunley dispensed rather unorthodox teachings that involved beer drinking, sleeping with prodigious quantities of women (including his mother), and vanquishing an evil ogress by hitting her with (you’ve probably guessed) his euphemistically named ‘flaming thunderbolt of wisdom’. Women still pilgrimage to his temple built in 1499 to be similarly anointed by the Madman’s divine love wand (a silver-handled wooden phallus) as a fertility blessing.

Yet entering his temple, bawdiness eases into reverence. Crimson-robed monks spin a large cylindrical prayer-wheel in a cramped courtyard while pilgrims gyrate handheld ones

shaped like German WWII hand grenades. They listen to a lama’s throaty sutras cutting through the inner sanctum’s fug of incense. They’d come to beseech the Madman (now residing as a fly in Tibet) to drive away evil spirits.

Such extraordinary beliefs and traditions are commonplace in Bhutan: the ‘Land of the Thunder Dragon’ and ‘Shangri-La of the Eastern Himalayas’.

It’s here deities ride celestial tigresses and a national park has been created for yetis, despite them being invisible. Where people adore their King and vociferously protested against him introducing democracy back in 2008; and where people’s welfare isn’t measured by number-crunching GDP but officially by GNH (Gross National Happiness). And where hunting and fishing is banned, driving not allowed on Tuesdays, and every mountain pass or bridge flutters with multicoloured prayer-flags.

Bhutan is often believed to be rather

Left: Ayers Rock; Melbourne city centre by night; Koala bear; kangaroo sanctuary

inaccessible. Not just geographically but because it imposes a daily minimum tariff of \$250 (£164) per day to stay (\$200/£131 in low season). In fact this fee covers three-star hotels, all meals, activities, guides, and transportation, which when analysed offers comparative value to neighbouring India and Tibet. Independent travel is not allowed so every traveller must use an allocated guide. Mine, Chhimi, was fine company.

“Happiness is a way of life here,” she’d chirrup, ever cheerful and elegant in traditional ankle-length kira skirt and silk wonju blouse closed by a silver brooch. I often teased her sunny demeanour - surely Bhutan isn’t Utopia, I’d question? - She remained unshakably positive. “We love our King. He works hard to provide good education and health and better opportunities for women,” she’d typically respond, challenging me to spot a miserable citizen. I never did.

Yet the country closed to the outside world until 1974 is changing. “Television only came here in 1999 and mobile phones a few years later and already we can’t do without them,” she concedes.

But outside the main cities, Thimpu >>





Left: Ayers Rock; Melbourne city centre by night; Koala bear; kangaroo sanctuary

and Paro, I find only unbridled nature and unruffled traditionalism in Central Bhutan.

Bhutan's backcountry

Dorji, our driver, corkscrews along mountain roads, eases over 3,000m passes, and brakes carefully down hair-raising valleys of foaming rivers. My preconception of Bhutan being solely snow-capped Himalayan peaks alters as we drive into Bumthang region's unbroken forests of blue pine, hemlock, oak, and maple, coated with mossy branches resembling furry pipes and trailing ZZ Top beards of lichen. We stop to view grey langur monkeys enjoying this pristine world.

Arriving into Bumthang's four isolated valleys: Chokhor, Ura, Tang, and Chhume, through the latter's buttery sunflower fields, I spot clusters of white flags rippling in the thinning atmosphere, monuments to recently departed souls.

Our base in Bumthang for three-nights is Jakar, a town of 16,000 set on the aluminium-grey River Chamkhar floodplain. It was

built in typical Bhutanese style: tall houses with exquisitely carved lintels and eaves and lime-washed walls frescoed by snow-lions, garudas, and a politer smattering of penises. Like all Bhutanese towns, it hosts an imposing hilltop dzong (fortress) used as administrative and monastic quarters - Jakar's was built around 1667. These massive Tibetan-style fortifications - think Lhasa's Potala Palace - were established across Bhutan by a national hero called 'The Unifier' who founded Bhutan as a distinctive cultural entity from Tibet in the 1630s.

Almost as large, Hotel Wangdichholing is empty; biding time until most visitors arrive for September-November's colourful temple festivals. But I'm enjoying off-season's tourist-free temples as the summer monsoon peters out, necessitating a warming fire in my room to counteract Jakar's arriving autumnal chill at 2,580m.

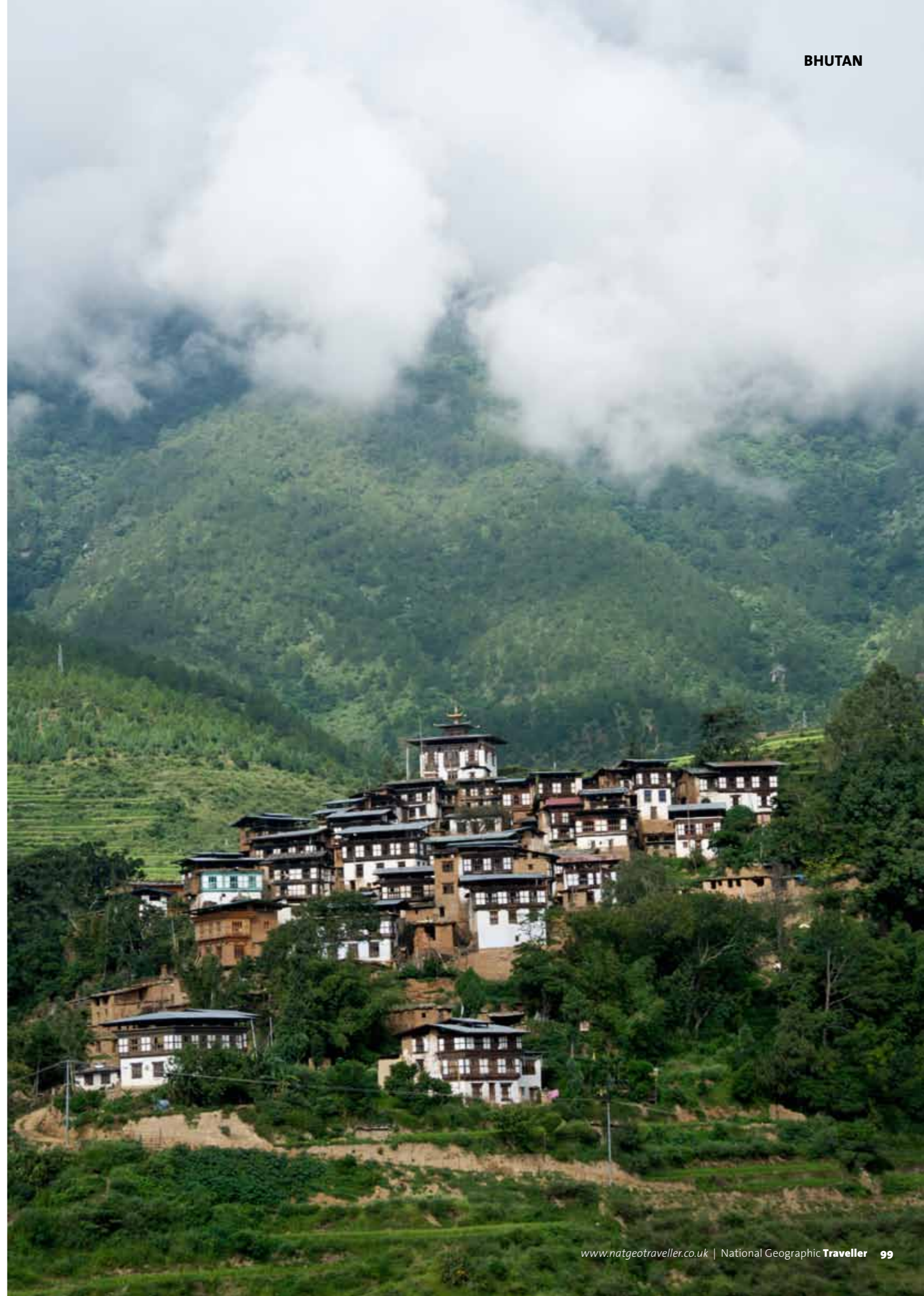
I also embrace Bhutan's endorphin-arousing cuisine. Many hotels typically serve rather anodyne westernised buffets so I ask to join Chhimi in local restaurants serving the chilli

heat the locals can't live without: ematdatshi chilli cheese, chilli cured pork, exotic chilli foetal-head ferns, and dumpling momos (dunked in chilli) - all eaten with red rice or buckwheat noodles and loudly slurped butter tea.

Chhimi and I explore Jakar's myriad temples, too, hiking along country lanes choked with wild marijuana, which monks innocently bunch into besoms to sweep their temple floors.

At the 7th-century Jambay Lakhang, the music playing from the temple is at first discordantly ear splitting. Monks are performing a ritual ceremony: blowing flutes, conch shells, and baritone horns, ringing bells, and beating drums shaped like lollipops. I struggle to process what sounds like Indian snake charmers, ship's foghorns, and thudding tom-toms. Yet eventually it fuses into a hypnotic harmony, making my hairs stand on end.

I can't, however, say I'm able to fully process the symbolism of Jambay's artefacts into an understanding of Bhutan's >> Mahayana



Left: Ayers Rock; Melbourne city centre by night; Koala bear; kangaroo sanctuary

Buddhism. The temple was built in 659 to suppress evil forces and later visited by Bhutan's key deity, Guru Rinpoche, depicted in temples as the 'Second Buddha' who brought Buddhism to Bhutan. Yet it's easy to be overwhelmed by the plethora of legends emanating from the thangka (paintings) inside Bhutanese temples, chronicling fanciful parables. So from an early stage I decide to simply enjoy Bhutan's temples' vivid exoticism. Elephant tusks and three-sided daggers of anger, ignorance, and greed; the taste of saffron-tainted holy water; oily smells of burning butter lamps; and beautiful ritual cakes the monks make from butter.

Beyond Bumthang, the heavenly flat-bottomed Phobjikha Valley nudges the clouds around 2,900m. We spend a day hiking an old mule route known as the Shasila Trail. Flower-rich open wetlands of asters and orchids graduate into rhododendron woodlands and I glimpse clouds of fritillary butterflies, infamous shrikes ('butcher birds') who impale their prey on thorns, golden dragonflies, macaques, and soaring skylarks. But there's one creature I'm never going to see.

We meet an old man from Eastern Bhutan where the Bhutanese government has designated the world's first reserve for yetis (migo).

Has he seen one, I ask? "No, they're invisible," he responds. "But I was in the woods once and heard one. I was terrified and ran."

What did it sound like, I wonder?

"Like a monkey," he says. It sounds suspiciously like he may have been running from one too.

From fabled tales to fervent cities, I travel next to Thimpu. It may be the world's only capital without traffic lights but after a week in slow-paced countryside where most people wear traditional dress, I have to reconnect with the 21st-century at seeing Bhutanese in western clothing with mobile phones pressed against their ears, minor traffic jams, and glass-fronted shopping malls.

We pull up outside an enormous opulent building that from a distance, I suspect is the King's palace. But it's my hotel, the Taj



Tashi. Possessing its own temple where a monk blesses guests, this palatial offering is one of a number of five-star hotels whose extra costa - if you crave additional luxury - is added to your daily fee.

If fact, 33 years-old King Jigme Wangchuk lives in a far more modest palace near one of Thimpu's two gargantuan dzongs with his beautiful new wife, dubbed the 'William and Kate of the Himalayas'. The royal family is highly accessible and the king is often seen riding his bicycle. That evening in Taj Tashi's smart lounge bar, I meet two of the royal princesses enjoying a quiet drink.

Besides heartfelt love, I wonder about the sentiments the Bhutanese express towards their king? Despite switching to constitutional monarchy, the king's aura of power remains undimmed. Inside Thimpu's mighty Tashichhoe Dzong, built in 1641, and surrounded by rose borders drilled by Mohican-ed hoopoes, we visit his royal temple throne room. Two golden brocade thrones

for the Druk Gyalpo (Dragon King) and his father, who abdicated in 2008, notably rest in front of Buddha's image. Was he revered as king or deity I ask? "We worship him because of his good deeds but we also believe he is the reincarnation of Pema Lingpa," explains Chhimi.

"With modernization," she adds, "we may eventually lose this belief but I hope this won't happen soon."

Myths & legends

Escaping the bustle of Thimpu, I set out to explore Bhutan's spiritual and superstitious soul on a hike along the Druk Path Trek, following a yak herder's route to mountain pasture between Thimpu and second city Paro. Around 20% of visitors to Bhutan book themselves on a trek; the best time being after summertime's monsoon ends when skies settle into high-definition clarity. Treks range from low-level cultural ones lasting a few days to the

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taxing 28-day high-altitude Snowman Trek.

Teaming up with a chef, mule-driver, and five mules, the Druk Path proves to be a rollercoaster yomp of mountain passes peaking above 4,000m.

The punishing ascent above the Thimpu Valley rises above the tree line onto open boggy moorland of pink-flowering heather around the 3,640m Phajoding Pass. When our mules' cowbells cease ringing, the sound of flutes wafts through the breeze; Lama Namgay Tenzing is instructing novices how to play at a lonely monastery just below the pass. He's recently arrived at the 13th-century monastery determined to revive its fortune.

"I chose here because I was sad this monastery had few monks. Some prefer better living conditions closer to cities but that shouldn't be important," he frets. "In this isolation, monks are not distracted from the real purpose, being both high in altitude and mind," he says, adding, "if you want to see what is at the bottom of a pond the water must

not be disturbed".

He explains most monks come from poor families and are often forced into monkhood. "Like many poor boys I was sent to a monastery when I was seven; rich people do not send their children to this life". Something, he feels, contributes to a widening gap in spiritual belief between different classes in modern Bhutanese society. His intensity evaporates when his mobile phone's ringtone bursts into a Moulin Rouge cancan.

Our second night of camping beside the windswept Jimilangtso glacial lake unnerves my crew. The lake is oily-black and Norbu the chef sleeps with his knife worrying about evil spirits. Chhimi and the mule-driver both tell of visitations in their dreams from a mermaid, the lake's guardian deity ready to draw you into her cold embrace if you disrespect the lake's sanctity. Even fetching water for tea from it is deemed sacrilegious.

"In the realm of hell in our Wheel of Life the lake represents cold torment from >>



which it's difficult to escape if you haven't accumulated good karma," Chhimi explains. Artistic representations of this 'wheel' feature in all monasteries vividly divided into six realms of Samsara (the cycle of birth and death). Hell is depicted graphically like a torture chamber - somewhere to avoid unless you're fond of sadomasochism.

My spirits, not the lake's, soar next morning crossing a breathless 4,700m-pass, fuelled by sweet milk tea and omelette (chillies de rigueur). In bright sunshine, wispy evaporation rises from Jimilangtso Lake and it almost looks benign, while ahead is a sweep of distant 5-6,000m frosted Himalayan peaks. During a day of gradual descent, along a narrow watershed towards Paro, I'm smitten by mixed stands of azalea, fragrant juniper, and larch forests bejewelled by alpine gentians and powder-blue snowberries. I pray for views of Bhutan's second-highest mountain, Jomolhari (7,326m), but it never rears out of the clouds. Maybe my karma today isn't good.

"One rock or two," asks the bathhouse assistant whose red-stained mouth betrays a decayed toothless grin. Not my drinks order but fire-heated stones placed inside a separate compartment of my crate-sized wooden bath.

A traditional hot stone bath is ideal for aching muscles after trekking. I take the plunge at the Tshering family homestay enjoying a unique opportunity to overnight in their traditional mud-walled, 400-year-old farmhouse, just outside Paro. The relaxing bath is ideal preparation for next morning's final important climb to Bhutan's most auspicious site - Tiger's Nest, Paro's iconic cliff-face monastery.

After a two-hour stern ascent through pine forest, we cross a vertiginous chasm fluttering with prayer-flags - I realise Tiger's Nest is close. Its whitewashed walls and gold setho rooftops glow in sunshine, fused to a rock-face

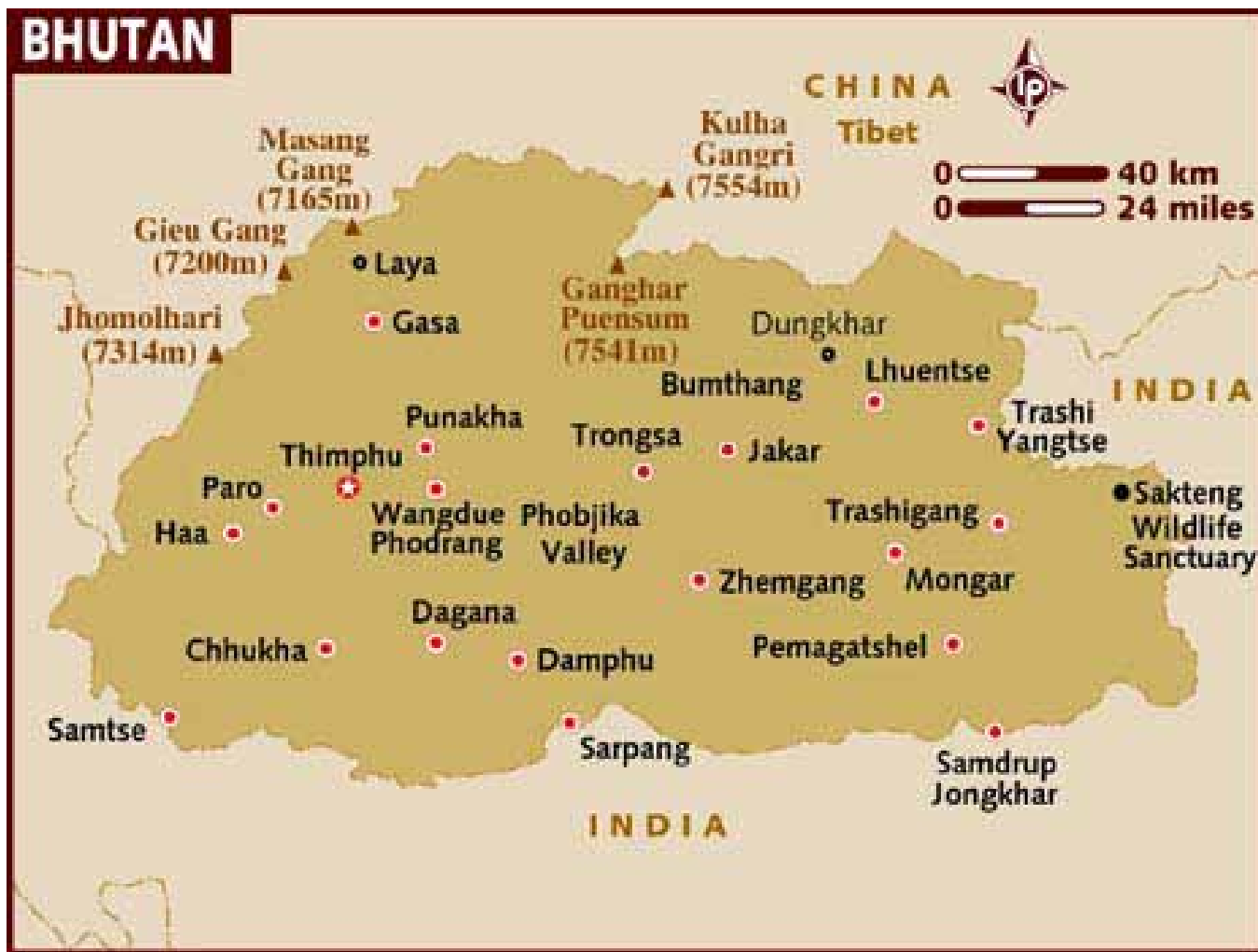
Left: Ayers Rock; Melbourne city centre by night;

hiding sacred caves.

"In the 8th-century Guru Rinpoche came to Bhutan to convert us to Buddhism," explains Chhimi, as we reach the gold-framed doorway of a poky cave temple open to visitors. "He flew to this mountain on the back of his consort he'd changed into a flying tigress and spent three years meditating here."

This legend means a lot to Bhutanese central beliefs. In 1998 Tiger's Nest was partially destroyed by fire. "My parents gave up one month to help carry building materials up when it was being rebuilt," she explains. Its multiple temples are small treasure troves of symbolic objects. In one, lay-monks from Thimpu are halfway through a 15-day retreat: reading sutras daylong and striking up the same mesmerising music.

Leaning on a wall overlooking a sheer vertical drop to the forests below, Chhimi suggests we fly back down like Guru Rinpoche and his tigress consort. Anything could be possible in this remarkable Himalayan



essentials
BHUTAN

GETTING THERE

» Travellers may enter Bhutan from Druk Air's Asian hubs (including Bangkok, Delhi, and Kathmandu). Druk Air flies daily between Bangkok, Delhi, and Kathmandu to Paro. Fly direct from Heathrow to Bangkok with British Airways, Eva Airways, Thai Airways or Royal Brunei Airlines. Fly direct from Heathrow to Delhi with Jet Airways, Air India, British Airways or Virgin Atlantic. There are no direct flights to Kathmandu but options include Etihad Airlines via Abu Dhabi, and Qatar Airways via Qatar. www.drukair.com www.ba.com www.evaair.com www.thaiairways.co.uk www.bruenair.co.uk www.jetairways.com www.airindia.com www.virgin-atlantic.com www.etihadairways.com www.qatarairways.com

» Average flight time: 10h.

GETTING AROUND

» Independent travel is forbidden for foreign visitors inside Bhutan. As a condition of receiving a visa your itinerary must be pre-arranged before arrival. Travel is by small minibus or 4WD. From the two main cities Thimphu and Paro, one hour apart, driving to Bumthang in Central Bhutan takes approximately eight to 10 hours; far Eastern Bhutan is a two-day drive. A limited internal flight network links Paro International Airport with Bumthang and Tashigang.

WHEN TO GO

» March-May and mid-September-November are popular seasons because they take in the main

monastery Tsechu (festivals). For trekking, higher-altitude treks such as Jomolhari, Druk Path, and Snowman, are popular during September-November's clear views post-monsoon.

NEED TO KNOW

» **Visas:** A visa authorization letter must be presented on arrival for UK citizens - \$20 (£13.27) charged on arrival.
 » **Currency:** Ngultrum (BTN). £1 = BTN87.65.
 » **Health:** Few concerns other than altitude sickness for those trekking above 3,000m.
 » **International dial code:** 00 975.
 » **Time:** GMT+6.

WHERE TO STAY

» Taj Tashi Hotel (Thimphu). www.tajhotels.com/bhutan

» Hotel Wangdichholing (Jakar). *T. 00 975 3 631369.*

» Ugyen Phendeyling Resort (Paro). www.upresortparo.com
 » Tshering Homestay (Paro). www.bluepoppybhutan.com

MORE INFO

» www.tourism.gov.bt
 » Phajoding Monastery. www.phajodingmonastery.com

HOW TO DO IT

» Blue Poppy Tours & Treks offer a seven-day cultural tour of West Bhutan including Tiger's Nest from £970 per person based on two sharing. Flights not included. www.bluepoppybhutan.com
 » TransIndus' 16-day Bhutan Journey tour includes Bumthang and Phobjikha Valley from £2,785 per person based on two sharing