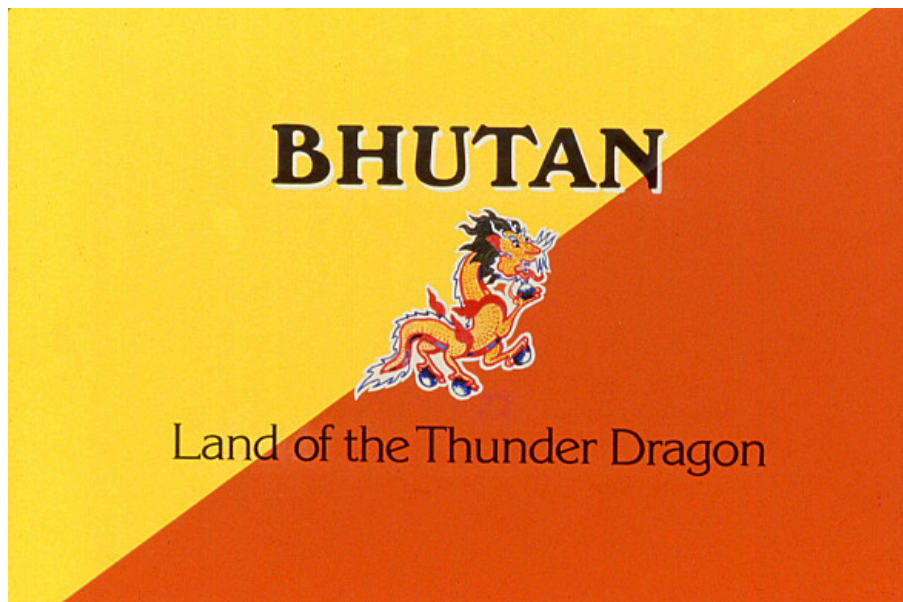


## PART TWO

BHUTAN

འབྲུག་ཡུལ་

LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON



This caption is based on the Bhutanese flag.



A general map showing the location of Bhutan

## TO THE LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON



I am in a foul mood. Because of the mist and cloud, I can see nothing. Soaking wet from the persistent rain, I stumble over boulders and slip in the mud. Both my knees hurt. I finally lose my temper, shout and curse. The only redeeming feature is that this part of the day's walk is all downhill.

Yes, I am trekking again. It is one year later and I am in Bhutan, in the midst of the mighty Himalayas, on another journey organized by Exodus Expeditions. I have paid quite a lot of money for this latest dose of madness, which started in mid September, 1986. The Kingdom of Bhutan regards itself as being rather exclusive and, because of this, charges foreigners a hefty price for the privilege of visiting this small but interesting country, the name of which means 'Land of the Thunder Dragon'. But why have I decided to trek yet again, having vowed never to repeat the previous year's endeavours? Because the temptation to enter this little-known, secretive country, to be up in the Himalayas, and to visit such exotic and out-of-the-way places is, for me, irresistible. I have also been inspired to come here by listening to three programmes devoted to the music of Bhutan, presented by John Levy on BBC Radio 3 in the early 1970s. I had listened, fascinated, to the extraordinary monastic religious music similar to what I had heard in Ladakh, the songs of villagers, music to accompany archery competitions and dancing, pure instrumental music, and an early form of drama performed by yak herdsman. What really remained in my mind, however, was a curious rendition of the very strange-sounding Bhutanese national anthem, played on bagpipes – a relic of British India.

As before, this new journey starts with a flight from Dublin to London, and in London I meet my new companions and travel with them to Delhi. This time we arrive in a new, spacious airport late in the evening and are driven to a hotel. At three o'clock the following morning our group of eight are driven to the old airport, which now handles domestic flights. Here we meet the ninth member of our group: a lively young lady named Veronica, who had been travelling around India, Ladakh and Tibet. I am very interested to hear about her experiences. She had also been in Inner Mongolia a year or two previously. I sit with her and another member of the group on our flight to Bagdogra, West Bengal, near Sikkim. What have looked like clouds on the horizon soon materialize into the high, jagged white peaks of the Himalayas. As we fly closer, my companions begin to identify some of them, such as Everest and Kangchenjunga. A cobalt blue sky is visible overhead, and the clouds beneath the hostile peaks are dazzlingly white.

Bagdogra airport, situated in a seemingly endless green plain at the foot of the mountains, is tiny. We find our luggage outside the main entrance. As we have time to spare and as I am tired, I lie down under a tree outside and fall asleep. When I awake, a minibus belonging to Bhutan Tourism drives up and stops close by. A smartly-dressed young man steps out and asks me if I am with the group from Exodus Expeditions. When I reply in the affirmative, he shakes hands with me and introduces himself as Kipju. We go inside and round up the others, most of whom, like me, have taken the opportunity to rest.

When we have collected our passports, we set off in the bus along a dusty straight road in the direction of the Himalayas, which can now be seen straight ahead, rising abruptly from the plain. We stop at a hotel for some lunch and continue our four-hour journey towards Phuntsholing, the main border town of Bhutan, travelling through ramshackle villages with Indian music playing over loudspeakers, then past farms, tea plantations, palm trees, paddy fields and forest. The rush of air past the windows offers us some relief from the intense heat.

Slowly we approach the mountains and soon we are climbing upwards along winding roads. All around us is dense forest. At one point we pass a lone monkey sitting on a low wall. We cross a wide river and make our way around more mountainsides. Somebody points to a narrow gorge; we are told that it leads to Sikkim. On discovering this, the excitement begins to rise.

As we turn away from the mountains and begin heading southwards, I fall asleep. When I wake, the sun is lower in the sky and everything looks more spectacular. I attempt to photograph some of the bright green paddy fields, the buffaloes, the farms and tea plantations, but as we hurtle along at such a speed, it is difficult to hold the camera steady. We again turn northwards, in the direction of the mountains, over which threatening black clouds have now descended. The combination of bright sunshine, the green of the fields and the darkness of the clouds looks highly dramatic.

Leaving behind the sun-drenched plains of India, we now enter a wide valley, where all is dark and brooding. On all sides, mountains covered in forest rise steeply. This turns out to be the spectacular approach to Phuntsholing. We stop, get out, leave our passports in an office on the Indian side of the border, then drive through an ornamental gateway into Bhutan, where once again we are obliged to descend



from the bus. This time we must go into a scruffy little building to fill in a couple of official forms. By now we are all grimy and exhausted.



*Phuntsholing gateway*

We climb back into the bus, drive through the rather unimpressive town and up into the mountains, where we stop at the Kharbandi Hotel, a spacious building overlooking the town in the valley below. Although the view from the veranda is dramatic, it is not exactly pretty. So this is Bhutan: dark and brooding, hot and sticky, and so far not particularly impressive.

As everyone is fatigued after our long journey, dinner is a subdued affair. We are served by staff wearing traditional dress (*de rigueur* in Bhutan); the women wear an ankle-length dress known as a *kira*, featuring bands of differing shades of blue, and the men a dark knee-length robe with long white cuffs, the *gho*, tied at the waist by a cloth belt, called a *kerā*. In addition, they wear long woollen socks and shoes. One man, who surprises me by being bearded, wears a check *gho* and carries a leather satchel.

Under a blue sky and bathed in blazing sunshine, the hotel and our surroundings look totally different the following morning. The garden outside my bedroom window is bright with flowers. After a delay caused by a lack of permits, we set off in the minibus on a sightseeing tour. Our first stop is the nearby Kharbandi gumpa: our first proper Bhutanese Buddhist temple. This one belongs to the 'official' Drukpa Kagyupa sect. It is a small, square building with a roof that looks Chinese, and there is a row of familiar-looking *chörtens* in front. On our way to it, we pass a small and unpretentious royal palace. Both buildings are at the top of a mountain and command a superb view of Phuntsholing valley and the vast Indian plain to the south.

Having examined the *chörtens*, we ascend the steps to the gumpa, which is surrounded by brightly-painted prayer wheels. Because of its pristine condition, it comes as no surprise to find that it was built in 1967. Inside are three main statues: the Buddha, in the centre, Padmasambhava on the left, and Ngawang Namgyal on the right. Padmasambhava was the eighth-century Indian master who helped build

the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, and the Zhabdrung Rinpoche Ngawang Namgyal was a Tibetan Buddhist monk and the unifier of Bhutan as a nation-state.



*Kharbandi gumpa, Phuntsholing*

When we have finished looking around, we are driven down to the town centre in two buses, where Kipju enquires about our permits and makes an effort to regain our passports, which are still being kept for official purposes. We wander around and some of us walk to the Indian side of the border, where we stop to photograph the gateway. At this point, an anxious Kipju appears and asks us to return; he explains that at the moment we are 'illegally' in Bhutan as our permits have still not been issued. We re-enter the country and pass the time exploring the busy, dirty streets. The population seems to consist of Indians who stare at us, but occasionally we see an elegantly-dressed young Bhutanese lady walking by. In a square is another Buddhist temple. I wander into an arcade and enter a bookshop, where I look at the books in English. As I have no local currency, I can buy nothing.

Still with no permits or passports, we return to the hotel, where I manage to obtain some rupees. I then walk along the road, leaving the hotel and town behind. Surrounded by lush vegetation, I am now able to savour the tranquillity of the mountains. Unfamiliar insects whirr in the trees and below me are panoramic views of the great Indian plain. When I reach a sign heralding a checkpoint, I turn back. After lunch in the hotel I sit on the veranda, reading a book; then, feeling drowsy, I return to my room and sleep until I am woken by the sound of footsteps and doors being opened. Our permits have now been issued, our passports have been returned, and we were leaving for Paro. We set off in the two buses shortly afterwards.

By now it has clouded over and it has started to rain. At first, the scenery is dramatic as we climb upwards and peer down into deep valleys between mountains shrouded in cloud, but soon the views are completely obscured by mist. It now turns cold and, despite the stuffiness inside the bus, we are forced to close the windows. Jumpers and jackets are hastily pulled out of bags.

On and on we drive, the bus swinging madly as we tear around bend after bend, the windscreen wipers going at full belt. As traffic regularly approaches us from the opposite direction, the driver makes frequent use of the horn.

The four-hour drive seems endless. I doze off once or twice, but not for long because of the discomfort. We stop at a little teahouse en route for some refreshment – most of us stay standing for the half hour – then set off again into the grey mist. However, it clears later as we skirt a river at the bottom of a deep valley; far below can be seen a hydroelectric scheme. Darkness quickly descends and for a long time we can see nothing until the lights of Paro begin to twinkle in the distance. We rush past vague outlines of traditional Bhutanese houses and eventually come to a halt outside a large hotel built in traditional style. This is the Olathang Hotel, which resembles an oversized monastery. By now it is early evening. We are glad to stand up again.



*Olathang Hotel, Paro*

As dinner is about to be served, we decide to dump our luggage in our rooms and eat immediately. We are surprised when an Indian porter leads us outside the main building and conducts us along a maze of stone pathways, lined by electric lights, to chalets, each one containing two rooms. They are quite comfortable and include en



suite bathrooms. The luggage arrives shortly afterwards. Back in the main building I join my companions in the dining room, which is decorated in traditional style. Over an excellent buffet meal, we unwind, chat and laugh, happy that the tedious bus journey is over.

I return to my chalet in the spitting rain and prepare for bed. It has been an interesting day, though the journey during the afternoon has proved to be disappointing.



On the following morning we set off on a sightseeing tour of Paro valley. At the top of the valley is a vista of traditional houses and fields ranged in interesting patterns. Chillies have been left to dry out on the roofs of the houses – a common sight here. We examine Drukgyel Dzong, a fortress built in 1649 when the country had been unified. Once used as defence against a threatened Tibetan invasion, it had been burned and left in ruins – a reminder of Bhutan's turbulent and warlike history. Kipju, our guide, explains that Druk means 'Thunder Dragon' (a reference to Bhutan), and 'gyel' means 'victory'. The amaranth plants growing in the fields below, he tells us, can be fried to make a tasty dish.



*View from Drukgyel Dzong*

The view from the top of the fortress is spectacular. Below, a man ploughs a field in traditional manner, using a couple of oxen. In a nearby hamlet, a group of dirty children laugh and play with yellow balloons. Most of my companions, with the exception of Veronica, show little interest in their surroundings – they have come here to trek. Indeed, this is where the trek will start in two days' time.



*Boy from village near Drukgyel Dzong*

We leave this sun-drenched spot and drive back the way we had come, stopping at a *mani* wall. I notice that there is something different about the inscription; Kipju explains that it reads *ōm māni pādme hūm hri* – another syllable has been added at the end.



*Kyichu Lhakhang, Paro Valley*

We then drive to the nearby Kyichu Lhakhang, a small Buddhist monastery. There are two main buildings: an old and a new, surrounded by colourful flowers.



Craftsmen are painting frescoes on the walls of the new one. Kipju tells us that the monastery was founded in the seventh century. By crawling under some scaffolding, we are able to reach the inner courtyard. Here I can hear the familiar sound of monks chanting. We are brought into a dark hall and shown around. In another room we see a large statue of Maitreya, the Buddha-to-be. Kipju demonstrates how the monks prostrate themselves in front of an altar, at a spot where their toes have made a sizeable depression in the floorboards. He then gets one of the monks to show us how a full prostration is made. The followers of Tibetan Buddhism often use the full prostration as a means of approaching or travelling to a sacred site, and many cover long distances in this manner. Worshippers stand, prostrate themselves at full length on the ground, with arms outstretched, stand up again at the spot reached by the fingers, and repeat the process. As can be imagined, this form of locomotion is slow and painful, especially when the ground is uneven, and worshippers become filthy in the process. However, such is the piety of these pilgrims that they are willing to undergo this arduous process, for it is considered to be healthy, holy and meritorious.



*Children in Kyichu gompa*

In the afternoon we are driven to the National Museum, housed in an old watch tower above Paro Dzong. This Aladdin's cave is full of colourful costumes and robes, old texts, saddles, harnesses, various types of hats, *thangkas*, stamps, brass pots, a water clock, old lamps, musical instruments (including the *drumney* – a guitar-like instrument with seven strings), helmets, betel nut and lime boxes, fierce masks used in monastic dances, stuffed animals, and butterflies. A group of bored tourists make jokes about the exhibits; I let them go ahead and examine the artefacts at my own speed.



*Paro Dzong*

Later we drive down to the *dzong*, which was built in 1646, then burned and rebuilt in 1907. We learn that all such fortresses were built to a general pattern handed down from generation to generation, that no plans were drawn, and no nails were used. In addition, they were always designed to blend in with the surroundings. Now no longer used as a fortress, Paro Dzong has been turned into a monastery and an administration centre. Visitors like us are only permitted to see the monastic section.

The central courtyards are massive, and an impressive tower rises from the centre of one in the front of the complex. Kipju leads us into a large, dark hall, where young novices have just been eating. They return to sweep the wooden floor with great vigour. Although most of them look like little old men, they all grin and shout – there is more horseplay than sweeping. Once the job is done, most of them run outside, though some remain seated by the door, reciting the scriptures that they have to learn by heart. While here, I examine some of the *mandalas* (geometric figures representing the universe in symbolic form), which are painted on the walls. Included in these are representations of Mount Sumaru, the abode of the gods; such depictions of the sacred mountain also denote the ascent towards enlightenment.

We leave the building by a wooden bridge that crosses the Paro Chhu (Paro river) and return to our coach. By now two of my companions had footed it back to the hotel as they had been bored by the day's sightseeing. In the town centre – a one street affair – we are allowed to wander around for an hour. As there is little to see apart from the unusual houses, Veronica and I decide to walk back to the hotel, and are glad of the opportunity to take a little exercise. Veronica tells me that she has decided not to trek as she has neither the energy nor the correct equipment, for her luggage had been lost in Delhi. Instead, she hopes to visit a friend who lives in eastern Bhutan.

I am roused from my slumbers at seven this morning by the sound of a buzzer and a voice shouting, 'Good morning!'. Today we will do a one-day trek up to Tagtshang ('Tiger's Nest') monastery some 15 kilometres from Paro. This extraordinary gumpa clings to a ledge of a high cliff – in fact, we had seen it through the clouds from a distance yesterday when we had visited Drukgyel Dzong. We and another party leave at eight and are driven to the riverside. As the other party and a group of American tourists are to use horses and donkeys, this means that we will have the path to ourselves. It is a glorious morning and, as we climb upwards, the scenery gradually improves. It is now a delight to leave the telegraph poles and cables that disfigure Paro and walk in the countryside. Here, the few houses that we see do not look so new and over-decorated like the ones we have seen in the town. Indeed, viewed from a distance, one could be forgiven for thinking that they are Swiss chalets.

At first the going is easy but soon it begins to get tough. As expected, two of my companions – Michael and John – shoot on ahead. For a while I walk with a lady named Valerie, but as I stop often to photograph the enchanting scenery, I soon end up last. A German film crew, which we had seen earlier, pass us just as we approach a tiny old-world hamlet beside a stream, where the water drives several large prayer wheels housed in two little buildings. Some of the wheels are fitted with bells, which sound when the wheels rotate.

On we go. I now begin to realize how unfit I am for trekking, for I have to stop frequently to catch my breath. None the less, it is worth the effort, for the view looking down towards Paro valley is impressive from here.



*Asters*



*Red Sage*



My attention having been drawn to a beautiful wild orchid, I now begin to search for more flowers and find plenty of them. I snap pictures of a tiny white flower, probably related to the chrysanthemum family, a dark blue geranium, asters, and red sage, all of which grow in profusion. Because of my ignorance in such matters, I have to rely on my companions to identify the plants. I continue through a refreshingly cool forest, admiring the lush and varied vegetation all round me, and occasionally arrive at a clearing where magnificent views of other wooded mountains and the valley below can be seen. Here the landscape is remarkably different from Ladakh.



*Tagtshang gompa, Paro Valley*

After zigzagging for a long time up the side of a mountain, the track eventually levels and I am able to make better progress. A sudden turn in the path stops me in my tracks, for in front of me is Tagtshang – the Flying Tiger – monastery. Miraculously it clings to a sheer rock face, as if defying gravity, with a sharp 3,000-foot drop beneath. The monastery gets its name from the famous Indian Tantric sage Padmasambhava, who, according to legend, came to this spot on a flying tiger and meditated with a disciple in a cave for three months. It is recorded that, in his wrathful form, he subdued the evil spirits. The monastery, which is visited regularly by pilgrims, was founded back in the eighth century and was therefore the first Tantric Buddhist monastery to be established in Bhutan. However, the gompa was rebuilt in 1692.

I photograph the extraordinary building through the surrounding trees and set off again. Later, at a clearing marked by tall prayer flags, I stop to admire an even more spectacular view of the monastery. On I go, finally arriving at a conveniently

positioned cafeteria, facing the gomba, where we rest and drink tea. Never was a cup of tea more welcome!

Refreshed, I descend rough stone steps to a magnificent waterfall, at the bottom of which is a wooden bridge and another water-powered prayer wheel. On the other side is a steep climb uphill.

At last I reach the monastery. Tired, I stumble through the ornate doorway and enter the cool, shady interior. I make my way to a viewing platform, where the sheer drop below leads to the distant Paro valley. I relax here for a while before joining the others for a guided tour of the gomba. The first little room that we visit is downstairs and contains the cave in which the great Padmasambhava is believed to have meditated. In a mural he is depicted in his wrathful form and also in his eight manifestations. On an altar are the familiar seven bowls of water, symbolizing either the Seven Examined Men (the first seven Tibetan monks) or the first seven steps of the Buddha. Kipju's explanation is more down to earth: washing, drinking, and the five senses.



*Tagtshang gomba*

The second room, next door, is called the Guru Lhakhang (Temple of Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche as he is sometimes known). In it is a large statue of the Tantric saint, flanked by smaller statues depicting his eight manifestations. Some *yab-yum* (literally, 'father-mother') frescoes are covered; surprisingly, Kipju pulls back the curtains and allows us to photograph them. Representing the primordial union of wisdom and compassion, these depict a male deity in sexual union with his *shakti* (female consort). Padmasambhava had a *shakti*: his wife Mandarava, an initiate and daughter of the King of Sahor in Himachal Pradesh, India. Also in the room is a statue of Tenzing Rabgye, the builder of the monastery.

Upstairs is a larger room, which I take to be an assembly hall or *dukhang*. The walls are covered in murals, but there are very few statues. I had noticed this in the other gompas that we had visited: none of them had been as tightly packed with



statues and sacred objects as those in Ladakh. By comparison, the monasteries here look quite empty.

After Kipju has explained the Bhutanese people's attitude to religion and the role of the monk in the community (there are now only three monks in this monastery), he brings us out to the viewing platform, from which we peep into a tiny chapel containing a huge statue of Padmasambhava in his fiery aspect on the back of his fabulous flying tiger. We then rest outside, admiring the view and the colourful roof of the monastery.

Reluctantly we leave – everyone has fallen for this magical place – and go back down the steps to the bottom of the waterfall. Up the other side we climb and, on the level again, walk to the cafeteria, where we sip cool drinks and eat a good meal of rice, meat and vegetables. The simple meal tastes good after our long trek.

Our walk back is a good deal easier than this morning's as it is all downhill; by now it has cooled down a little. For most of the journey I chat to Philip and Pat, a married couple, as I find them good company. They are knowledgeable about flowers; encouraged by them, I photograph some small, bright blue pea flowers and little yellow potentillas, making notes of the names. Earlier, when we had been near the waterfall, I had photographed a tiny white ball-shaped flower with a red centre, which Philip and Pat thought was a type of *polygorum*.

As we near the end of the day's trek, it begins to rain. I pull a raincoat out of my bag – it is far too big for me – and clamber into the bus as soon as I reach it. Fortunately, the rain begins to ease off.

On our way back to Paro, we stop at a field where some young men, watched by a group of monks, are practising archery, a sport to which the Bhutanese are addicted. However, this is nothing like the archery competition that I had witnessed in Ladakh. There is no music or razzmatazz – just the men firing arrows at a tiny target a long distance away and rarely hitting it. Nonetheless, it is interesting to watch. Whenever the target is hit, there is a cheer, accompanied by much whooping and shouting. The bows are made from two pieces of wood, joined at the centre. They are very taut and require great strength to pull back the string; the arrows are both very short and very sharp. There are two targets, one at either end of the long field, and both are used alternately.



*Archery, Paro*

Back at the hotel we drink tea in the bar and I repair to my room, where I finish writing some postcards. Over an excellent meal I speak with an English girl, who, together with the group that she had joined, has completed the trek that we will start tomorrow morning. Although it had rained a good deal, she and her companions had enjoyed it.

Veronica joins us later – she had fallen asleep. She is to go to the capital, Thimphu, tomorrow, but after that she is unsure of what will happen, as she has been refused permission to visit her friend in east Bhutan. I feel sorry for her; clearly she is quite ill and things are not going very well for her. I offer her any help that I might be able to give her.