

I awake soon after six to the unwelcome sound of rain pattering on the outside of the tent. When one of the porters pulls back the flap to offer us tea, all I can see outside is grey mist. In the dining tent we are cheered at the sight of muesli in our bowls – another goody from the cardboard box. In addition, we eat toast, fried eggs and slices of tinned meat, which we immediately nickname yakburgers or Big Yaks. I eat two of them, as I predict that our packed lunches will not be very filling.

By the time we leave, the clouds show signs of clearing. Patches of blue appear and the rain eases. I follow Kipju and the others along the valley towards Jitchu Drake – the way that we went yesterday. We pass the bridge that we crossed and press on until we have a good view of part of the mountain. Unfortunately, the top half is now shrouded in cloud.

We now cross a bridge and clamber up a steep ridge. I pace my steps slowly and mechanically. A couple of the tall and well-built young men in our group are now suffering from altitude sickness – I can't help suspecting that their large lungs demand more oxygen than mine. I make it to the top of the ridge without pausing to catch my breath. From here the view is stunning. The sun, which has emerged from the clouds, now shines on the sides of the mountains and the valley below. Taking my last look at this magnificent sight, I follow the others eastwards along the wide Soi valley. This is the type of scenery that delights me: large open spaces with a clear blue sky above. Although the gradient is slight, I move slowly because of the high altitude. To my right is a range of magnificent snow-topped mountains and, farther on, a stark side valley with an icy peak at its end. This, Kipju explains, leads to the Nachu-la, a pass often used by the locals. He also draws my attention to a flock of blue sheep on my left, which I had not noticed.



*Soi valley*

A little later, Kipju suddenly points to a marmot that is just about to enter its warren. The little animal has seen us and has frozen in its tracks. Unfortunately I do not have the zoom lens on my camera; when I remove it from its case, the creature quickly disappears. We see another one soon afterwards, which I attempt to photograph. This area is fascinating and I continually stop to drink in the wild vistas. By now I am on my own. As the sun shines fiercely, I take the precaution of putting on my sunhat and applying sun cream to my neck. However, it is still very cold; I wear a thermal vest, a cotton shirt and a thick woollen jumper.

Finally I reach the end of this stretch and slowly make my way up to a small stone cairn. From here I have an excellent view of another side valley, which veers off towards the south-east. It is colder here, and by now there is a light shower of snow. This continues on and off for a while.

Swinging northwards, I enter a smaller side valley, where I can see the tips of two white peaks peeping over a ridge. Slowly I climb upwards, then head eastwards. To my right are mountains with unusual vertical streaks of snow clinging to the sides, and straight ahead is the Nyele-la, the first pass that we must cross, at 15,900 feet (4,846 metres). I can just about see a cluster of prayer flags at the top.

I now begin the slow ascent towards the pass. As I do so, some of our porters pass me; the yaks carrying our luggage then come into sight. These animals have been supplied to us this morning, following local custom; no doubt they can handle these high altitudes better than the ponies. They are led by the people who presumably own them.



*Near the Nyele-la*

At the top of the pass, I shout '*Lha gyalo!*' to any of the gods who may be listening. An icy wind tears at me. Miraculously, the clouds have parted, revealing an extensive panorama of mountains ahead, which stretch away into Tibet. This is the view that I

have been craving to see. Happy, I stay put for a short while, photographing the spellbinding mountain range (only half of Tshering Gang is visible), and quickly descend to where the group has stopped for lunch. Just as I reach my companions, the mountains completely disappear behind the clouds. Because of the cold, everybody has bundled themselves up in their warmest clothes. Our lunch consists of fruit juice (Bhutan's 'Druk' brand), cold roast potatoes, cheese sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs. As we eat, the clouds clear again and Tshering Gang shines forth in all its glory. Even Jitchu Drake's elusive peak makes a brief appearance.



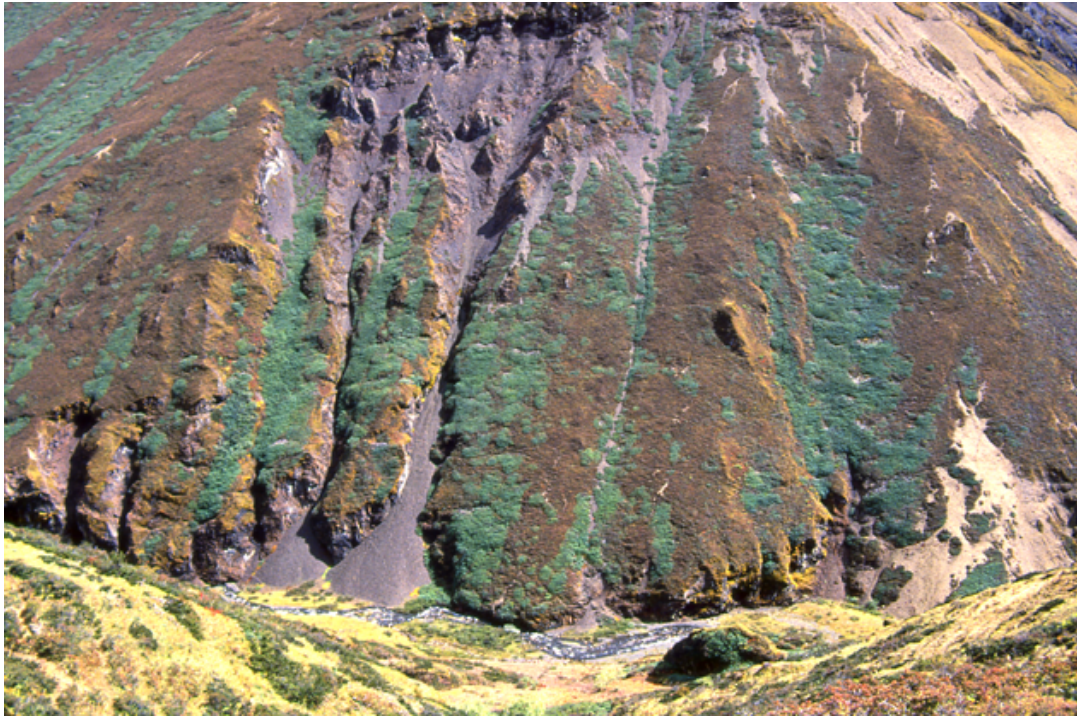
*Tshering Gang mountain from the Nyele-la*

We do not delay here, but leave as quickly as possible. I go flying down the mountainside. Following a ridge of loose scree that leads eastwards, I approach a small river, cross it and tramp along the northern side of the Lingshi valley. This beautiful part of the trail has breathtaking views of mountains, rivers, side valleys, forests and flowers. As the path is almost level, it makes for easy walking. I throw off my jumper and continue at a lively pace. It now feels good to be in front and to have the place all to myself.

Isup catches up with me and we walk together. I stop when we approach some yak herders' tents (which I have never seen before) and photograph one of them. The black tents are made of yak hair, which, although quite porous, is very warm and waterproof. Ignoring the barking of dogs that are tied to a wooden post, I follow Isup into one of the little tents and watch a man churning yak milk to make butter. The inside of the tent is essentially a kitchen; solid hunks of cheese made from yak milk are strung together and are being smoked over a fire of yak dung. A little girl and boy hang around outside; tied to the boy's back is a small bundle of firewood.



Outside again, Isup informs me that these tents are only used during the summer; during the winter, the herders live in ordinary houses in the nearby valleys. Isup marches ahead and I find my way down through rhododendron thickets to the campsite far below. Just beyond is Lingshi Dzong, the local fortress, on a hill. Four valleys converge here; *Ling-shi* means 'four valleys'. Our campsite is situated beside the Mo Chhu, a river that flows from the snows of a distant mountain that can be seen at the northern end of the valley. It is a wonderful setting.



*View from Lingshi valley*

As my legs are tired by now, it takes me a while to walk down the zig-zag path to the campsite. The first of our group to arrive, I crawl into a tent to escape the cold wind and to rest. Shortly afterwards, drinking chocolate and biscuits are served. While studying a map that seems to make no sense at all, Kipju appears and asks me if I would like to visit the Dzong. Although I am still tired, I decide that it may be worth seeing, and join some of my companions, who follow him.

It is a steep climb up the hill, but the building is spectacular and the views are superb. At the fortress, we find a group of locals looking down at us from the roof. Kipju brings us inside. The old-world, tumbledown courtyards are full of charm. Just outside one of the entrances, the Bhutanese flag flies. It is diagonally divided into two colours: yellow for the kingdom (or so I am told), and red for the Buddhist Red Hat sect. In the centre is a representation of the Druk, the Thunder Dragon.

Kipju goes upstairs and obtains a key for the gompā, which is situated in the central tower. To reach this we climb two very steep ladders. We emerge into a small, dark monastery. An old, grimy-looking monk (the only one here, as far as we can see) stands to one side as we look around and Kipju explains the wall paintings. Padmasambhava is depicted, along with Ngawang Namgyal, the Buddha and Chenrezig. A picture of four animals, one on top of another, symbolizes the Unity of



Life. The wisest, on the top, is the bird, which is a symbol of the Buddha; the rabbit is next, underneath; then a monkey; and, supporting them all, an elephant.



*Doorway, Lingshi Dzong*



*View from Lingshi Dzong*

After we have seen everything, we clamber down the ladders and leave. Outside is a small *mani* wall with a roof; lower down is a typically Bhutanese *chörten*: it is square, with a pitched roof. At the other side of the valley is another one of these; we will pass it tomorrow.

Back at the camp, I collapse into my tent and write my diary until dinner is announced. We sit in a circular, draughty building around a fire and eat by candlelight. Once again we are served coleslaw, and the meal finishes with tinned pears. A wonderful day.



*Primulas, Lingshi Dzong*

The unwelcome sound of rain pattering on the roof of the tent awakes me again this morning. We set off after eight and begin by climbing up towards the *chörten* we had seen yesterday. We then turn to the right and walk along a river valley, passing some colourful flowers and more yak herders' tents. Some children stand outside one of these, beside a woman with a large pot of milk. I stop to take a look, and just as I am about to leave, a young lad wearing an unusual conical cap appears. We had been told about this headgear, which is typical of the region.



*Yak herder, Lingshi valley*

On I trudge, my leg muscles tired after yesterday's exertions. As I do not feel much like walking this morning, I make slow progress.

At last I reach the head of the valley, where I have to cross a river with Kipju's help, for I keep slipping off the wet stones. Next comes the approach to the Yale-la, our second and last pass. As I approach it, it begins to snow. Halfway up I meet Kipju, who hands me my packed lunch. As I am tired and hungry, I stop and eat it. I then tackle the spectacular pass (16,500 feet or 5,000 metres); it is tough going, especially in the snow, but I finally make it. At the top I roar '*Lha gyalo!*' to the yaks and yak herders far below, and to the mountains in general. I walk around the rough *mani* wall in a clockwise direction and then descend into a grey, misty nothingness. It continues to snow and then it begins to rain. I trudge along a muddy path, passing a lake (which I can hardly see), muttering the mantra '*ōm māni pādme hūm*' in time to my footsteps in order to keep sane.

The path eventually disintegrates and the rain increases. Soon I am crossing another unending patch of slippery rocks and mud. Because of the mist and cloud, no scenery can be discerned. I am soon horribly wet and miserable, and my knees are beginning to hurt. The only redeeming feature is that the journey is all downhill.

I arrive at the camp at about four o'clock, in foul humour, and find my companions sitting in a stone hut, with no fire to warm them. Everyone looks fed up. A mug of hot drinking chocolate and some biscuits offer a modicum of comfort. A while later, an attempt is made to light a fire but, as the timber is too damp, we get more smoke than heat, and it is not easy to dry ourselves out. We eat our dinner sitting around the smoky fire: a silent, glum bunch of people. I am glad to crawl into my tent and snuggle into my warm sleeping bag.

Miraculously, the next day is sunny and the valley in which we have camped looks beautiful in the early morning light. At one end can be seen shining white peaks and, at the other, a wisp of cloud hanging in mid air. Before breakfast, we wrap our luggage in plastic bags, as we have been told that the yaks will have to wade through rivers today – though we will cross them using bridges. As the stone hut is too cold, we eat our breakfast outside.

When ready, we set off on our 18 kilometre walk, which today is mostly downhill. I now find myself hobbling; my right knee hurts whenever I apply too much weight to it. I wonder what has caused this. Yesterday I had arrived at the camp with two stiff knees. I proceed carefully and slowly, taking care not to transfer too much weight on to my right leg. As the scenery in this valley is superb, I am glad of the excuse of having to walk slowly. Following a rushing river, the path takes us through forests, and leads us to vistas of bare cliffs, mountains and snow-clad peaks. I stop now and then to photograph various different flowers.

However, the fine scenery soon comes to an end when we enter another forest and the path disintegrates; once again we are back to negotiating boulders and slippery black mud. Uncomfortable at the best of times with this type of terrain, I now find it very painful with my sore right knee. As a result, I am reduced to a snail's pace. Through the forest I stumble, negotiating boulders, mud, streams and rivers.

We finally stop at a sunny spot for an early lunch. By now I have developed a dose of the runs; I thankfully accept some medication. Afterwards, I lie down and fall asleep for a little while. Feeling better when I wake, I resume the never-ending trek.



Soon, however, my knee begins to hurt again. Under the impression that I do not have too far to go, I am annoyed when Kipju informs me, some time later, that I will have another hour of walking. At my speed, I know that it will take me more than an hour. I soon become tired and exhausted. When I feel that I must be almost at the campsite, I meet Kipju again, who points to a ruined Dzong in the distance. I accept his offer to take my daypack and give me the use of his stick. The latter makes the going a good deal easier. Nevertheless, it takes me a long time to reach Barshang Dzong and the campsite. It is situated in a magnificent clearing, under two colourful farm houses and facing a snow-capped mountain.

The first thing I have to do on arrival is head immediately for the bushes. I then drink two cups of tea and eat some biscuits. Isup tells me that he will organize a horse for me tomorrow. He seems to know what has happened to my knee, and mentions that the condition is common enough – no doubt other trekkers had injured themselves in a similar manner. I retreat to my tent, where I lie down with a cold, wet flannel wrapped around my knee. Out of the opening I can see two prayer flags and the distant snow-topped mountain.

My companions are in a livelier mood at dinner time. Although the food looks good, I limit myself to two bowls of soup, some rice, and tea. We retire to bed early this evening because tomorrow's trek will be 24 kilometres long – a two-day trek rolled into one. I am looking forward to the luxury of travelling this distance by horse!

After an excellent night's sleep – the best so far on the trek – I am woken at 5.30 a.m. Outside, the sky is blue and clear but, because the sun has not risen above the mountains, everything is covered in frost. Breakfast consists of Indian cornflakes in hot milk, chips (of all things!), *puri* (a type of Indian bread) and slices of tinned meat. We finally get started some two hours later.

Although I can only move slowly, I have to walk at first as the horse has not yet appeared. By now my knee is quite sore. The sun rises and begins to light up the valley. When I reach a warm, sunny spot, I sit down to rest. Just as I start to move again, Kipju and a couple of his colleagues appear with a small horse. I am given a couple of basic instructions on how to hang on and am pushed up on to a large, comfortable saddle.

The journey proves to be pleasant: a slow amble through sun-drenched forest. After a while a certain amount of tedium creeps in as there is little change in the scenery. However, it feels good to be seated on the horse, its bell tinkling musically. I listen, fascinated, to folk songs sung in a spontaneous, uninhibited style by Kipju and his companions. With us comes the owner of my sturdy little beast, two more horses and a foal; the owner and the other lads encourage the animals with shouts of '*choo!*', '*choy!*' and variants, such as '*chüy!*' and '*chöy!*' They communicate with our yak herders with loud whoops and cries that echo around the mountains. I chat to Kipju about religion and his education, and later I ask him and one of his companions to sing me the Bhutanese national anthem – the one that I had heard on the radio, played on bagpipes.

The path, like yesterday's, consists of rocks and soft, wet mud – I am glad that I do not have to negotiate it. As the unfortunate horse frequently flounders in the mud and stumbles over the stones, I have to hang on very tight. However, I have to

dismount and walk a little now and then, as some of the steep slopes are too treacherous for the hapless animal.

On and on we go. Sometimes I sing a medley of airs, especially in the morning when I feel cheerful. Our route follows the Wang Chhu, the river that flows towards the nation's capital, Thimphu. After several hours I begin to feel hungry. At last we stop for lunch: juice, boiled potatoes, some more *puri* bread and meat. I let the lads drink my water as they have none, and give them sweets.

Off we go again. On the way we meet various people coming in the opposite direction, or just resting. All are greeted in a friendly manner; I smile at them and cry, '*kuzu zangpo!*'. One man doffs his cowboy hat to me; another, bearded and rather Chinese looking, wears a pointed hat. I am told that he is Tibetan and is carrying a bow and arrows. Farther down the trail we see oxen.

At last, after much climbing up and down, we progress along the riverbank and finally reach a tiny village at about five o'clock. There to greet us is the rest of the party and two minibuses. Everyone cheers and takes photos of me as I approach on horseback and, when I cross a mark on the ground, I am ceremonially presented with a bottle of beer. Some monks from the nearby Chagri (or Cheri) gompa are also here, watching. This monastery has been closed to the public for the past month; originally we were supposed to visit it.

There is now great jubilation as we line up for a group photo, and see our luggage safely transferred from the yaks to the buses. We thank the lads who have looked after us during the trek and give them some money. They are very grateful; they shake hands with us all and wish us goodbye. They have been a great bunch. I let them finish my large bottle of beer, for the little that I have drunk has already gone straight to my head.

The trek now over, we drive off and soon begin to approach the outskirts of Thimphu. In the failing light it looks like a scattered, untidy city – I do not take to it at all. We see what look very much like slums, full of Indians and Nepalese. In the city centre, we pass the Queen Mother's palace and several other large and impressive buildings, including the huge Tashichho Dzong – the main fortress and monastery. From here we drive up into the hills, towards our hotel.

This, like the one in Paro, turns out to be large and built in traditional style, though it seems to be a little old. The staff, dressed in national costume, look rather rustic. They bring us and our luggage to rooms on the top floor. I head straight for the bathroom and treat myself to a very welcome hot shower – I have not realized how filthy I have become. When I look in the mirror, I discover that my face has become quite red from the strong sunshine.

Washed and clean again, I dress in clean clothes – what a luxury! – and begin to sort out my things. I leave this chore unfinished when I go down for dinner. The food is good, but not as tasty as what we ate at the hotel in Paro. We chat and laugh at the table, and leave when the waiters begin to clear everything away. It is 10.30 p.m. when I finally lie down in my comfortable bed to sleep – late by trekking standards!