

As in the hotel in Paro, we are woken by the sound of a buzzer. After breakfast we drift outside for a show of traditional folk dancing. Fortunately the sun is shining and it is gloriously hot. There is a relaxed atmosphere as we await the dance troupe, who arrive about half an hour late. We are joined by a few Americans, and the entertainment is quite delightful and – fortunately – not too touristy. Deck chairs are fetched and placed under the shade of a tree while the dancers, laughing and joking, don their exotic costumes. A makeshift changing room (a colourful curtain stretched round a wooden frame) has been erected, but not everyone keeps inside it. Indeed, its real purpose seems to be a place from which the dancers, once properly attired, can emerge and begin their performances.

The show begins when a man, dressed in traditional costume, strolls out, sits down on a bench in the hotel garden, and begins crashing a pair of cymbals. A second or two later a host of skeletons jump out from behind the curtain and prance about in front of us. The dance, which looks so alien and yet is so colourful, suddenly seems to reveal all the magic and mystery of Bhutan to us. Ignoring Kipju's instructive explanations, I hop around with my camera in an effort to capture some of what we are seeing. As the movements of the dancers are completely unpredictable, it is difficult to capture still images.



*Traditional dancing, Motithang Hotel, Thimphu*

The skeletons finally disappear behind the curtain, the cymbals fall silent and we applaud politely. Next, a group of boys and girls appear in national costume and began to sing and dance. Like the Ladakhi dances, these are strangely devoid of energy and enthusiasm. Again, the movements are of the shuffling variety, though maybe just a little quicker and more energetic than what I had seen the previous

year. The singing often stops abruptly for a few beats and starts again a moment later.



*Deer dance, Motithang Hotel, Thimphu*

The rest of the programme consists of masked dances interspersed with folk songs and dances. We are treated to a deer dance, in which the movements are wild: lots of swirling around and bending in all directions by the male dancers. Again, this is accompanied on the cymbals. After the following set of folk songs and dances, we have a fierce devil dance, with masked dancers cavorting to the sound of long Tibetan trumpets and cymbals. The two trumpeters simply play one low note either singly or together, in different rhythms. The arresting movements of the dancers make up for any monotony.

By way of a change, and to represent the people of southern Bhutan, we are then treated to a pretty Nepalese dance, performed by young boys and girls, and accompanied on a portable harmonium, a drum, and voices. The Bhutanese folk group returns for a farewell song and the show is brought to an end.

We now drive off in our bus to the city centre, where we stop at a touristy handicraft emporium. As the choice of goods is not particularly impressive and as the prices are inflated, I look around briefly and leave. I amble up the main street, peering into the ordinary shops, which I find a good deal more interesting. Ornate outside, and mostly built in the local style, they are small and dark inside. All I buy is a comb for two rupees from a business-like Bhutanese boy in one shop and, in a bookshop, two books about Bhutan and a cassette tape of local music and song. Here and there I notice signs, printed in English, prohibiting parking, blocking entrances, smoking and so forth; my impression is that life here is rather rigidly controlled by the authorities. The people appear to be polite, well behaved and often shy. The subdued atmosphere here in the capital is in direct contrast to the carefree and lively atmosphere that I had encountered in Leh last year. Certainly everything is clean and in good order in the main street and around.

I meet Kipju and go with him in the bus to collect the others from the emporium; some of my companions have bought souvenirs. We then drive to the other end of the town to see a large ugly *chörten* erected in memory of the late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, who had died while on holiday in Kenya in July 1972 at the age of forty-

four. (The reigning king is his son Jigme Singye Wangchuk who, I have now discovered, is the same age as myself, thirty-one, and the youngest king in the world.) The *chörten* is painted in gaudy colours and the structure, especially inside, is quite hideous. The interior murals depict a seething mass of *yab-yum* figures locked in sexual embrace: Tantric Buddhism in its most explicit form. I pay more attention to the pilgrims circumambulating the structure with beads and portable prayer wheels.



*Pilgrims, Thimphu*

I am glad to leave, board the bus and return to our hotel for lunch. As we are not due to leave this afternoon until two o'clock, I take a short rest in my room afterwards.



*Tashichho Dzong, Thimphu*

In the afternoon we drive along the lantern-lined roads to the huge Tashichho Dzong, Bhutan's administrative and religious centre. We had seen this massive and impressive building from various points in the town, and I had been reading about it. As we approach it, we leave the general populace behind, and now we encounter



well-dressed officials in high-class Japanese cars. The modern buildings in the vicinity look very clean and tidy. We stop in a car park and walk the rest of the way. Kipju now dons a special white shawl, thrown loosely around him, and we are requested to remove our hats. This proves to be a nuisance as the sun is so strong, especially when reflected off the dazzling white walls.

We climb a flight of stairs to the main entrance, the décor of which is rather modern and gaudy. The building had first been conceived on a small scale in the thirteenth century, then enlarged in 1641 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the unifier of Bhutan. After several disasters over the centuries, it was reconstructed in the 1960s by the previous king. Hence, most of the structure is very new, except for the central square tower (*utse*) and the Lhakhang Sarp (the monastery beside it), both of which probably date from the seventeenth century.

Inside, Kipju draws our attention to various features, most of which I miss as I am busy photographing anything that takes my fancy. We slowly walk around the large central courtyard, keeping to the shade. The windows are highly decorative and gold shines on the rooftops.



*Tshodgu chamber, Tashichho Dzong, Thimphu*

We make our way round to the chamber in which the king sits with the *Tshodgu* or National Assembly for a week twice a year, during the summer and winter. We wait for a while until Kipju finds the caretaker who has the key. Inside, the décor is so rich that it is almost bewildering. Facing a large altar, behind which can be seen the top half of a huge statue of the Buddha, is the king's throne, draped with red and yellow material when not in use. As we amble around this massive chamber, its heavy ceiling supported by countless highly-decorated wooden beams, we can hear monks below chanting and playing their eerie music – a familiar sound by now.

We linger for a while, taking photos and watching a man in a corner making new *thangkas* and other religious paraphernalia, using coloured cloths. There is a delightfully tranquil atmosphere in this dark building; bright sunshine streams inside through narrow openings.



Outside again, the scene has changed. Monks come scurrying out of doorways and a great flock of pigeons fly around and land in the square. We peep through the main doorway of the *dukhang* below and watch the young monks as they chant and play their instruments. Amongst them strides the *chöstimpa*, wielding his whip to enforce discipline. On seeing us, he comes outside and scowls at us for a while.

After we have had our fill, we cross the square to the older Lhakhang Sarp, the seventeenth-century gumpa which, we are told, houses four hundred monks. We enter through the main door and climb up a steep ladder to the first floor in order to see the *dukhang*. At the entrance, I notice a large phallic symbol painted on the wall. It amuses me and I wonder if anybody else has noticed it. If they have, politeness has obviously deterred them from making any comment. In fact, very graphic phallic symbols are painted on the walls of Bhutanese houses in the countryside and are considered to be a sign of good luck. As we have not seen these on our travels, I wonder if the locals have been discouraged from depicting them on houses along the popular trekking routes for fear of upsetting foreigners.

The *dukhang* is a fine place, its décor dating mostly from the previous century. Behind the altar is a large statue of Padmasambhava, flanked by other deities. The walls are covered in instructive paintings and the ceilings in mandalas.

After we have looked around, we leave the large complex, passing by a small and humble royal palace within its own grounds. We are quite impressed by this lack of ostentation, and surprised at the seeming lack of security of any kind; just a simple wooden gate shuts the palace and its surrounding garden off from the rest of the world. We have already learned of how accessible the king is to his people.



*View from Simtokha gumpa*

Boarding our minibus once again, we leave this exclusive area and, bypassing the town centre, drive to the other end of the valley to visit the oldest dzong, Simtokha, which had been built by Ngawang Namgyal in 1629. As well as being a fortress, it is also a monastery, and as such it was the first centre of social and religious education in Bhutan. On our way to the building we pass some splendid scenery; far below we can see paddy fields bathed in the late afternoon sun. At last we approach the red

and white *dzong* and drive up a steep hill towards it. It is a fine structure in a spectacular setting.

The inner courtyard is very narrow as the gompa takes up most of the space. Inside, it is darker – and visibly older – than most of the monasteries that we have already seen. In the main hall is a temple dedicated to the protective deity on one side, and a thousand Buddhas are depicted on the walls. The library contains the weighty volumes of the two main scriptures, the *Kagyur* and the *Tengyur*. Having examined all this with the help of our torches, we enter the inner sanctuary, the *lhakhang*, where the statues are housed. Looming out of the darkness is a large image of Śakyamuni, the historical Buddha, with his two attendants, and flanked on both sides by eight Bodhisattvas. At the foot of the altar are two huge tusks, symbols of the Buddha, whose mother is said to have dreamt of an elephant while expecting him. A ray of sunshine comes streaming through one tiny window; this is the only source of light.

We then visit a side chapel to the left of the main hall. This contains three statues together: the thousand-armed and eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara (Lord of Mercy), flanked by Chenrezig (the same deity) with four arms, and his female aspect or consort, Tara (also known as Dölma). On the walls are depicted various monks and teachers of the Red Hat sect. Once again we have to use our torches to make out the details.

After I have asked Kipju to explain a few points to me, I then go off to explore the rest of the historic monastery. I amble around the cloisters, photographing various corners and peeping into the young monks' cells. I am amused to see pictures of pin-up girls on some of the walls – though I see nothing that is overtly naughty. Having looked around to my fill, I wander back outside, where I find Kipju looking for me. The others are in the bus, waiting. I do not care, as I want to see this interesting place properly. I am beginning to find these organized tourist trips a bit of a drag. I clamber back into the minibus and apologize, and we drive back to Thimphu in the fading light.



*Motithang Hotel, Thimphu*

On arrival at the hotel, Kipju informs us that there will be a cocktail party for us at 6.30 p.m., given by the trekking manager of the Tourist Board. In the meantime, we are given tea and biscuits in the foyer.

In my room I spruce myself up and join the others in the bar at the appointed time. Here we are introduced to various officials dressed in national costume: the trekking manager, the tourism manager, the manager of all the hotels in Bhutan, and others. I accept a glass of whiskey and water. At first everything is rather formal, but soon the ice is broken when we begin to relax, talk and laugh. Our hosts want to know what we have thought of the trek, of the hotels and the service, and if we have any complaints or suggestions. We agree that this is a nice gesture on their part. The party concludes with a speech from our hosts and presents of colourful sashes for everybody. I had examined these same sashes earlier today in the handicraft emporium; thankfully I had not bothered to buy one of them!

Afterwards we make our way to the dining room for our evening meal. While we eat, Veronica appears but sits at another table. As soon as we have finished, I go over to her and ask her how her adventure had gone. She tells me that she had had a wonderful time, and had obtained permission to visit her friend in eastern Bhutan without any problem, despite the predictions that this would be impossible. A jeep and a driver had been put at her disposal. She believes that central Bhutan is scenically superior to anything else that she had seen on her travels, and she had found the remote eastern part of the country quite fascinating. I am very envious of her when she tells me that she had had the good fortune to meet the famous writer Heinrich Harrer, now aged seventy-four, and had travelled part of her journey with him. She described him as a real gentleman. She had met all kinds of wonderful, friendly people and had stayed with the locals in their homes. She had certainly been extremely lucky. I now wish that I had abandoned the trek and had gone with her instead, though maybe she would not have enjoyed so much hospitality had I gone with her. Having travelled often on my own, I have discovered that people generally tend to be more welcoming to lone travellers. I realize that she is a very adventurous person and I am grateful for the information that she had been giving me about visiting China and Tibet; she had told me that if I want to see real monasteries, I must go to Tibet. I tell her about our trek and convince her that she has not missed much. I now realize that, because of our slow progress, we had only seen a small part of western Bhutan.

This morning we are travelling in the minibus to Punakha, the former capital, which is in central Bhutan. En route we stop in the town centre here in order to see the Sunday market, which, we are told, is generally quite lively. This is held in a square full of people selling their wares, mostly vegetables and clothes, though there are plenty of other things on offer, such as various items of hardware. A couple of monks are selling religious objects and portable shrines containing miniature paintings of the various deities. One man appears to be selling religious texts – I recognize some traditional Tibetan books. As everybody is dressed in colourful costumes, I realize that this is an excellent opportunity for photography and snap everything that looks interesting. Although I am not particularly interested in what is for sale, I do notice that certain goods cost much less than those in the official tourist shops.





*Sunday market, Thimphu*

We set off soon after nine o'clock and drive towards Simtokha gumpa, which we had visited yesterday. We then turn left and head out of the valley towards the Dochang-la, the pass that will lead us to Punakha. Gradually we leave civilization behind and the scenery becomes monotonous as the ubiquitous forest enfolds us. After about one hour we reach the top of the pass, where we tumble out of the bus and look down over a sea of mountains and clouds. It is quite a sight. We are now looking into central Bhutan, which is a restricted zone. Kipju has to present papers at a checkpoint.

Back in the bus, the slow and winding two-hour descent into Punakha valley begins. The view below is impressive but soon the journey becomes tedious.



*Punakha valley*

Eventually we arrive in an attractive deep valley of terraced bright green paddy fields, with farmhouses dotted here and there. We stop at a particularly dramatic spot, where we jump out and photograph the scenery. Far below us winds the Dzong Chhu, the river that flows through the valley. We drive on, passing many impressive views, and finally arrive at the bottom. We now approach Punakha Dzong, an impressive old building partially in ruins, built on an island at the confluence of two rivers: the Mo Chhu or Female River on the left, and the Pho Chhu or Male River on the right. The dzong had been built in 1637 by Ngawang Namgyal, who died while meditating here in 1651. It was damaged by fire several times during its history and by an earthquake in 1897. It was the administrative centre and the seat of the government until 1955, when the capital was moved to Thimphu. The dzong now serves as a winter residence of the Je Khenpo, the chief abbot of the Central Monastic Body of Bhutan. The reigning king has a residence here too, but his wife and other women of the family reside in a separate building outside, as women are not allowed to live in the monastery.

We stop in the so-called main square of the rather squalid town centre (a small collection of traditional one-storey wooden shops) and cross a swaying suspension bridge to the huge, impressive fortress and monastery. Just as I am about to climb the steep steps to the main entrance, I am accosted by two young students who ask me to take photos of them and to exchange addresses so that I can send them copies. As they are so polite and earnest, I willingly agree. I talk to them for a little while and then, when I rejoin the group, I manage to lose them. I now concentrate on seeing and photographing the architecture and decorative details inside the building. Because of its age, it is full of character.





*Punakha Dzong*

To get to the second courtyard, we walk through a passage that has been channelled through the thick wall. We then find ourselves at the entrance of the temple where the embalmed body of the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal had been laid to rest. There are impressive paintings on either side of the entrance: the Wheel of Life and some unusual cosmic mandalas, which I find fascinating. Dark and mysterious inside, the temple contains statues of Maitreya, the Buddha, and a Bodhisattva behind the main altar. Back outside, I ask Kipju to explain the wall paintings and I take some notes. Happy, I wander around the building and reluctantly join the others to cross the bridge back to the town centre. I would have happily spent hours in this marvellous dzong.



*Shop, Punakha*



After we have looked around the tiny shops, we drive off and, arriving at a farmhouse, descend to the river to a picnic site. Here, in the shade of a small temple, we eat an excellent hot meal that is brought to us by a couple of young lads and an elderly man.

We leave before three o'clock and head back for Thimphu. I am sorry to leave Punakha after such a short stay. As we drive uphill, I push my head out of the window and take some photos of the magnificent views looking down to the curved rice paddies and the wooden farmhouses. Soon we are zigzagging back up the mountains, leaving the valley far below. Before long, the view disappears as we enter thick cloud. At the pass we drive to a little pavilion, where we stop for the customary tea and biscuits, both of which are served immediately. We look at calendars for 1986, which are on sale, as well as a tourist itinerary and a national newspaper printed in English. One of the articles is about the Bhutanese script.

We leave after a short while and are back in Thimphu within an hour. We stop in the main street at the bookshop, which some members of our group want to visit. As the fellow behind the counter recognizes me from the previous day, I tell him that I have brought him more customers! As there is nothing that I want, I wander down a hitherto unexplored part of the main street, looking into the small shops, which I find quite fascinating. The town centre is lively now, with people of all descriptions walking up and down, talking animatedly, and traffic roaring up and down the road, spewing out filthy exhaust fumes. When I return to the bookshop, I find people congregating outside the entrance of a cinema next door, buying tickets. The place looks very tatty indeed. Also included in the same building is a small bookshop-cum-newsagent and a couple of very dirty-looking restaurants.

At last we board the bus and drive back to the hotel in the dark. At dinner time, Veronica sits with an American doctor who is travelling on his own; this morning she had gone with him to the market and then to an archery competition. We chat at our table, exchange addresses and then return to our rooms.

Our last full day in Bhutan and the start of our journey homewards. At breakfast this morning, the kitchen staff seem to be rather confused and forgetful. One couple, who had ordered omelettes before most of us had arrived, eventually get them last.

It is a dirty, wet morning – not ideal for our long journey back to Phuntsholing. We board the dreaded minibus and set off. Unfortunately, I end up sitting on a back seat, over the wheel; I know that this will spell trouble. Veronica sits beside me. I look at some tourist information that had been given to us and Veronica reads a book.

We drive down to the town centre, where one or two people use the post office, then leave Thimphu, passing Simtokha Dzong and heading along another part of the river valley. After a while the farmhouses begin to disappear as the valley narrows, and we climb upwards into a thick bank of cloud. From here on the journey becomes monotonous. Cramped in an uncomfortable position, I either try to read or look out of the window. By now Veronica is using her earphones and listening to music on her tape recorder. On and on we go, shaking and swaying as we round corner after corner.

Before midday we stop at a wayside restaurant. Inside we huddle around a stove in the middle of a room while we wait for a meal. This turns out to be quite good and

includes Tibetan *mo-mos*, which we have not eaten during this holiday. The taste of these little meat-filled dumplings reminds me of my stay in Ladakh the previous year.

We later resume our journey, which becomes more gruelling. After a while I begin to feel a little ill. I borrow Veronica's tape machine and listen to my new tapes of Bhutanese music, which prove to be very uninteresting.

After a while I lie down on the seat (Veronica has moved) and try to snooze. By this stage I am thoroughly fed up as I am uncomfortable and there is little to see outside. Consequently, after several hours of tedium, I am delighted to see the familiar checkpoint that signals our arrival at Phuntsholing. Soon afterwards we pass the Kharbandi monastery and drive into the grounds of our hotel. We are all glad to stagger out of the cramped minibus.

In the foyer we have afternoon tea, surrender our passports and go to our rooms. I immediately throw off my clothes and treat myself to a welcome hot shower. I trim my beard, write up my diary and rest. I join most of the others for dinner and sit with Veronica and Philip, whose wife Pat is unwell. After Veronica leaves us, Philip and I continue conversing. We finally say goodnight and repair to bed for our last night in Bhutan.

By seven o'clock the following morning we have left our luggage outside our bedroom doors and are having breakfast. Outside it is dark and still bucketing rain – not a particularly good day on which to leave the country. We all have mixed views on our stay here; mine range from exhilaration to downright disappointment. I certainly feel that the country is not as exotic or as exclusive as it had been made out to be. Both Veronica and I have concluded that we enjoyed Ladakh more than Bhutan.

Half an hour later, Kipju arrives in the minibus with a young customs official, who makes a cursory check of our luggage. The reason for this, I believe, is to make sure that we are not taking any valuable antiques out of the country. We set off soon afterwards, drive down to the town centre, stop at the oriental gate to check something with the border authorities, and drive into India. Here we stop again and run into the small customs building, where our passports are stamped, checked against a list, and returned to us.

Now begins the tedious drive in the pouring rain back to Bagdogra. At least we can see something through the windows today, but not much of interest. Unfortunate women huddle under huge black umbrellas as they work in the tea plantations. Dark Indian faces scowl or stare blankly at us as we whizz past. India in the rain is a very miserable sight indeed. After a long and uninteresting journey, which at one stage is interrupted by an accident ahead, we finally reach Bagdogra airport at around midday. We thank Kipju and give him and the driver tips; when our luggage and tickets have been organized, we shake hands with him heartily and say goodbye. He has been an excellent guide, and his courtesy and kindness have been exemplary. When he leaves, all our connections with Bhutan effectively disappear.

After a very long wait, our flight to Delhi via Patna finally takes off late in the afternoon. An incident at Patna delays our next flight and at last we leave for Delhi. By the time we arrive at the old airport, I feel quite unwell. We then drive to the Siddharth Hotel, stopping at another hotel en route to drop off John and Veronica, who are not flying to London with us. We spend just a short time in the hotel and

leave in the small hours of the following morning for the new international airport. Our flight brings us to Frankfurt, where the weather is hot and sunny. From here we travel to London on a Pan Am flight. Because I still feel poorly, I eat nothing – just as well, for many of the others complain that the food is appalling. When the stewardess thanks us for flying with Pan Am, and hopes that we have enjoyed the service, there are cries of ‘rubbish!’ from members of our group. Clearly some members of the staff are somewhat embarrassed.

At Heathrow I bid farewell to my companions, change terminals and catch my flight to Dublin. As I have requested a non-smoking seat and because there are none left, I am upgraded to first class. I now find myself in a separate compartment, in the company of smartly-dressed businessmen. Here the service is excellent; I could enjoy a snack of fresh salmon and other delicacies, washed down with wine or champagne, but because I feel sick, I dare not eat anything. Soon we are flying over Dublin and, in no time at all, the plane touches down. I am delighted to be home once again.

Less than two weeks later I am checked by a chiropodist, who informs me that I have damaged the cartilage in my right knee. He gives the knee and the surrounding area a thorough massage, a few twists, then a couple of good pulls. Before I leave he tells me how to massage it myself. In time it heals. I have finally learned my lesson – no more treks.