

FLAVOURS OF BHUTAN

Bhutan is a majestic contradiction. Shrouded in a blanket of mountains, famous for its stunning monasteries and dzongs, it's still relatively inaccessible to travellers. But with a little effort, those who do visit, can find authentic street food sitting comfortably alongside a range of hotels that are as stunning as the scenery

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL





Opposite page: delivering service and tradition in style at Amankora Gangtey. This page: the view from the lodge over misty Phobjikha Valley



‘Until the 1960s there were no roads, let alone airports, and the influx of outside influences has been

Clockwise from top left: the Amankora Gangtey dining room; luxury style in the resort; winter light pours in through the large windows; modern comforts abound; the lodge is surrounded by potato farms



Winter sunshine in the Himalayas comes as a surprise to most people. Bhutan is fringed by snow-capped mountains to the north, where it borders Tibetan China and sub-tropical lowland jungles to the south, where it meets India.

What lies in the middle is green and warm, even through the winter months. A single-lane highway threads itself east-west across these middle elevations, connecting high mountain passes and the fortresses of former kingdoms.

For the people of this land, reverence for their royal family and the integration of Buddhism into every aspect of daily life and governance lies at the heart of happiness. Images of the king and queen adorn every shop, every home and every car.

Happiness itself is also something to be measured and monitored, with the fourth King of Bhutan stating, in the 1970s, that ‘Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product’. As a result, today the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index plays a key role in shaping the country.

Some aspects of the country can’t be shaped however, and that’s the landscape. Towns and villages cling to the edges of steep ravines out of necessity rather than choice – in short, most of Bhutan is mountains. There are only four airports, again down to geography rather than any form of choice.

Take the town of Paro, in the western central region of Bhutan, it is home to little more than 11,000 people but has an airport simply because it is the only valley for 500 miles – in any direction – that is long enough and wide enough to land an Airbus. Air travel is a comparatively recent addition to the landscape. Until the 1960s there were no roads, let alone airports, and the influx of outside influences has been carefully filtered ever since. Its borders opened in the 1970s, and visitors cautiously began arriving at this Himalayan Buddhist kingdom, knowing little of what to expect. This, in part, was down to the monks being the only literate ones in the kingdom until well into the 20th century and, with their works often lost in the shrouds of mythology and mysticism, few solid lines can be found tracing the actual timeline of history.

And so now we have Bhutan in 2020, a land of not even a million people still waiting for most of us to give it a chance.

Many will have been already been captivated by its most famous monument, perhaps without realising that it was in Bhutan. Tiger’s Nest, or *Paro Taktsang*, is a sacred temple in the Paro valley that defies the laws of gravity, not to mention building construction, by



cautiously filtered ever since. With a population of only 800,000, Bhutan is still virtually unknown to many'

Clockwise from top left: timber and stone architecture at Amankora Gangtey; the redstart is a common sight in the Himalayas; soba noodles with scallops and shiitake mushrooms at Amankora Paro; a typically warm welcome at the lodge; Drukgyal Dzong, which is surrounded by pine trees and rice terraces

Travel information

Bhutan lies between Tibet to the north, Nepal to the east and the Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim to the south. The time is 6 hours ahead of GMT. The currency is the Bhutanese ngultrum (BTN), which is pegged to the Indian Rupee at a rate of one for one. In February and March the average high temperature is 27C and the average low is 14C.

There is a minimum daily spend for travellers in Bhutan, although luxury stays will require an additional top-up above the mandated minimum. A portion of your daily travel budget is put directly into an education fund for young Bhutanese.

Entry to Bhutan can only be arranged with the help of a local tour operator. The local experts at Bhutan Scenic Tours will organise your visa and book all accommodation and travel for your visit, including guides and transport. bhutanscenictours.com

GETTING THERE

Druk Air (Royal Bhutan Airlines) operate flights into Paro from Singapore, Delhi, Kathmandu and Bangkok. Your baggage can be checked through with your international connection from the UK. drukair.com.bt

RESOURCES

The Tourism Council of Bhutan is the country's official travel and tourism board. It's website is full of advice to help plan your trip. tourism.gov.bt

FURTHER READING

Married to Bhutan by Linda Leaming (Hay House, £13) delves headfirst into the culture of Bhutan, exploring how the character of a country can change a person, for the better.





'Momos are the dumplings of the Himalayas, made by hand from wheat dough stuffed with vegetables or meat. Locals have them as a quick lunch or take them home for a lazy dinner when they don't want to cook'

clinging to a mountain side in such a way that you expect to come crashing down at any moment.

This snapshot, with a backdrop of majestic Himalayan scenery, should be enough to inspire, but when coupled with the intrigue of Buddhism and the tales of Bhutanese mythology – such as that of Druk, the Thunder Dragon that adorns their flag – then this kingdom should be on discerning travellers' lists. And then you have the food.

If anything has a daily impact on that happiness scale for locals, then it is spice – a defining factor in local gastronomy. And yet, Bhutan would once hide their spicy traditions from visitors, fearing it would be too much for delicate palates, and instead they became wedded to blandness, with three-star hotels serving up one-star meals. Flavourless, characterless dishes became the norm.

Fine dining was attempted by a handful of restaurants in the capital, Thimphu – in the country's western interior, east of Paro –

but these blind experiments predictably failed, with tragic results. It turns out what the Bhutanese do best is Bhutanese cuisine and now, at last, the pots and pans are bubbling with regional dishes destined for the plates of travellers.

Getting a taste of the local dishes, at street stalls or at the better five-star hotels, is definitely the best way to enjoy travel in Bhutan.

Paro, with its wide-open rice terraces, has the produce on its doorstep and, with Tiger's Nest clinging to a nearby cliff-face, is the most obvious place to first sample local delicacies.

The streets of downtown Paro are a blend of small grocery stores selling imported snack foods, clothing and a handful of glittering souvenir shops overstocked with carved masks and fridge magnets. But, ask a local, and you'll get directed to the edge of town, where knowing taxi drivers gather on their downtime. They're here for Sushila Restaurant, home of the best *momos* in —————>>

Clockwise from top left:
archery is Bhutan's national sport; Amankora Paro;
Gangtey Monastery in Phobjikha Valley



Clockwise from top left: Como Uma; one of the hotel team; Gangtey Lodge's chilli-cheese; apple juice; first light in Paro; Sushila's momos; Amankora Paro chic; Gangtey Lodge; dining at Amankora Gangtey; local flavours at Gangtey Lodge; Como Uma; Gangtey Lodge; breakfast at Amankora Gangtey



Where to stay

Amankora Paro The design-led Amankora lodges represent the most exclusive accommodation standard in Bhutan. Architectural flair is sympathetic to the local surrounds, and the level of service matches the high standard of comfort. Along with the Paro outpost, lodges can be found in Thimphu, Gangtey, Punakha and Bumthang. Doubles from £1,375 including meals, wine, transfers and visas. *Drukgyal Dzong, Chuyul Paro, 00 975 233 1333, aman.com*

Como Uma Punakha Part of the Como group, this five-star hotel is located in an isolated valley with spectacular views over rice terraces, with easy access to the Punakha Dzong, just 10km down the road. Doubles from £375. *Botokha Kabesa, Punakha, 00 975 258 4688, comohotels.com*

Dewachen Hotel and Spa Affordable but very comfortable, the rooms at Dewachen are generous and warm, although service can be a little hit and miss. Located at the far end of Phobjikha Valley, it caters for groups of travellers from all over the world. Doubles from £95. *Phobjikha Valley, 00 975 1716 2204, hoteldewachen.com*

Gangtey Lodge Bhutanese-owned five-star lodge that discreetly blends into the countryside and offers guests a warm welcome. Generous rooms and excellent dining options less than 2km from the beautiful Gangtey Monastery. Skilful direction in the kitchen ensures excellent dining. Doubles from £420, on a full-board basis. *Gangtey, Phobjikha Valley, 00 975 234 0943, gangteylodge.com*

Nemjo Heritage Lodge Modest in size but generous on tradition – think comfortable armchairs, old farm implements and traditional woodwork and paintings scattered around the cosy rooms – this converted home with a pretty garden offers a central location, just 1.6km from downtown Paro, on the banks of the Paro River. Rich in Bhutanese style, it offers guests an exceptionally high degree of customised, professional and friendly service. Doubles from £190. *Nemjo, Paro, 00 975 827 1983, bhutanlodges.com*

Taj Tashi Thimphu With its fusion architecture, and its great location, tucked away in the very heart of Thimphu, this hotel offers a luxury hotel experience within walking distance of city attractions, and is just a stone's throw from the National Textile Museum. Doubles from £345. *Samten Lam, Chubachu, Thimphu, 00 975 233 6699, taj.tajhotels.com*



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: dried chillies; tomatoes and onion; chilli powder; Paro Dzong; Raven Restaurant's chicken curry; chayote squash; a Lobesa café lunch; Khuruthang vegetable market; strips of aubergine drying; market vegetables; Phobjikha Valley children

Bhutan. Momos are hand-made dumplings of the Himalayas, made from wheat dough stuffed with vegetables or meat, before being steam-cooked. Locals have them as a quick lunch or take them home for a lazy dinner when they don't want to cook.

Sushila's is to Bhutanese fast food what Tiger's Nest is to Himalayan temples, only easier to reach. The eponymous Sushila quietly works at the back of the kitchen and lets her team of young girls handle the chaos of the lunch rush. The bench seats here are roughly the right height for a ten-year old and less than 2m in length, yet entire families pack themselves in. This tiny space is always full.

On any given day she prepares two or three momo varieties, with

cheese, vegetable, beef and chicken getting high rotation. The momos come with a bowl of broth and as much spicy chilli as even the most hardened spice fans can tolerate. The tangy bite of Bhutanese chilli hits the mouth a little differently to its Asian siblings – adapting to Thai chilli won't necessarily offer any tolerance to the Bhutanese varieties. Chilli sauce for momos is a blend of chilli powder, vegetable oil and, sometimes, cheese to smooth out the heat. But despite the cheese's efforts, there's no reward, as the chilli flavour always wins, cutting through the fatty beef and onions that fill each dumpling.

A list of other quick lunch options is also offered: —————>>

'What really brings the taxi drivers in is bathu, a traditional buttery soup thickened with droplets of hand-pinched pasta and flavoured with yak jerky and flower pepper, known locally as "tingay"'



Above, from left: preparing festival rice; tingay at Khuruthang vegetable market; devotees in Thimphu; bitter gourds

Where to eat

Drubchhu Café Located just after the turn off towards Punakha, this is a small tea room that serves waffles and ice cream, in case you need a break from chilli and rice. Drubchhu is rather a low-end resort but the café is open to non-residents and has great views of the surrounding rice terraces. From £6. *Drubchhu Resort, Punakha, 00 975 237 6237, drubchhu.com*

Sushila Restaurant Not far from the Paro farmers' market, local taxi drivers hang out in numbers and order their lunch from Sushila. Most days Sushila serves buffalo momos, the crowd-pleaser, packed with onion and cabbage inside large pastry folds. Cheese and potato momos are another favourite – be sure to try them if they're available. A full menu of curries, rice and chilli dishes are also on the boards all day long. From £2 for a momo. *Lower Taxi Parking, Paro, 00 975 7721 0408*

Raven Restaurant Come here for excellent chicken curry and classic Bhutanese dishes laced with long chillies. It's cheap and cheerful and easy to find, just upstairs near the taxi stand in downtown Punakha. Deep-fried samosa and 'chilli chop' are also popular dishes with the regulars here. From £8. *Khuruthang, Punakha, 00 975 1737 6745*

Karma's Coffee This was the first coffee chop to open in Bhutan and it's still considered the best. Karma gained his exemplary barista skills in Melbourne, Australia, and his upstairs café, neatly tucked away from street, serves up light meals and freshly baked cakes in a calm and welcoming atmosphere. From £5 for coffee and a snack. *Phendey Lam, Thimphu, 00 975 1718 1920*

Swiss Restaurant Tshering and Choki Maurer named this eatery after the Swiss Guesthouse in Bumthang where they spent decades refining their hospitality. Despite the name, the menu offers an excellent introduction to Bhutanese dining – just ask Tshering to dial down the chilli as required. From £10. *Dondrup Lam, Thimphu, 00 975 1711 1926*

Sherab Dema Farmhouse A short drive from the township of Jakar, in Bumthang Valley, chef Sherab and her family operate a private dining experience for travellers, with a roster of dishes built on the buckwheat noodles and pancakes that are the foundation of Bumthang cuisine. They prepare a feast for their guests, covering a wide range of traditional dishes and serving way too much food for even the hungriest of diners. From £12. *Jambay Lhakhang, Jakar, Bumthang, 00 975 1772 3673*





'Chilli-cheese (*ema datshi*) is the national dish and is mandatory with every meal. Whole dried chillies are cooked up in water and cheese curd to make a spicy mix that is used to add flavour to any dish'





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: study time at Eutok Monastery, Paro Valley; the 17th-century architecture of Gangtey Monastery; modern monks in Paro Dzong; novice monks gather for a lunch of rice and chillies. This page, clockwise from top left: prayer wheels at Gangtey Monastery; young monks at Eutok Monastery; masked dances in Bumthang



chicken curry, fried rice, beef noodles and savoury pastries.

The taxi drivers are happy to queue for *bathu*, a traditional buttery soup thickened with pasta-like dumplings and flavoured with yak jerky and flower pepper. The local word for this pepper is 'tingay', which sounds as it tastes, with your lips tingling, before numbing.

Together with the capital Thimphu, Paro is the business-end of Bhutan, closest to the airport and the road to India. While Thimphu is certainly worth space for on any itinerary – especially Tashichho Dzong – head north-east from here, deeper into Bhutan, through the high pass of Dochula to take in Punakha Dzong, a palace and monastery dating back to the 17th century.

En route, you'll find the town of Khuruthang, little more than a truck stop and a taxi rank, but home to a Saturday farmers' market that draws people from all over the valley and from distant mountains as far away as Laya Gasa – the highest settlement in Bhutan, in the far north. Everyone makes a stop here for the locally famous chicken curry at Raven Restaurant.

The curry embraces the Nepalese influences from the south of the country under the skilled hands of chef Bhim Maya Rai. Bhim's is a fresh style of curry rather than thick and heavy with cream. Ginger, onion and coriander stalks elevate the curry base and the chicken is slow-cooked until the spices have permeated the meat, then it's finished with fresh coriander leaves. It's served with lentil soup, white rice and a side of braised vegetables.

The ingredients will have come from the market, bringing together a wide range of ethnic groups from either end of Bhutan. Traders have their sources, with tropical fruits such as pineapple and bananas found here, even in winter, alongside the ubiquitous veggies such as aubergine, bitter gourd and tubers.

Yak herders come down from the mountains to sell their fungi, cheese and sometimes the meat as well. Meat and the Bhutanese are awkward bedfellows. With the official line being no animals should ever be killed for meat, determined locals do find ways of getting around it. Stories abound of yaks being taken for —>>

Food glossary

Azezy A combination of fresh or dried chilli, coriander and red onion mixed into a salsa. Every kitchen makes this to their own recipe

Bathu Creamy soup enriched with wheat pasta and dried buffalo or yak meat. Bhutanese version of the Tibetan *thukpa*

Chilli chop Large whole chilli, battered and deep-fried

Chugo Rock-hard yak cheese

Dollay Very small round little chillies that even many Bhutanese people consider too hot to include in recipes

Ema datshi Bhutan's national dish. Consisting of large chillies cooked in a cheese sauce, it is served with every meal to add heat and flavour

Khule Buckwheat pancakes

Phin Pork cubes cooked with vermicelli

Putu Buckwheat noodles

Momos Dumplings filled with either cheese and onion or minced buffalo meat, wrapped in pastry and then steamed

Shabaley Bready pastry filled with minced beef and onions, then fried

Shakam datshi Dried beef jerky cooked in creamy cheese with chilli

Yete The dried flesh of a large sea snail, rubbery lumps of which are used to flavour dishes such as thieboudienne





‘The Como Uma hotel’s leans on international influences but Bhutanese elements are always spliced in, such as fresh cheese curd salad with tomatoes and onion, or a Cosmopolitan cocktail with pomegranates and rosemary’

perilous cliffside walks and having an ‘accident’, just in time for a festival. Even monks are allegedly not unknown to partake in such questionable acts as startling a goat that happens to be near the edge of a very steep mountain.

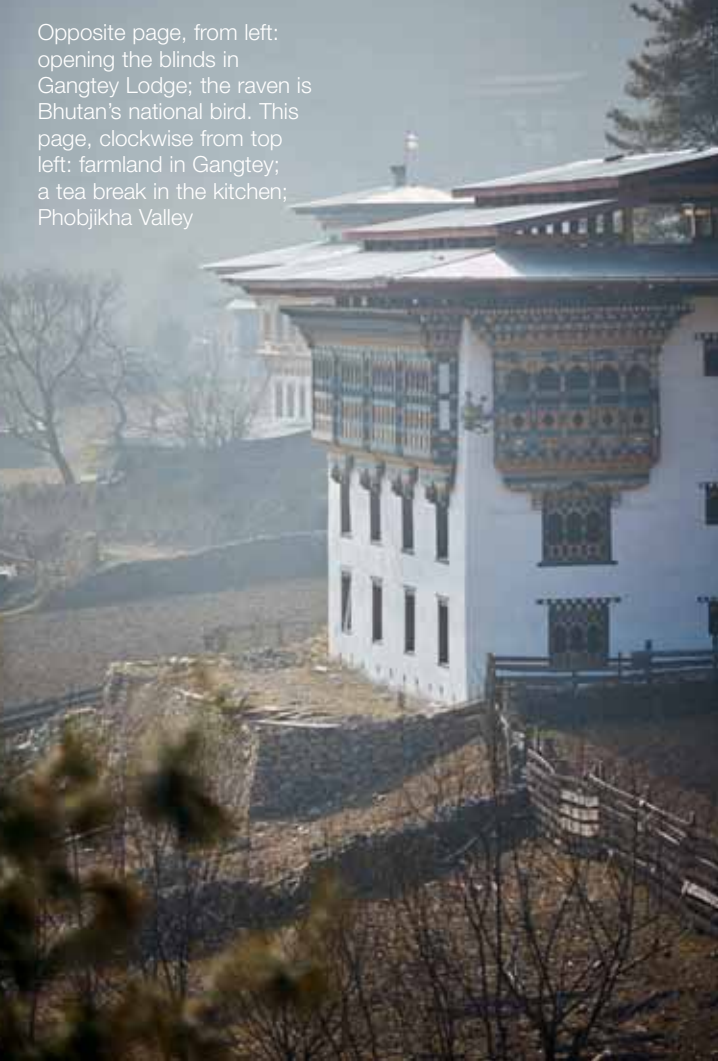
Either way, local yak meat is rare, and at this market, if you do find it then it’s in the form of sun-dried strips that can be stored and then revived in the cold months for a stew. Other meats you eat in Bhutan, such as the chicken in Raven’s curry, will more than likely have been imported from India.

Local dairy isn’t a problem. Yak butter and cheese are still popular in the Bhutanese diet but over the last decades dairy cows have become far more common in villages. Cows are more docile and tolerate lower altitudes better than yaks, and the milk is fatty enough to make curds for cooking up with chilli. Chilli-cheese (*ema datshi*) is the national dish and is mandatory with every meal. Whole dried chillies are cooked up in water and cheese curd to make a spicy mix that adds flavour to any dish. They eat a lot of rice in Bhutan, but only when there’s plenty of chilli-cheese on top to make it delicious.

Other staples of the market include parcels of yeast wrapped in fern leaves, which are used when fermenting rice, and grains to make local brews of *bangchang*. It’s a little bit rice wine and a little bit beer and more than a little bit rough around the edges. It turns up at festivals where even monks never say no to a glass.

Punakha Dzong, located at the confluence of two powerful rivers, is the shining jewel of the region and the winter home for Bhutan’s most revered Buddhist leaders. Their annual festival usually takes place in February and marks the fast-approaching spring and the departure of the lamas, who return to their duties in Thimphu for the warmer seasons. The monks perform dances to chase away the evil spirits and invoke the power of their deities. So physically demanding are the performances, the —————>>

Opposite page, from left:
opening the blinds in
Gangtey Lodge; the raven is
Bhutan's national bird. This
page, clockwise from top
left: farmland in Gangtey;
a tea break in the kitchen;
Phobjikha Valley





‘Spending nights in mud brick-clad luxury, walking to a towering 17th-century fortress and then popping into town for a momo and chilli lunch – these are the things that make Bhutan unique’

monks prepare months in advance for the extraordinary feats they demonstrate.

Those coming to the festival aren't spoilt for accommodation options, but Como Uma is a good one, located not far from the charming *chorten* (Buddhist shrine) of Khamsum Yulley in a tranquil section of the valley and a short drive from Punakha Dzong.

Size-wise, rooms are a touch on the intimate side, but the architecture and kitchen elevate Como Uma to five-star status. The hotel's menu may lean heavily on international influences but Bhutanese elements are always spiced in, such as fresh cheese curd salad with tomatoes and onion, or a Cosmopolitan cocktail given a local makeover with pomegranates and rosemary.

The developing nature of tourism in Bhutan means you can sleep in comparative luxury but still experience the most authentic of travel experiences. You can meet lamas in Punakha Dzong for a blessing, hike through rice terraces and villages to greet the dawn at Khamsum Yulley, and buy medicinal herbs from winter migrants in the markets of Khuruthang. The people of Bhutan are welcoming and warm, regardless of who you are. They don't care about how much the hotel room you slept in last night cost; they care only about the smile you share.

Further east again, and the journey from Punakha to Phobjikha Valley takes around four hours, but the views you witness are second to none as the terrain transforms from broad-leaf forests to mountains covered with rhododendrons. Catch it at the right time of year and the slopes are massed in hues of red, pink and white. Where the big trees start to thin out is also where the air gets thinner and the alpine flowers flourish. The high-pass of Yotong La is just over 3,050m in elevation, from where the road dips down into Phobjikha Valley and into the village of Gangtey. Most places to stay in Phobjikha are pretty basic but there are a few options that allow you to enjoy a little luxury without going short on local influences.

In Gangtey you'll find Amankora Gangtey, the kind of higher-end lodge that will happily serve a plate of momos alongside a 2015 riesling from Alsace. Which, incidentally, works well, as the hint of sweetness from the wine balances nicely with the chef's favourite chilli sauce. Sha Bahadur Pradhan is that chef, and he pulls into the menu a special recipe from his mother's village in the south of

Bhutan. Katikey Village Spiced Chicken features his top-secret umami-rich mix based on roasted vegetable seeds, ginger and mustard that gets ground into a powdery rub. The chicken is grilled and served with rice and cauliflower for a simple but hearty dinner.

Gangtey sits at an elevation just below 3,050m, which is low enough to get good sunshine in winter but just high enough for the yaks to enjoy some thin air. The menu at Amankora gives a nod to their seasonal guests by adding yak carpaccio, ravioli and sausage. Sha, it seems, has a good source for yak meat. And he's fortunate as it is considered by the Bhutanese to be something of a superfood with the animals spending their lives grazing on alpine meadows abundant in medicinal herbs, whose healing properties have been revered for centuries.

Sha suggests we put the wine aside for the yak sausage and, instead, pair it with a sparkling local apple juice. Himalayan apples hold their freshness for months in the cool winter air and so the juice is richly dark with an undercurrent of caramel.

If you have more than a week in Bhutan, you should go further east still, taking the highway to Trongsa and Bumthang into central Bhutan, deep into the heart of buckwheat fields. Noodles and pancakes are staples for local Bhutanese in Bumthang, replacing rice as the main source of carbohydrate. Few travellers make time to venture this far into the country, which is certainly their loss.

Things are changing in Bhutan, with more acceptable places to stay than ever before, but the pace isn't out of sync with the relaxed and easy-going nature of the Bhutanese people. The transformation is proving to be gentle and gradual. There are no overnight sensations here – this isn't Dubai.

People are catching on to Bhutan, but it's a country proud of its independence, and a few more Airbuses arriving in Paro won't change that. It's a land of great contrasts. Spending nights in mud brick-clad luxury, walking to a towering 17th-century fortress and then popping into town for a momo and chilli lunch – these are the things that make Bhutan unique. The best of Himalayan hospitality without skipping on the chilli sauce. □

Ewen Bell travelled to Bhutan with the support of the Tourism Council of Bhutan, Druk Air and Bhutan Scenic Tours.

Opposite page, from left: spiritual dances in Bumthang; a member of the Gangtey Lodge team; a Phobjikha Valley farming village; morning prayers. This page: locals gather in Tang Valley to sing before the resident monks perform their sacred dances

