

QUIET MOMENTS WITH A THUNDER DRAGON

“You don’t have to go chasing every photograph in Bhutan; just sit patiently and the best ones will come to you”

The people of Bhutan refer to their nation as the land of the Thunder Dragon, a title that evokes images of fire breathing monsters and villagers fleeing from destruction. The reality is something far more peaceful. Words and images by **Ewen Bell**



Landlocked and culturally independent, the Bhutanese kingdom has only just begun to open up to the forces of globalisation, having kept out the British, Tibetan and other influences for centuries. That purity of culture is what draws photographers: the promise of chance meetings with monks and the hope of getting away from the tourist trail.

This is a sparsely populated nation with dramatic mountains and a very poor road network. It takes time to get around, and most people aren’t in much of a hurry anyway. The tourist trail, however, does dominate the journey as you wander along the east-west highway, as most travellers come in search of the colourful festivals. The narrow and windy roads are busy with small vans and cars heading to, or returning from, a traditional performance at a temple. These are deeply spiritual events that are intended to drive away the evil spirits and bring good luck to the community, but the fascination of travellers is something of a bonus.

Big temples closest to Paro International Airport are the ones that receive the maximum influx of westerners and their cameras. As you head east into Central Bhutan, and the province of Bumthang, the density of photographers gets a little better. But any festival will invariably have been “discovered” and you will have to share the experience with other western travellers. The dancing monks and their intense displays are highlights of any visit to Bhutan, but as photographers it’s often the quiet moments that are the most memorable.

Tigers and caves

Finding a little peaceful solitude is a key theme to culture in Bhutan. Divine gurus, mad monks and mythical tigers have all added to the folklore of the country, creatures in search of solitude that usually find them in the most inconvenient of places. The Tiger’s Nest is an icon of Buddhism in Bhutan, a collection of temples that cling to the cliffs as a symbol of isolation and »

» IMAGES

DRAGON IN FULL FLIGHT
» (ABOVE) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 70-200mm f/2.8 lens; 1/1000sec; f/2.8; ISO 500

EWEN IN BHUTAN
» (FAR LEFT) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 50mm f/1.2 lens; 1/320sec; f/2.8; ISO 1600



“Patience is a virtue, whether seeking enlightenment or just seeking the light”

down a trail, across a suspension bridge and then climbed up again to reach the village. We'd visited the temple the day before and met some of the residents as they prepared a feast for the monks. All that dancing and performance requires a nourishing meal at the completion.

Young girls had spent the previous day cooking rice and typically spicy Bhutanese dishes. This is a lovely country for photography but it will never be a culinary destination, that much is certain. We had watched the women practice their songs, and photographed them inside the kitchen as light streamed in through slatted windows. We took our time and soaked up the calm surrounds of the temple, and the monks showed their appreciation for our dedication by making us cups of tea.

Dancing monks

Festival days are a little less relaxed in general. Early in the morning a few senior monks had time to kill and posed with their masks, but as the day moved on they had a schedule to worry about and performances to offer. Ruby robed men of wisdom would disappear behind a door and then minutes later they were replaced with vibrant gowns and garish masks. »



contemplation. It's a tough walk uphill for several hours to reach the lair, a trek completed by hundreds of travellers every day.

Peaceful moments come not from running far from the crowds, but from sitting still with your own company. The best advice I can give anyone seeking to improve their travel photography is to “Go Slow”... and coming to a complete stop is not a bad idea either.

At a modest festival in Bumthang I found myself going slower than normal, thanks to a broken toe. The walk from road to village was all I could manage, having stumbled



» IMAGES

DRAGONS IN WAITING

» (FAR LEFT, TOP) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 70-200mm f/2.8 lens; 1/1000sec; f/2.8; ISO 320

BOY WITH DRUM

» (FAR LEFT, MID) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 24mm f/1.4 lens; 1/100sec; f/2.0; ISO 800

GIRL IN A WINDOW

» (FAR LEFT, BOTTOM) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 70-200mm f/2.8 lens; 1/640sec; f/2.8; ISO 400

GIRLS IN A DOORWAY

» (THIS PAGE) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 50mm f/1.2 lens; 1/500sec; f/2.0; ISO 400

CAPTURING THE LIGHT

» (BELOW) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 24mm f/1.4 lens; 1/160sec; f/2.0; ISO 1600



Tours

Photography for Travellers

Ewen Bell leads a photographic tour into Bhutan every year. Find out more about his "Go Slow" advice and inspiration for travel photography at photographyfortravellers.com



» IMAGES

LEAP AND SPIN

» (ABOVE) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 24mm f/1.4 lens; 1/1600sec; f/2.8; ISO 200

READY THE DRUMS

» (ABOVE RIGHT) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 70-200mm f/2.8 lens; 1/1250sec; f/2.8; ISO 800

HILLTOP TEMPLE

» (BELOW RIGHT) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 70-200mm f/2.8 lens; 1/320sec; f/2.8; ISO 200

SEEKING ENLIGHTENMENT

» (FAR RIGHT) Shot with Canon 1DMkIV; 70-200mm f/2.8 lens; 1/200sec; f/2.8; ISO 160

Young novices were involved in the event as well, mustering all their discipline to finish getting dressed up. Even monks in training are easily distracted by the desire to punch a classmate or steal their breakfast.

Overlooking the courtyard below, I spent my day watching the dances from above, sharing the view with novice monks around me. Unable to race about and chase my photos, I simply sat quietly and let the moments come to me. And they did. The joy and spirit of these young men is something you often don't discern while they're hiding behind a mask, but you see it in brilliant colour both before and after the dances. Not only are they rich in spirit but they're eager to share it.

After the festival I had a chance to see some photos from my fellow travellers. They too had captured some lovely scenes, with dancing in full flight and plenty of sunshine to work with. Everybody goes home with a unique account of Bhutan; no two photographers are the same. I'd sat on the wooden floorboards upstairs with a 24mm lens and a generous dose of ISO to shoot in the soft light. My friends had sat on the granite slabs, toting fast telephoto lenses and trying to compose a shot while the monks spun and leapt in every direction.

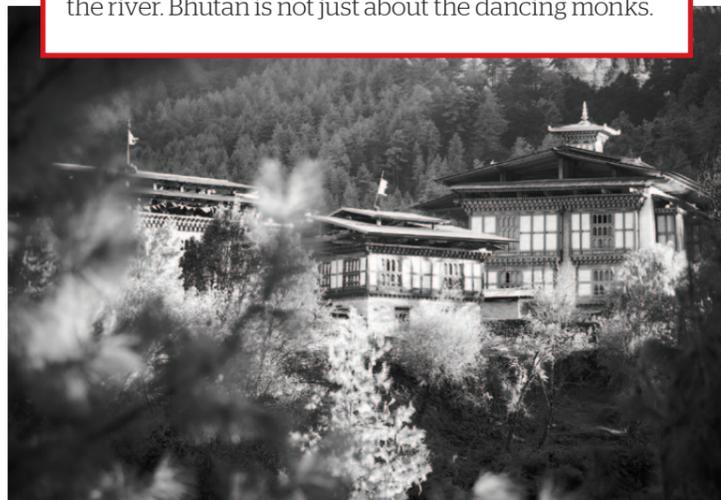
Earlier that morning this temple had more travellers than residents, but after lunch most visitors had moved on in search of another photo opportunity. We stayed put, had some local cooking, and rejoined the monks. Patience is a virtue, whether seeking enlightenment or just seeking the light. You don't have to go chasing every photograph in Bhutan; just sit patiently and the best ones will come to you.



Pro Tip

Road to somewhere

The main east-west highway that links Paro to Bumthang is a long drive indeed, full of bends and mountains. It's a scenic drive as well, with plenty of inspiration for stopping along the way: waterfalls hidden in valleys, mountain passes with views of the Himalayas and farming communities that cling to the steep hillsides. It's not a journey you want to rush. There are mountain ranges filled with quiet moments to be discovered here too, sometimes with a lazy yak or a massive Nepalese stupa placed at the curve of the river. Bhutan is not just about the dancing monks.



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For more of Ewen's adventures here and abroad, check out photographyfortravellers.com