

FARAWAY PLACES

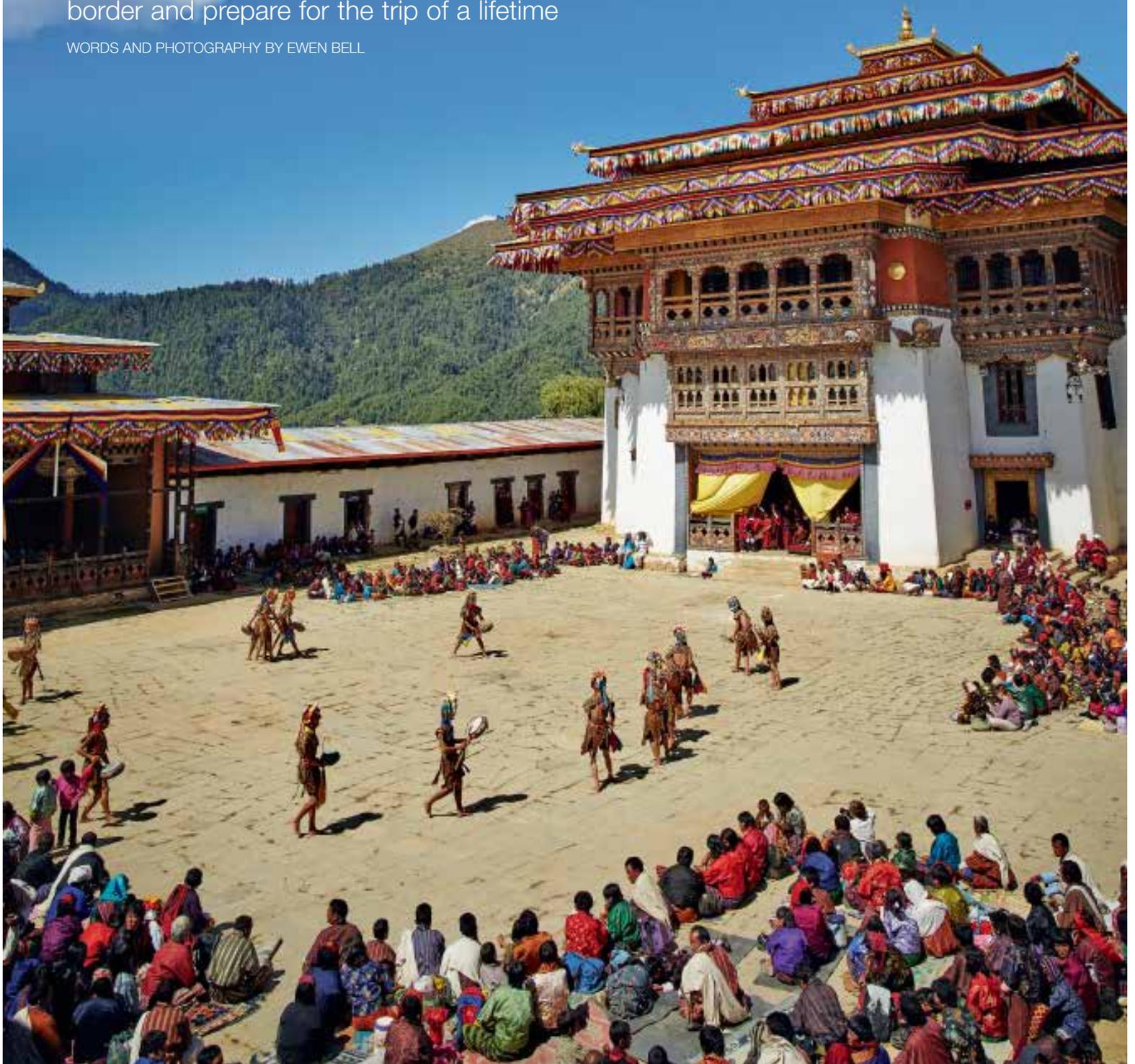
BHUTAN

HUNTING THE THUNDER DRAGON

Journey into the mysterious Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, where traditions are fiercely guarded and wealth is measured by happiness. Cross the border and prepare for the trip of a lifetime

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL

This page: celebrations commence in Phobjikha Valley at the Gangtey festival.
Opposite page: a reveller wears the mask of Raksha Lango, the ox-headed minister of the Lord of Judgement, who serves as a reminder to live a pious life







Left, from top: donning gowns inside Ngang Lhakhang monastery; monks in the courtyard of Trongsa Dzong. Opposite page, from top left: young Bhutanese at Gangtey *tshechu* (festival); women watch over proceedings; ceremonial dancers perform at the festival



On the wings of a raven, the distance between Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, and the central region of Bumthang is a mere 104km. The journey by road is considerably more. I'm opting for the slow route to an annual festival where monks perform spiritual dances that purify their temple and bring protection to the community. It's an epic pilgrimage not to be taken lightly.

To get there, I'm taking on the landscape of the Himalayas, along a narrow, bumpy highway that links east to west. There are few straight lines along the way, save the plentiful pine trees and beautiful local architecture. The road winds determinedly through fertile mountains and precipitous valleys that are often blocked by rockslides and landslips or washed away in sections by summer monsoons. It's as treacherous as it is spectacular.

Bhutan is a relatively young kingdom, filled with kindness and joy. It owes its cultural heritage to Tantric Buddhism triumphing over the barbarity of fiefdoms. This landlocked nation of just 750,000 people has been cautious about opening up to the outside world. It wasn't until 1974 that foreign visitors were granted access to the country.

The northern border of Bhutan is marked out by massive mountain peaks so high and remote that many remain

Travel information

Thimphu is the capital of Bhutan. Flights to Paro, an hour's drive away take around 3 hours from Bangkok, which is approximately 11.5 hours from London. Time is six hours ahead of GMT. Currency is the ngultrum. Entry to Bhutan can only be arranged with the help of a local tour operator. Experts at Bhutan Scenic Tours bhutanscenictours.com will organise your visa and book all your accommodation, meals and travel as well as acting as your guides. A portion of your daily travel budget is put directly into an education fund for young Bhutanese. Autumn and winter offer temperate day temperatures and dry weather. December and January are rich in blue skies. September and October offer warmer weather with occasional rain but midsummer is very wet.

GETTING THERE

British Airways flies several times a week from London Heathrow to Bangkok Suvarnabhumi from £780 return. ba.com

Drukair flies from Bangkok to Paro every day. drukair.com.bt

Thai Airways also operates daily services from London to Bangkok from £850 return. thairways.com

RESOURCES

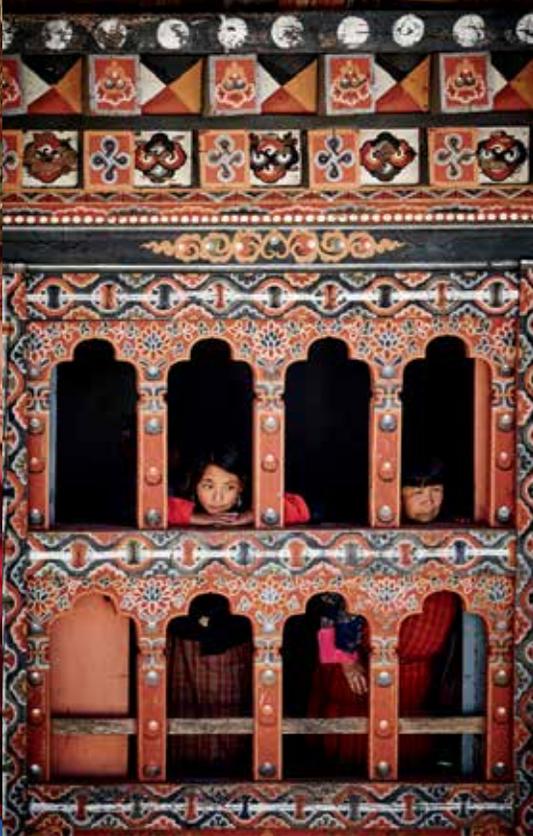
Tourism Council of Bhutan is the country's official travel and tourism board. Its website is full of advice to help plan your trip. tourism.gov.bt

FURTHER READING

Buttertea at Sunrise by Britta Das (Summersdale, £7.99) is a memoir about hardships and happiness in a land almost untouched by the West.

CARBON COUNTING

To offset your carbon emissions make a donation at climatecare.org and support environmental projects. Return flights from London to Paro via Bangkok produce 3.26 tonnes CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £24.47.



Below, from left: Jakar Dzong sits on a hilltop; ceremonies are awash with colour; Punakha Dzong is regarded as the country's most beautiful



Below, from left: traditional brightly coloured gowns; ready to take part in celebrations in Prakhar; participants wear masks for the event





Left: black-necked cranes fly through the Phobjikha Valley. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: a warming bowl of chilli; views from Hotel Dewachen; a potato farmer in Phobjikha Valley; families gather together in Prakhar

Where to eat

Most food is covered as part of your tour package, although meals in some of the large hotels can cost up to £40 extra

Chogyal Lhamo A quality lunch stop in the middle of Trongsa township. The family run restaurant serves tender homemade noodles in a tasty vegetable broth – finely chopped beef and some coriander flakes garnish the bowl, then chilli-rich *aezey* (salsa) rounds out the meal for some added heat. *Trongsa town centre*

Karma's Coffee This was the first coffee shop in Bhutan and it's still the best. Karma learnt his barista skills in Australia and his upstairs café offers light meals and cakes. Perfect for when you need a break from chilli and rice. *Phendey Lam, Thimphu, 00 975 1 718 1920*

Raven Restaurant Expect the likes of chicken curry and classic Bhutanese dishes laced with long chillies. It's easy to find near the taxi stand in downtown Punakha. Deep-fried samosas and *chilli chop* (battered chilli) are also popular with the locals. *Khuruthang, Punakha*

Sherab Dema Farmhouse Sherab and her family operate a private dining experience for travellers. They prepare buckwheat noodles and pancakes that are the foundation of Bumthang cuisine. The feasts cover a wide range of traditional dishes and there's way too much food – even for the hungriest of guests. *Bumthang*

Shushila Restaurant Not far from Paro farmers' market, taxi drivers hang out and order their *momos* (dumplings) from here. Most days there are buffalo momos, a crowd-pleaser packed with buffalo mince, onion and cabbage inside folds of pastry. Cheese and potato momos are another favourite. There are also curries, rice and chilli dishes. *Paro*

TNW Sweets Across the road from the Lobesa farmers' market, this little sweet shop sells classic Hindu treats. Its speciality is *ras malai*, prepared fresh every day. The delicate pillows of buffalo curd are drowned in thick sweetened milk. One serving is never enough. *Lobesa*

untainted by the footsteps of man. Yaks cope well with the thin mountain air and provide both clothing and food for the Bhutanese. Their high-fat milk is used to make a very rich butter, with the remaining whey collected to make *chugo*. By boiling the whey and skimming off the cheese, the *chugo* is set into little rectangles, strung together on a thread and dried in the sun until it's as hard as a rock. Biting it will break your teeth. To dissolve it you have to roll it around in your mouth for an hour or maybe longer.

Just an hour from the airport in Paro and home to 100,000 people, Thimphu is Bhutan's biggest city and the seat of government, royalty and trade. If they had enough flat terrain to build an airport here they would but there's barely enough flat land for its football pitch. The national stadium hosts marquee events such as royal weddings and archery competitions. Football is popular here but nailing a target set 145m away with bow in hand and quiver on back is the national sport and verges on an obsession.

Nearby, the farmers' market next to the Raidak River is rich in seasonal offerings such as yak carcasses and blood sausages prepared from their intestines. Sacks of rice are sold in hues ranging from brown to red. Wild mushrooms and fungi come in from forest villages and there's enough chilli to fill a palace. One section of the market is devoted to the raucously pungent aromas of *doma*, fermenting areca nut sold with betel leaf and powdered lime. It's a poor man's nicotine, euphorically stimulating yet addictive and toxic in equal parts. Locals chew on the mixture that turns blood-red and stains their mouth while probably doing even worse to their organs.

The route out of Thimphu takes us from a busy main street to a wooded country road in a few minutes. There is no suburban sprawl to escape here, simply a winding path that heads west through woodland and farmsteads. This section of road is excellent by Bhutanese standards, and my 

Below, from left: family life in Bhutan; fresh noodles in Trongsa; a stallholder sells textiles at Pele La; inspecting goods at a pop-up market







Opposite page, clockwise from top left: buckwheat noodles; making the staple ingredient; men arrive home; lunch at Sherab Dema Farmhouse; sunrise over Chimi Lhakhang; harvesting buckwheat; prayer flags across the 'Burning Lake' of Bumthang; local wildlife in Punhakha Valley; a farmer heads to market with his mustard greens; chillies dry out. This page, from top: Sherab prepares lunch; an array of her dishes; livestock roam the fields; children finish school for the day

driver warns me that only a little of the East-West Highway has been completed as part of recent upgrades.

It takes us an hour to reach Dochu La, the most visited mountain pass in the country. On a clear day the views of Himalayan peaks from this spot can extend all the way to the edge of Tibet. On a foggy day the twisted trunks of rhododendron trees and the lichen that hang from their bows are all that you can see.

It marks a milestone for trips heading deeper into Bhutan, where locals leave prayer flags. When someone you care about begins a journey, it's common for the Bhutanese to raise these flags inscribed with kind wishes, a prayer for protection that is repeated every time the wind lifts them. In my case, I have a guide who is a gentle giant with a kind spirit. I feel unfazed by anything the difficult passage ahead may present us with.

The highway cuts a path down from Dochula and into the fertile valley of Punakha. A modest truck stop on the highway called Lobesa is a pleasant surprise for local food. A marketplace sells fresh produce on one side and Bhutanese fast food on the other. Chilli chop and river fish are always on hand for immediate consumption while the buffalo momos take just ten

Where to stay

Como Uma Punakha A five-star hotel located in an isolated valley with breathtaking views of the iconic rice terraces, it retains easy access to the Punakha Dzong a little further down the road. The architectural style is complementary to the surrounding villages without compromising on sophistication. Doubles from £580. *Botokha Kabesa, Punakha, 00 975 2 584 688, comohotels.com*

Hotel Dewachen Easily the best hotel in Phobjikha Valley, expect large rooms with Bhutanese-style decor. Visitors come for the cranes and festivals at Gangtey Gonpa, not the cuisine. Morning views of the sunrise are simply incredible. Doubles from £46. *Phobjika, Wangdue Phodrang, 00 975 1 712 5311, dewachenhotel.com*

Swiss Guesthouse A quirky and charming small hotel set in an apple orchard overlooking the Jakar Valley. Rustic timber-panelled rooms are warmed in the cooler months with pot-belly stoves. The family that runs the show is the main attraction: warmer than a wood fire and offering homemade dinners every night. Doubles from £32. *Kharsumphe, Jakar, Chokor, Bumthang, 00 975 3 631 145, swissguesthouse.bt*

Taj Tashi Thimphu Decidedly ostentatious fusion architecture in the centre of Thimphu. Expect a luxury hotel experience. It's within walking distance of most of the city's attractions. Doubles from £480. *Samten Lam, Chubachu, 00 975 2 336 699, taj.tajhotels.com*

Zhiwa Ling Located towards the Tiger's Nest end of Paro Valley, Zhiwa Ling caters to high-end travel groups and corporate events. Interiors are heavily influenced by Bhutanese style. Food here has an international feel, although some local options are available. Doubles from £280. *Satsam Chorten, Paro, 00 975 8 271 277, zhiwaling.com*



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Left, from top:
sunrise over Jakar
Dzong; a monk at
Trongs Dzong; an
antique bell at the
monastery;
intricate facades in
Paro; ubiquitous
prayer candles

minutes to steam. A mixture of minced meat with onions, cabbage and coriander wrapped in pastry are the basis for a good momo in Bhutan. However, a side sauce made of ground chilli and onion is what makes a good momo great.

In late summer the rice fields of Punakha are heavy with golden grains. Farmers make a little extra money by turning their harvest into a crunchy snack. Rice is ground into a flour, mixed with water, flattened into sheets and fried in canola oil until the air between sheets expands to form a rectangular rice puff. They have a gritty texture from the coarse grinding and are best consumed with an ice-cold beer. The lady who sold me her rice puffs recommends Druk 11000, which she says is named so you know it's better than the imported Indian beer Hit 10000.

As we enter Punakha Valley, the narrow road passes a modest-looking town surrounded by rice terraces. Chimi is known throughout the country for its sacred power of fertility. The village temple, Chimi Lhakhang, was erected on a site chosen by Drukpa Kunley, a 15th-century monk known as the 'Divine Madman' who taught that the phallus is a source of power. As a result, phallic imagery adorns every home here and a brisk trade in carved wooden penises has been eagerly embraced by the rice farmers.

Placing an 8ft penis by the front door is one way to make your home stand out in the street but the effect is lost a little when all the neighbours are doing it too. A busload of Chinese tourists are audibly impressed by these bold artworks and are squealing with giggles as they shop for mementos.

Bhutanese women requiring divine assistance with fertility seek out help at Chimi Lhakhang, sometimes requiring multiple blessings before successfully conceiving. My guide makes a little joke at this point: 'If you want to be certain your wife gets pregnant, she can even spend the night at the temple. However, if you want to be sure that the baby is yours, maybe don't do that.'

Punakha Valley is close enough to Thimphu and Paro to make it an easy inclusion on short visits to Bhutan, and Punakha Dzong is one of the most elegant fortresses in all of Bhutan, dating back to the early 17th century. When locals talk about how old a dzong is, they will tell you when the site was first built and then tell you the last time it burnt down and had to be rebuilt.

Fire has been an enduring problem for the dzongs and temples. This is due to the prevalent use of butter lamps and flammable fabrics draped inside them. Any cloth that catches alight can quickly get out of control and their remote locations and limited access to water means it's not as simple as calling the fire brigade.

Only a fraction of travellers to Bhutan make it as far as Punakha, and even fewer continue any deeper into the heart of the country due to the difficult terrain. However, Buddhism teaches you to ignore the easy path in search of greater reward.

An essential stopover when driving to Bumthang is Phobjikha Valley, a high-altitude landscape filled with small villages and potato farms. Gangtey Gonpa, a remarkable monastery, sits on top of a hillock overlooking the valley. Every winter Phobjikha is visited by hundreds of migratory black-necked cranes that have become the focus of conservation movements in Bhutan. —————>



Clockwise from top left: a Buddhist nunnery in Paro; Zhiwa Ling hotel; rushing to prayer; a Bhutanese boy; at peace in Gangtey Gonpa







Clockwise from top left: jaw-dropping views of Tiger's Nest monastery; native birdlife; steamed momos; prayer flags are tied together; spicy local dishes; early morning mist over Punakha Dzong; cherry blossoms

Dasho Benji, founder of Bhutan's Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, tells me: 'Mostly the cranes are welcome and potato farmers have learnt to harvest their crop before the birds arrive so they can share the excitement of November's annual crane festival.'

If Phobjikha is a quiet moment in The Land of the Thunder Dragon, the town of Trongsa is like stepping inside the dragon's lair for a peek at the family album. My first glimpse comes about an hour before arriving, when you see the impressive walls of its dzong loom across the valley. The view suggests we will be there in minutes but the route turns down a side valley and away from our destination. The Thunder Dragon likes its visitors to work to find it.

In the 17th century a brief period of unity existed under the rule of Zhabdrung Rinpoche, which saw the dzongs constructed and Tantric Buddhism accepted. Dzongs are uniquely Bhutanese, combining spiritual and administrative objectives. Every region has one and no two in the country are the same.

At Trongsa Dzong there are two large timber gates at opposite ends of a square. In the past, all trade on the east to west trail would pass through the dzong, allowing the ruler to collect taxes in the form of rice or salt. A watchtower higher up the hill once strengthened the fortification of the dzong but it has now been turned into a museum with a fine collection of artefacts.

Until the Seventies you couldn't reach Trongsa by car, and I'm starting to regard it as a minor miracle that I have managed it myself. My driver has been exemplary in navigating our little van through conditions more suited to a four-wheel drive. For decades the narrow strip of tar running across Bhutan has offered a challenging drive on a good day and a pile of rocks or mud on a bad one. In the next few years upgrades to the highway will remove most of the bumps, protect against future landslides and add a few new bridges – a considerable improvement.

Our route out of Trongsa climbs upwards to clear another pass at Yotong La before rolling through the buckwheat fields of Chumey Valley and finally descending into Bumthang district and the town of Jakar. Bumthang is famed for the wild behaviour of its monks, strength of its local whiskey and fervour of its temple festivals. The architecture changes as you enter the valley, moving away from whitewashed walls to raw stone or earthen stucco





Clockwise from top left: chill-laden aezey; a grandmother sells her items; yeast parcels; the river runs past Punakha Dzong

finishes that reflect the warm tones of the land itself. Pine trees dominate the forests and cannabis plants run wild along rivers.

Buckwheat has been the staple of Bumthang for centuries, its purple and orange stalks painting patches of the landscape during summer and autumn. *Putu* (buckwheat noodles) and *khule* (buckwheat pancakes) are staple foods in the region, so we visit a local farmhouse that shares the cuisine with foreign travellers.

To make the noodles for lunch, our host Sherab Dema and her two daughters grind the buckwheat by hand then knead it with water and salt. Sherab sets up a wooden extruder, a basic tool that relies on her physical weight to force the dense dough into strands. The noodles are boiled briefly on the top of the stove then plunged into cold water. One of the girls fries up buckwheat pancakes and then they prepare a dozen other dishes, all spiced to suit the Bhutanese taste buds. *Ema datsi* (chilli cheese) is hot enough to gently melt your fork but it's bang-on for flavour.

With a wry smile, Sherab tells me she had to eat the pancakes three times a day as a child: 'The key is to use as much yak butter as possible to smooth out the buckwheat's bitter taste. Sometimes we get the sweet kind and we don't need so much butter then.'

Later, in Jambay Lhakhang, one of Bumthang's most sacred temples, we encounter a friendly archery competition. The men dance and sing old songs of victory each time their arrow is true.

Our next stop takes us back to Paro. Days of bracing for bumps along the highway are replaced by a pleasant 25-minute flight, thanks to the recently reopened airstrip in Bumthang.

The flight gives you a bird's eye view of Tiger's Nest monastery, known to locals as Taksang. It's an stirring prelude to one of Bhutan's most popular but difficult hikes.

In the 8th century the famed Guru Rinpoche is said to have ridden a flying tigress to a cave high in the granite outcrops before spending more than three years here in meditation. The Tiger's Nest temple

was built around it in the 17th century. Inside, I absorb the spiritual dedication of the Bhutanese and allow my breath to catch up.

Crowds typically start arriving on the higher sections of the vertiginous 6km trail in waves of exhaustion by 10am. You can ride a horse as far as the teahouse halfway up but from there you have to walk (or find your own flying tigress).

That seems to be the lesson with Buddhism in general and Bhutan, in particular: only the very best treasures are uncovered through hardship. If the roads here were any better than they are, the pristine mountains and Tantric temples would not offer such rewards. The greatest asset of the Bhutanese is their desire to retain the cultural charms and chasms that make them unique.

As you walk back down the hill, your lungs fill with oxygen again and gravity pulls you forward. There is an easy route back from the wilds of Bhutan but there are no easy paths to enlightenment. □

Food glossary

- Aezey** Fresh and dried chilli, coriander and red onion mixed into a salsa
- Bathu** Velvety soup enriched with wheat pasta and dried buffalo meat. A Tibetan version exists called *thukpa*
- Chilli chop** Battered and deep-fried whole chilli
- Chugo** Rock-hard yak cheese
- Ema datsi** The national dish of large chillies cooked in a cheese sauce, served with every meal to add heat and flavour
- Khule** Buckwheat pancakes
- Momos** Dumplings filled with either cheese and onion or minced buffalo meat, wrapped in pastry then steamed
- Phin** Pork cubes cooked with vermicelli
- Putu** Buckwheat noodles
- Shakam datsi** Dried beef jerky cooked in creamy cheese with chilli

