

Bhutan trip report – April and May 2013

By Peter Williams

This is a report about our trip to Bhutan. Bhutan is a small Himalayan kingdom about the size of Switzerland, to the east of Nepal. To the south lies India, and to the north lies China, so it is surrounded by the two most populous countries in the world. This is ironic given that its own population is only some 750,000 – about the same as Leeds. With one exception (litter), it is totally unspoiled by the outside world, and both the architecture and the scenery must be some of the most beautiful in the world.

Our group

Our group comprised a mixed crowd of Europeans and antipodeans: Penny and me; Steve and Ann, with whom we have been on holidays in the past (and whom we first met on a Naturetrek trip to Spain); Sue, who used to fulfil my former role at Eversheds before I did; Kate from Sydney whom we met on our trip to the Sub-Antarctic Islands of New Zealand eighteen months ago; Gerard from Auckland whom we met on the same trip; and Gerard's cousin Peter, who lives in Vancouver and who was the only person we did not know at the start of the holiday. The holiday was put together for us by Gerald, our tour guide friend from Belgium, who also accompanied us.

Our group also included two Bhutanese guides, Jambay and Sonam (knowledgeable about wildlife and culture respectively). Our bus driver was Dorji, an ex-army driver, who seemed to be able to cope brilliantly with other traffic, road works, potholes, rain, fog, darkness and everything else that the roads and the heavens threw at us.

The purpose of our trip was to see the landscape, animal and bird life and culture of Bhutan. Inevitably with a group in which there are keen birdwatchers, birding was a key part of the holiday, but we still managed to squeeze in visits to some dzongs as well. Unfortunately there was not enough time to walk to Bhutan's best known monastery, Tiger's Nest, perched high on a mountainside, although we did see it from the road from where the walk starts, hundreds of feet below.

A brief guide to Bhutan

Bhutan is a relatively wealthy country, and will become wealthier as more tourists visit, and as more dams are built so that more hydro-electricity can be generated for sale to Nepal and India. There is virtually no visible poverty and absolutely no hassling of westerners by beggars or hawkers, although there is still a great deal of manual labour in construction and farming which in the west has long been mechanised. However the people appear cheerful and well-fed and could not have been more friendly towards us. We saw some of the broadest smiles we have seen anywhere in the world in Bhutan, as we waved to everyone from our bus like royalty.

Until 1974, the country was virtually isolated from the outside world. Until then, few foreigners were allowed to visit. However, the current king's father, the fourth king, made the momentous decision to invite some foreign guests, and members of the press, to his coronation in 1974. That act launched tourism in Bhutan. At the start, there were annual limits on the number of tourists, but these no longer apply. Instead a lid is kept on demand by a relatively high minimum daily spend requirement – but as this includes food, accommodation, transport and the provision of guides, it is still good value for small groups like ours. The money that tourism brings in is said to represent an important part of Bhutan's income.

The official language of Bhutan is called Dzongkha, which uses the Tibetan script but is so different that Tibetans cannot understand it. Education takes place in English, and so

many people – particularly in the tourist industry – speak at least rudimentary English and often speak it fluently, as our two guides did. Signage is in English and Dzongkha. In different parts of the country, particularly the east, there are different languages and the Lonely Planet guidebook says that often the only language spoken in common between different parts of the country is English.

Bhutan is known for the importance it accords to the concept of gross national happiness (GNH), developed by the fourth king. This is not as simple as it sounds. It is not merely a measure of how happy people are. Instead it is a system of measuring progress and development according to the good they provide to society as a whole. The Wikipedia entry on GNH cautions that “Like many psychological and social indicators, GNH is somewhat easier to state than to define with mathematical precision.”

Bhutan is a Buddhist country. The most obvious evidence are the temples and monasteries. The biggest buildings are called dzongs, and are part monastery and part administrative centre (like town halls). Many date back hundreds of years. They are often massive as they were effectively constructed as fortresses, for protection against marauders. They, like the majority of Bhutanese houses, are beautifully constructed and decorated.

Other commonly seen evidence of the Buddhist faith are the large whitewashed shrines known as chortens, which ward off evil spirits in inauspicious places. They apparently contain holy relics. There are also prayer flags everywhere, of various kinds. The prayers are blown away in the wind. There are also water-driven prayer wheels, as well as manual ones that passers-by turn as they walk past. Again the prayers are conveyed into the wind. Bridges are festooned with prayer flags in the expectation that the prayers will drop into the water and be carried far and wide.

Rebirth is a particularly important concept in Buddhism but, despite many conversations with our guides about it, how it works never became clear to us.

Where we went

Bhutan is not a large place, but moving around is very difficult. It lies in the Himalayas, from the foothills in the south to the high peaks in the north. There is only one international airport, in the west of the country, and the road network, and the roads themselves, are rudimentary. There is just one main road that runs through the country from west to east, joining up the principal towns, and for most of the way it is single-track. It resembles a country road in, say, Yorkshire. There are verges in some places that enable two vehicles to edge past one another, but in the more vertiginous stretches of road there are only occasional passing places – and huge drops into the valleys below, as the photographs show. At the moment there is relatively little traffic, particularly in the east of the country. However, private car ownership is increasing and so the main road is being upgraded to two-lane (ie one lane in each direction). This is a slow, extremely laborious process which will take years to complete. There is more about road building below.

The trip started with a flight to Delhi, where the group assembled, and we stayed overnight in a pleasant hotel near the airport. Then at 5.00 am the next morning (entailing a 2.00 am departure from the hotel), we flew by Bhutan’s airline Druk Air (“Dragon Air”) to Paro, Bhutan’s only international airport.

Then over the following ten days we travelled in a small bus from Paro in the west to Trashigang in the east, and then south to the Indian border at Samdrup Jongkhai. Along the way we made a few diversions, one of them south almost all the way to India, to a valley which is one of the few places where the very rare (and endangered) golden

langurs live. In all we travelled only some 600 miles, but given the state of the roads our average speed was probably no more than 20 mph, and so it felt a lot further.

At the end of our Bhutanese road trip, from the Indian border at Samdrup Jongkhai we travelled (rather conspicuously, in an area noted for several armed separatist movements) for three hours in a convey of three modern white 4x4s through the Indian state of Assam to the city of Guwaharti – just one of the many Indian cities with a population of over a million people that we in the west have never heard of. From there it was a flight of two and a half hours to Delhi, where we had another overnight stay before flying back to London.

Days were relatively long. We changed our location virtually every day, often leaving at 6.00 am and not arriving at our destination until twelve or thirteen hours later. On such days we tended to eat our dinner as soon as we arrived at the new accommodation and then be asleep by 9.00 pm, ready to start again early the next morning.

Food and accommodation

We were staggered by the high quality of the accommodation in a country that is relatively unaccustomed to tourism. Virtually all of the hotels we stayed in were modern resorts with modern facilities (including wi-fi!) and their own grounds. One hotel was one of the smartest that we have stayed in anywhere on our travels. On four nights we camped, so we could explore parts of the country where there are no modern hotels. This was less luxurious but the tents were put up for us before we arrived, and we were given mats to sleep on.

The food in hotels and restaurants was not quite so memorable. There seems to be a standard tourist menu in Bhutan which all the hotels stick to. It tends to comprise a number of separate dishes served as a buffet on chafing dishes, consisting of rice, noodles, one meat dish, a couple of simple vegetable dishes and one dish with far too many chillies in it. Penny and I do not like spicy food, and we were steering clear of meat while on holiday (through previous bad experiences), so we were left with a rather uninteresting diet. The same dishes (or ones that were so similar as to be virtually indistinguishable) appeared at virtually all the lunchtimes as well as the evenings, even (surprisingly) if we had taken a picnic lunch with us. The food cooked for us at the campsites was much more varied and tasty even though the circumstances in which it was prepared were much more rudimentary. Breakfast throughout the holiday tended to be an egg dish together with toast, but there was also porridge while we were camping. The food at the hotel in Delhi was still a buffet but was much more varied and flavoursome.

Water in Bhutan was not safe from the tap but there was always a supply of bottled water in the bus. At meals we drank water, fizzy drinks, local or Indian beer or (extremely expensive) wine imported from Europe or South America. When you considered how far the wine had come, however, you could see why it was expensive.

Roads and road building

As mentioned above, the road network and the roads themselves are rudimentary. Many villages are not yet accessible by roads, although you can see new roads snaking up the mountains wherever you look. Joining the villages to the road network is a government priority. There are a few roads that are two-lane (ie one in each direction) but most are single-track. There is a huge project under way to provide a second lane, which means that there are frequent road works. Some are minor, and do not delay the traffic, such as extending the width of the road surface right to the inner edge of the cliff face. But others are much more major, involving blasting away the cliff to make a larger ledge on which to perch the road. The rubble is then bulldozed over the cliff, to form

part of the support for the road on the outer edge of the cliff. The road is advertised as closed for several hours every day while the work is carried out – and remember this is Bhutan's only road.

As the photographs show, in places we had to wait for the diggers to clear away spoil from the road before we could drive over it. We saw roads at all stages of development, including roads being surfaced using hand tools by road gangs from India. Indian construction companies are constructing the roads and the Bhutanese do not seem interested in helping out, so there are many Indian navvies working on the roads, living in camps along the roadsides.

There is one sad comment to add about the roads. Being in mountainous areas in a country that experiences several months of monsoon rain each year, there are numerous rock falls during the wet season, which block the roads until they can be cleared. It is difficult to envisage Bhutan ever having a road network that is permanently open. It would require the construction of avalanche shelters (as in the alpine roads in France and Switzerland), which would put the cost of construction way beyond anything the country could afford.

What we saw

Culturewise, we visited three dzongs – both the numerous courtyards and the inner religious part where no photography is permitted. We also had the opportunity to see Bhutanese life as we passed by in our bus, and in the towns at which we stopped. The national sport in Bhutan is archery and we had the chance to watch several practice sessions. The target is placed 140 metres away, astonishingly. We also visited the national crafts school, where children and young adults are taught the traditional Bhutanese skills such as embroidery, metalwork, religious painting and woodcarving. This is apparently both to ensure the survival of these skills but also to provide employment for the increasing number of young people who are no longer content to work on the land.

Wildlife was a particular draw for us. We had good views of wildlife from the bus, and from walking along the "main road" for a mile or two, normally downhill only, while the bus waited behind us and picked us up again. We tended to do this three or four times a day. There was so little traffic that we could walk happily down the middle of the road until we heard a vehicle approaching. There were few opportunities to walk away from the road, as the entire country is forested. The birdlife was best seen from the road, but the mammals were best seen from the bus as they were relatively shy.

The takins, which are the national animal of Bhutan, were in a reserve (formerly a zoo) in the capital Thimphu. We were told that when the zoo was closed some years ago, all the animals were set free but the takins were so tame that they wandered the streets and the reserve had to be recreated for them. They are a curious amalgam of goat and cow. We also saw plenty of cattle and yaks (or cow/yak hybrids) grazing on the roadside verges. They all have owners and presumably their owners can tell them apart even though they do not appear to be labelled. There are large mammals in Bhutan (tigers and snow leopards in particular) but they are virtually impossible to see.

As the photographs show, there was some fantastic wildlife to be seen, including the rare golden langurs (a type of monkey), very colourful monal pheasants (which were too far away for Penny to photograph) and the hornbills. We also saw one of the rarest birds in the world, the white-bellied heron, which lives in a few isolated Himalayan valleys. Even Gerald had never seen that bird before and he has seen many thousands of bird species throughout the world. We found one isolated bird getting ready to roost on a gravel island in a river. The local villagers were able to direct us to the spot.

But what made the holiday really special for us was the extraordinary scenery – like Switzerland but much, much bigger. The whole country is various shades of green. There are trees everywhere – different types of tree at different altitudes. We spent virtually the whole holiday travelling up and down mountains, from relatively low areas around 5,000 feet (still higher than Kathmandu) to high passes at 12,000 feet. Most days involved climbing over one or even two high passes, to reach the next valley. On our final day the road dropped almost 10,000 feet from the high pass into the valley below (for comparison, Ben Nevis is only some 4,400 feet). Just imagine driving more or less downhill *all day*. The temperature varied according to height and amount of sunshine, but it was definitely chilly up high in the morning mist.

The weather was predominantly dry but overcast, with sunny days only at the start and end of the holiday (which explains why many of the photographs are somewhat dark). There was also a lot of mist and at times low cloud, which is normal for the time of year. But we deliberately visited in the springtime, rather than in the autumn when the air is clearer, because the birds are more active in the spring, and the rhododendrons are in full flower in April and May. The photographs show how splendid the rhododendrons looked. We got an idea of how the plant-hunters from Europe must have felt when they first visited the Himalayas in the nineteenth century, to bring back plants for Kew and private plant collectors. We shared their excitement.