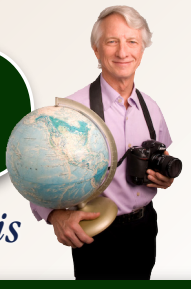

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL S. LEWIS ✣ STORY BY VALERIE SEARLE LEWIS

BHUTAN,
THE MOUNTAIN KINGDOM

Report from Bhutan
Trip Date: November 2007

Our introduction to Bhutan could not have been more dramatic. The flight from Delhi goes eastward and parallel to the highest mountains in the Himalayas. In brilliant sunshine the dazzling peaks of Mount Everest, Lhotse, Kanchenjunga, and their equally majestic brethren, surveyed the universe above puffy, white clouds, like icebergs towering above the ocean.

Tigers Nest Monastery in western Bhutan

As this breathtaking sight fell behind us we began our descent, first through the clouds and then, literally, through the mountains. Our jet wound down steep valleys, our wingtips seemingly feet from the slopes on either side, until, with relief, we saw the flat valley floor and the runway at Paro, Bhutan's only airport. Delicious, pure mountain air greeted us, followed by a smiling welcome from men in '*ghos*' and women in '*kiras*,' the traditional dress mandated by the king for all Bhutanese citizens. We had arrived in the mountain kingdom of Druk Yul, land of the Thunder Dragon.

The only surviving Himalayan Buddhist kingdom, Bhutan is a unique land where religious and political power have equal weight. For centuries Buddhism has pervaded every aspect of life. Monasteries, shrines, stupas, and prayer flags dot the landscape. Every home has a room with an altar, for prayers. A monk spends a whole day in a house conducting prayers before the white flag, seen on the roof of every house, may be set up. Many elderly men and women retire to small monasteries and holy places to keep the prayer wheels turning, ring the bells and ensure that prayers and offerings are made. Astrology, predictions and auspicious dates are taken very seriously. New parents receive blessings for their baby from a monk who then names the child. Meanwhile the king is a revered figure who has absolute secular power — as long as the monks approve.

A country the size of Switzerland, with a population of 700,000, Bhutan remained behind its mountains, sealed off from the outside world, until the 1960s. The current king's grandfather saw what happened to Tibet when the Chinese took control in 1959 and realized that, if his country was not to suffer the same fate, Bhutan must seek allies in the larger world community. Only then

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were paved roads, telephones, schools, hospitals and an airport established. Foreign visitors and the press came for the first time in 1974, for the coronation of the fourth king. He has recently abdicated in favor of his son after leading his country into the modern world in a very careful and controlled way. Determined to preserve the country's unique traditions and balance of secular and religious power, he has limited the numbers of foreigners entering the country while developing free health and education systems, instituting rural development schemes and emphasizing environmental conservation. Before abdicating he instituted the writing of a constitution and announced that democratic elections are to be held, for the first time, in 2008.

As we left the airport we could see the massive '*dzong*' or fortress above the town, dominating the valley as it was built to do in the seventeenth century. Close by was the archery range in the middle of the town, where two teams of eight men, all in their traditional short robes and knee socks, were facing each other at either end of a 140-yard grass strip. While they may have been practicing their ancient national sport in, for us, strange outfits, they were using extremely powerful, state-of-the-art carbonite bows to shoot three times farther than the Olympic sport. When an arrow landed on the ground the rivals would shout comments, some clearly not very flattering, but, when one hit the very small target, they performed a ritual dance and chant, while signaling with colored flags.

> We rode on horses up the mountain and then climbed seven hundred steps to reach the monastery built around the guru's cave.

Leaving this enchanting, other-worldly scene, we quickly passed along Paro's short main street, where all the little wooden-fronted shops are general stores, and followed the fast flowing river of crystal clear water up the valley. We drove past golden fields of ripe rice and picturesque three-story farmhouses, where splashes of scarlet on the rooftops turned out to be chili peppers drying in the sun. We knew that the Bhutanese eat chili peppers on almost every dish, with every meal, but who could imagine that many? The houses are decorated with carved and brightly painted wooden windows, doors and eaves, and their walls painted with astrological and Buddhist images, to bring good luck and fend off the evil spirits. Along the narrow road were many residents on foot, confirming the stories that Bhutanese are known to think nothing of walking miles up and down their mountains and, in remote areas, may walk for three days to reach the nearest road. Sometimes, cattle or horses were ambling along the middle of the road. As we drove higher and the valley closed in, the lush forest of pines, larches and firs came right to the edge of the road. When we walked to our hotel through the wood the crisp, fresh air and the peacefulness wonderfully revived two weary Chicago travelers.

Monks with handheld video games

While Paro happened to have enough precious flat land for a runway most of Bhutan is mountainous. The northern third of the country is the impenetrable Greater Himalaya, much of it unexplored and covered in snow year round. The center of the country consists of steep, forested hillsides and narrow valleys where the rushing rivers at the bottom are only occasionally bridged. Where slopes are slightly less steep, terraced rice fields and small vegetable patches fill every available space. The southern edge of the country is part of the north India plains and is semi-tropical. Throughout there are monasteries, some tiny and perched at dizzying heights on narrow ledges, others occupying a prominent knoll, with fine views up

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and down the valley. We visited many. Perhaps the most famous, and certainly one of the most sacred, is the Taktshang Goemba, or Tiger's Nest, where the holy man, Guru Rinpoche, flew in from Tibet on the back of a tiger and meditated in a cave on a sheer cliff, 2700 feet above the valley floor. We rode on horses up the mountain and then climbed seven hundred steps to reach the monastery built around the guru's cave. A '*puja*' or ceremony was being performed by the seven monks in the tiny temple. Accompanied by cymbals, flutes, a gong and two four-foot-long, rumbling bass horns, their chanting rapidly emptied the mind of all thoughts brought up the mountain.

Child in basket while mother works in market, Thimpu

Far up another mountain, but rarely visited, was the monastery of His Eminence Neyphug Trulka Rinpoche, the ninth reincarnation of Terton Nagawang Dragpa. Discovered to be a reincarnation at nine years old and now twenty-seven, Rinpoche has spent years studying and meditating, nine of them in India. Offered a comfortable professorship in Australia, he has chosen, instead, to return to the ramshackle monastery of his seventh reincarnation and improve the world by giving a home and love to 55 boys aged five and up, all of whom are orphaned or from broken homes. From lecture tours he has raised funds to build bathrooms with running water, and a kitchen to replace the smoky, hole-in-the-wall where we met the two boys who were cooks for that week. Eventually he hopes to repair the monastery itself. After our introductory tour, we climbed the steep stairs to the main sanctuary, where all the monks in their maroon robes sat in rows performing ceremonial prayers in our honor. The hauntingly loveable boys, Rinpoche's story and powerful personality, the extraordinarily beautiful location, and the rhythmic chanting, together produced a most emotional experience.

Dancer in traditional costume, Paro

Large, state-supported monasteries are found in '*dzongs*.' These huge castles were built all over Bhutan in the 1600s, mostly by the Shabdrung Rinpoche, whose combination of religious teaching and military power unified the country and defeated repeated invasions from Tibet. In valleys used by the invaders and at the confluence of major communication routes the '*dzongs*' were defensive structures also housing the regional administrative and religious institutions. Today, men entering '*zhongs*' must wear the white shawl they usually keep on their car dashboard for such occasions. The first courtyard contains offices of government workers and even the regional court. Farther into the '*dzong*' are other courtyards with prayer and study halls, as well as the monks' accomodations. Yet deeper into the labyrinth are the temples with their altars, shrines, paintings, statues and offerings. The great Punakha '*dzong*,'

Man selling chili peppers in the market, Thimpu

was the seat of government until Thimpu in the next valley became the capital in the 1930s. Still today, the Chief Abbot of Bhutan and the entire Thimpu monk body move to Punakha for the winter months, where, at an altitude of 1000 feet lower than Thimpu, they enjoy a milder climate.

This charming and ancient tradition of moving residence according to the season

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comes about because there is no heating or air conditioning in old monasteries, palaces, and administrative buildings. As Bhutan adapts to modernity will such customs change? In the same vein, take the question of the dogs. An inescapable feature of travel in Bhutan is the enormous number of dogs, most of them strays and bone thin. They lie in the road, in the entrances to monasteries and beside almost every house. They trot along the roads, through the fields and in the forests. When you stop for a picnic you immediately have three or four companions, patiently waiting for scraps. At night they howl and bark, creating a serious problem in larger towns like Thimpu, where there are thousands. While Bhutan may be a devoutly Buddhist country, attitudes towards animals are complex. To begin with, there is the perplexing issue of reincarnation, which involves animals and the possibility that a dog may harbor the spirit of the next baby to be born. Then there is the Buddhist principle of not taking life. Thus, efforts to round up the dogs and euthanize them or sterilize them are met by strong protests. Yet they are occasionally kicked, stoned and run out of town. In the same vein, while Buddhists do not take life, meat in the form of beef, pork and yak routinely appears on menus, supposedly butchered by Nepalis. Of greater magnitude, and far more pressing, is the need for employment for all the rural people moving to the towns and for all the young people graduating for the recently established education system. How will Bhutan resolve these, and many other, issues as tourists and the outside world increasingly affect their way of life? The fourth king is said to have remarked that he was not so interested in Gross National Product in his country as in Gross National Happiness. Is that an achievable goal in the 21st century? ✣