

## Into the Land of the Thunder Dragon

The Druk– the Thunder Dragon – is synonymous with much of both ancient and modern Druk Yul, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, the Kingdom of Bhutan. Dating back some 1,000 years, the Druk symbolises so much of the culture of Bhutan.



This photobook records a brief stay in this magical country in October 2014. It is one of the most fascinating places I have ever visited, and the Druk and its related symbolism appears everywhere. Bhutan's predominant, almost sole, spiritual basis is Buddhism, and specifically the Drukpa sect of Buddhism which was itself founded in part on the myth of the Thunder Dragon. The Druk is enshrined in law as one of the national symbol of Bhutan, and the King (the current King being the 5<sup>th</sup> in the Wangchuck line, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck) goes by the title of Druk Gyalpo or "Dragon King". The people of Bhutan are collectively known as Drukpa, meaning "Dragon People".

So, symbolism abounds. Guru Rinpoche, who in the 8<sup>th</sup> century flew to the site of the current Paro Takstang monastery ("Tiger's Nest") on the back of a tigress, is central to much of this symbolism. Milarepa (c 1052 – 1135) is said to have visited and meditated in the Takstang caves. Further afield, around Dochu La and Punakha, Drukpa Kunley, the Devine Madman (1455 – 1529) who is credited at times for introducing Buddhism to Bhutan and who established the monastery of Chimi Lhakhang in 1499, has many myths associated with him, some of which resulting in the symbolic phalluses painted onto so many Bhutanese buildings.



These pages record some of this symbolism, as well as the sights and scenery of the places visited. This book is technically the fourth in my "Bridges" series of books – a series which records treks in Nepal, Tibet and Peru prior to this one. In my own thinking the "bridges" metaphor is one of facing challenges – physical and mental. It started with the notion of visiting faraway places, well off the normal beaten path, but of course is applicable much closer to home. Towards the end of the book this trip's bridges are recorded, but they did not present the mental challenge that some of their predecessors had done. This time there challenges came from the mental demands of pressing on and taking the next step, towards to the top of the next hill or to the pass at almost 5,000 metres, when breathing seemed so hard and energy so spent. Indeed, writing these words, back at sea level and generally warm and comfortable, the challenges have quickly faded in the memory.

Over just 8 days (which included two rest days) we covered almost 100 klms of mostly difficult terrain, through landscape which varied from warm, almost sub-tropical, forests with pines, rhododendrons and beautiful autumnal deciduous trees, to barren glacial valleys, and spectacular Himalayan vistas. Walking “paths” were generally rock strewn tracks, often muddy and slippery, sometimes carved out of the steep hillsides by the nomadic yaks. Playful blue Himalayan sheep were plentiful. And dodging the droppings on the tracks of the ponies which were our often constant companions, and which carried all our key gear, was a quickly learned skill.

And then there were the non-trekking days. A further seven days exploring the towns and sights of Paro, Thimphu and Punakha. At each of these the culture of the people of Bhutan was on display, in the most positive way, and in so many ways. The Buddhist spiritualism abounds. The people proudly wear their national dress. They engage with their national sport – archery – with obvious enjoyment and enthusiasm. They speak proudly of their Gross National Happiness – the country’s development measure first coined by in 1972 by Bhutan’s fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. As much as one can capture the culture of a country and the spirit of its people in photographs, this book attempts to do just that.

To you, the reader, I hope that you enjoy the images. More than that, I hope that it encourages you to find out just a little bit more about this fascinating country, and perhaps even to visit. You will not be disappointed.

Peter Campbell  
Yallingup, November 2014

## Monday 6<sup>th</sup> October

Today was our first day in Bhutan. After a 3:15 am wake-up and departure from Bangkok, we had a great flight to Paro, the site of the only airport in Bhutan, on a very comfortable Airbus A319. Good service and into Bhutan easy – indicative of the friendly approach which the Bhutanese have to their visitors.

The Paro airport is very neat and nice, and we found our guides Tandin Gyeltshen and Jigme with ease. From the airport our first stop was our hotel for the next two nights – Room 306 at the Mandala Lodge. We had a lovely room with excellent views over the town of Paro, dominated by the Rinpung Dzong, and surrounded by ready to harvest fields of red rice.

After a bit of personal organisation, it was off downtown for our first meal at a local restaurant, followed by visits to the National Museum with its variety of ceremonial masks, thangkas and displays of national animals and geography; then to the Rinpung (Paro) Dzong; the Nyamai Zam bridge spanning the Paro Chhu; and finally to the national archery field, before returning to the hotel for a pre trek briefing and dinner.

## Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> October

Today was a pre-trek test walk up to the Paro Takstang monastery. Paro Taktsang is the popular name of Taktsang Palphug Monastery (also known as Tiger's Nest).

Legend has it that Guru Padmasambhava, popularly known as Guru Rinpoche, visited and sanctified Bhutan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when evil spirits abounded and harmed people. Legend has it that Guru Rinpoche flew to this site on a tigress' back to subdue a local demon. He then meditated in the Taktsang Senge Samdup cave for three years, three months, three weeks, three days and three hours.

A temple complex was first built in 1692, around the Taktsang Senge Samdup cave in which Padmasambhava meditated. He is credited with introducing Buddhism to Bhutan and is the tutelary deity of the country. Today, Paro Taktsang is the best known of the thirteen taktsang or "tiger lair" caves in which he meditated.



The Tiger's Nest is arguably Bhutan's best known attraction. Perched spectacularly on top of a cliff face some 500 metres above the valley floor, it is a remarkable place. Regrettably the original structure was destroyed by a fire in 1998, and rebuilt and re-opened in 2005. Despite being relatively "modern" the monastery has a magical feel about it, in part because of the legends surrounding it and in part because of its amazing precarious location. Some statistics for the short walk to Paro Taktsang are:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
~ 5 klms	0930	Tiger's Nest - start	2624	27.481556, 89.360778
	1300	Tiger's Nest	3147	27.4925, 89.362111
	1430	Café	2945	27.488361, 89.358861
	1500	Finish	2599	27.481611, 89.360917

Our trip to Paro Takstang was then followed by a visit to Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest monasteries in Bhutan, built in the 7th century by Tibetan Emperor Songtsän Gampo (c. 605 – 649?), who is also credited introducing Buddhism to Tibet and with building the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. It is considered to be one of the 108 border taming temples he built (in a single night). In the 8th century the temple was visited by Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche).

As I needed to access an ATM, upon our return to the Mandala Resort I then walked into Paro town for an hour or so, taking in some of the local sights, before returning to the hotel for dinner and final pre-trek briefings.

### Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> October

Today was the first day of our trek. After a short drive out of Paro, we visited the Drukgyal Dzong, arriving there at around 9:30 am, and staying till about 10 am before hitting the road.

Drukgyal Dzong, meaning “Fortress of the victorious Drukpas” was built in the 1649 to celebrate victory over invading Tibetans, but largely destroyed by fire in the 1950s. We stumbled into a celebration of sorts, as the photographs show. The Dzong offered us some lovely views of Jomolhari, our principal destination.

As we were at the beginning of the red rice harvest season we soon came upon a woman who was winnowing her harvest using old traditional sorting methods. It looked like hard work on her back.

Shortly after, we stopped for a rest at a small village with a few inquisitive (and shy) kids, then crossed the Paro Chu on one of the few suspension bridges of the trek, and progressed slowly up the river to Camp 1. Around 3:30 pm we stopped at the Gunetshawa army base where Tandin our guide attended to the hiking permit formalities. The army base is largely in place to protect the Bhutan-China border. Bhutan has strong diplomatic and military (and social) ties with India, and none with China. A very strong impression I gained throughout our visit was of the extreme caution (fear?) that the Bhutanese have towards their northern neighbour. They have seen (and continue to watch) the treatment meted out by the Chinese government on the people of Tibet, and are concerned to ensure that the same does not happen to them. So scattered throughout the area through which we walked are army bases and posts to monitor any cross-Himalaya movements.

Today's walk was interesting and scenic but largely uneventful. Its statistics are:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
17 klms	0745	Start – Mandala Lodge	2367	27.429194, 89.402472
	0930	Drukgyal Dzong	2604	27.502667, 89.322667
	1130	Morning Break	2570	27.535833, 89.318972
	1300	Lunch	2666	27.557167, 89.30925
	1530	Army Base - Gunetshawa	2821	27.557167, 89.28875
	1615	Camp 1 - Shana	2889	27.613944, 89.272778

## Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> October

We were up early this morning for a 7:15 am departure, ahead of what going to be a gruelling day.

Today's scenery was beautiful, we trekked slowly northwards alongside the Paro Chu. The weather was kind to us. The senses were treated: blue skies; beautiful light filtering through the ferns growing on the trees; the constant but tranquil rumbling of the Paro Chu as it rushed down its path towards the Chukha Hydropower Plant in the south of the country. We crossed back and forth over the river over several bridges as we slowly wended into the Jigme Dorji National Park and closer to the Jomolhari Base Camp, tomorrow's destination.

Our altitude gain today was some 800 metres, and the end point, whilst not particularly high, was starting to get into the region where altitude affects were noticeable. Regrettably Grace Boorman started to suffer some of those affects, and overnight and by the next morning the Boormans made the decision to turn back.

Today's statistics are:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
22 klms	0715	Departure	2889	27.613944, 89.272778
	0905	Morning Break	3020	27.633694, 89.255389
	1025	Break 2	3168	27.654, 89.259667
		Lunch spot (minus horses)	3274	27.664889, 89.265028
	1300	Lunch spot (with horses)	3385	27.679444, 89.269083
		Camp 2 - Soi Thangthangkha	3619	27.707333, 89.288472

## Friday 10<sup>th</sup> October

We awoke this morning to a cloudy campsite, which thankfully cleared as the morning progressed. Soi Thangthangkha is a common campsite for several treks, so it was fairly crowded (by trekking standards).

Today was another steady uphill walk, heading north then turning north-east towards Jomolhari. For the early part of the day we passed through beautiful forests much the same as the previous day, before coming out above the tree line around midday. As the altitude increased we started to come across yak herds grazing along the path.



Early afternoon saw us at the quaint (but somewhat desolate) village of Jangothang, just a couple of kilometres down from Jomolhari Base Camp. This also marked around the 4000 metre mark of the trek for the first time.

The previous two days had seen the region celebrate the Jomolhari Mountain Festival, and the evidence of this could still be seen at

Jangtohang. From the website of the Tourism Council of Bhutan:

*Jomolhari Mountain Festival is an exquisitely themed two-day event celebrated at the base of Mt. Jomolhari, by communities located along one of the most scenic trekking routes in Bhutan.*

*The festival celebrates the culture of the communities living together with the natural wonders that surround them: one in particular, the elusive, yet elegant, snow leopard! This endangered cat thrives in the region; several camera trap photos and definite signs have established the region as one of the best snow leopard habitats in Bhutan.*

*The communities of Soe Yaksa and Soe Yutoed, located along the Jomolhari trek, in collaboration with Jigme Dorji National Park (JDNP) and the Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division (NRED) - with support from the Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC) and Bhutan Foundation - bring together this festival as a community based initiative towards the conservation of snow leopard; to create awareness on the importance of conservation; engage and build on the perception and attitude to create harmony between this endangered cat and the people; provide a platform to bring in opportunities for sustainable livelihood, and promote their culture.*

Today's statistics:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
19 klms		Start	3619	27.707333, 89.288472
	1230	Lunch	3915	27.752861, 89.315889
	1500	Jomolhari Base Camp - Jangtohang	4106	27.781556, 89.341306

### Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> October

Today was a rest day at Jomolhari.

After a slow start to the day, I then went exploring in the nearby hills. I walked up to the prayer flags above the camp, and then around to see the very spectacular Jichu Drake. From above the camp there were magnificent views of both Jomolhari and the lovely Jichu Drake. After a lovely morning walk I was back in camp around midday.

However from my diary for the day:

*Janet not at all well. Discussion as to whether to go on or go back. I am quite worried about her.*

We had a fairly lazy afternoon. Janet and I walked around to see Jichu Drake with Tandin. We were privileged to also see inside a local house, the home of the local chief. An excellent insight to an aspect of the local culture. I enjoyed this little side trip, but Janet really wasn't feeling well, and so she simply endured it.

From the diary again after that afternoon:

*Janet's headache worse. Resorted to dexy. Decision that if headache still there in morning then we'll go back.*

I was most disappointed to have confirmed to me that the Portable Altitude Chamber (Gamow Bag) which was meant to have been carried with the camp gear was indeed not there. This eliminated an avenue of possibility to fix Janet's altitude sickness.

The statistics for the day were:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
---		Exploration Walk	4153	27.782889, 89.341278
			4264	27.785, 89.3405
			4270	27.786389, 89.343944

### Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> October

Janet woke up feeling good this morning. We dosed her up on dexamethasone and liquid gel ibuprofen, and the decision to go was made. From that time onwards she was unstoppable, for this day and the rest of the trek.

Another early start – at 7:45 am out of camp, across the river and up the hill on other side then onto base of Tshophu glacial valley. The Tshophu valley is an incredibly spectacular and beautiful place. It is stark, cold and treeless, with the flat areas dotted with nomadic yak herder camps, and their yaks.

It was a long slow walk up to the Tshophu Lakes, getting there around 10:30 am. Then an even longer, slower and tougher walk upwards and up to the Bang Tue La.

Walking along the Tshophu Valley I spent a lot of time by myself. It was a great time for reflection, and I revelled in the peace, quiet and aloneness. I started to think of single words to describe the experience, and some which came to mind were:

- Beauty
- Starkness
- Aloneness
- Quietness
- Stillness
- Peacefulness

I got to the top of the La at around 1:30 pm. At around 4900 metres Bang Tue La was the highest point of the trek. It was chilly on top, with an icy wind coming from the other side of the pass from the south-west. The view from the top was spectacular, both back down into the Tshophu Valley and across the pass into the Soi Yaksa valley.

After about 20 minutes at the pass (the others had been there longer as I was the last to get there), we headed down into the Soi Yaksa for lunch a short time later. The lunch spot must be one of the most spectacularly beautiful places in the world. Sitting at around 4600 metres with high Himalayas

in the background, rugged cliffs to our left and the glacial Soi Yaksa valley below us to the right, I felt relaxed and at peace with nature.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in a slow descent into camp at Chorapang.

Today was a very long hard day, but incredibly beautiful and rewarding. We were blessed with spectacular blue skies – in the days before and after the vista would have been obliterated by cloud. Our total ascent for the day was some 800 metres, and our descent over 1000 metres, spread over some 16 kilometres. So lots of both up and down, and a reasonable distance. Today’s journey and statistics are:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
16 klms	0745	Jomolhari Base Camp - Jangothang	4106	27.781556, 89.341306
	0850	Tso Phu (glacial) valley base	4312	27.783278, 89.351389
	1000	Tso Phu Lake	4406	27.764139, 89.370417
		Tso Phu valley	4583	27.75425, 89.376194
	1345	Bhonte La/Bang Tue La	4884	27.734639, 89.362806
	1420	Lunch	4662	27.726972, 89.358806
	1700	Camp - Soi Yaksa/Chorapang	3795	27.705583, 89.355861

### Monday 13<sup>th</sup> October

Today was our second rest day, this time at Chorapang. We awoke (properly) at around 7 am, for a slow breakfast.

Around 9 am a young woman from the local village came to the camp to sell handmade wares. Janet purchased a lovely woven scarf.

We were treated to a display of high altitude cavorting by a large herd of blue sheep above our campsite. They ran and frolicked backwards and forwards across a small rockslip area, probably one that they had created themselves. As they did so many rocks tumbles down into the river below them – we could see why, the day before, we had not camped in the Tshopu Valley where playing blue sheep would have sent rocks tumbling down into our campsite.

Then at around 10:30 am we walked to Soi Dzong (also known as Sey Dzong). The walk was about an hour from camp, and up around 500 metres. A twisty/turny path, with narrow paths and steep drops. Lots of yaks and fabulous views.

The history and purpose of Soi Dzong is not entirely clear. By some accounts it is a special construction built to house Bhutanese treasures to protect them from Tibetan invaders. The treasures were brought to Soi Dzong from Paro. This version seems to resonate with how the place looks. Other versions have Soi Dzong as a defence against the Tibetan invaders. Perhaps it was both. Whatever, it is an amazing 17<sup>th</sup> century 3-level wooden construction, wedged high in a cliff face. The remnants of a ladder can be seen below the Dzong, but even then it is inaccessible. The ladder would need to be considerably longer, and I can imagine that a longer ladder was withdrawn into the Dzong to ensure that unwelcome visitors could not get to it. More amazing is its remote location – if you didn’t know it was there you would walk straight past it.



Later that afternoon the large herd of yaks we had seen on our walk around to Soi Dzong wandered through our camp, mothers with their calves, all calling each other, as they headed off to pastures up the valley a little.

Today's statistics:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
---	1150	Soi Dzong/Sey Dzong walk	4284	27.692778, 89.358667

## Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> October

Today was a day of sunshine, rain, snow and hail! We left camp at 8:30 am, and walked up the Soi Yaksa valley, through a rhododendron forest, filled with spectacular autumn colours, arriving at "no name" La at 4140 metres at 10:30 am. The view from the pass, though cloudy, was very pretty.

We then entered the somewhat bleak and desolate Tapu valley and started the long slow hard cold walk up to Takalung La.

We were already in wet weather gear, trudging through the rain and sleet and mud.

We stopped for lunch at around 1230 pm, half way up the Taka valley. I found the walk up to the pass very hard, and the others had been at the lunch spot for some time when I got there. The rain had cleared for lunch, but started to come in around 1:00 pm, and so everyone left quickly. I was the last to go, and struggled up the track to the Takalung La at around 2:00 pm. The pass is at 4545 metres, and was largely shrouded in clouds. On this occasion the others had not waited for me, as the weather wasn't all that inviting.

I stayed at the pass for around 20 minutes, before heading down and getting into camp around 3:15 pm, not all that cold, but extremely wet and muddy. Near to camp I passed what I took to be an old yak headers hut, in a state of disrepair – almost no roof, and the floor in bad shape, but a well presented and good condition front door to keep trespassers out! Throughout the trek I had seen a number of old stone and timber building in disrepair, whilst the preferred accommodation these days seems to be a large blue plastic tarpaulin stretched over a frame of tree branches, often with no side.



From my diary:

*Camp is on a very wide open yak field, called Thangbue, at 4172 metres.*

*Realistically nothing will dry overnight (it is raining steadily now as I write @ 1715.)*

*Another hard day – not as hard as Sunday, but right now feels just as challenging. I think because Sunday was so hard I had not recovered my strength/energy before today's walk.*

The campsite was hard to visualise this afternoon, but tomorrow morning we had a great view of the huge valley, several kilometres long, dotted with yak herders camps and their charges. We would also get to see the Takalung La and the track down from the top to the camp.

This was our highest and coldest campsite. Located at over 4100 metres, we were treated to snow and sub-zero temperatures overnight. Even given its inherent flaws our tent was quite cosy, and we were snug within our sleeping bags.

Today's statistics were:

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
11 klms	0830	Start	3814	27.705694, 89.355528
	1040	No-name La	4140	27.693139, 89.334722
	1230	Lunch	4351	27.667111, 89.323111
	1400	Takalung La	4525	27.659972, 89.324278
	1515	Camp – Thangbue/Thombu Shong	4172	27.650694, 89.315222

### Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> October

Just after 6:00 am a 10-minute window of opportunity opened to capture some images of the Thangbue campsite, and the surrounding mountains. The air was spectacularly clear (as you would expect at this altitude). The tents were frozen, as was the ground underfoot. It was not a place to just stand around in for too long. But the photographic opportunities were marvellous, even if brief.

After breakfast at 8:00 am we said thanks and goodbye to the three horsemen, who would take our tents to the final campsite, and then move on to their homes or to their next assignment. We took this opportunity to deliver tips to each of them for their service.

Today was the last serious day's walk (as it turned out it was actually the last day). After camp we headed up and onto the ridge, at just over 4300 metres, and then a slow descent along the ridge for the next 90 mins, before starting the incredible long decent down to the Paro Chu valley. The ridge walk was meant to deliver views of the high Himalayas, including Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, sitting between Sikkim and Nepal, but the cloud gods had other ideas.

The walk down took about 3 hours, and was one of the most gruelling parts of the trek. The overall descent, from the top of the ridge, was over 1500 metres, and almost 1700 metres from the start of the ridge (Thombu La) to our final camp. I found myself with the darkest of thoughts because it was so taxing. Harder, in a different way, to the ascents!

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
13 klms	0845	Start, Camp – Thangbue	4172	27.650694, 89.315222
	0930	Thombu La/Ridge Start	4340	27.644472, 89.312194
	1100	Ridge End	3968	27.644472, 89.297361
	1400	Lunch – Shana?	2823	27.605972, 89.285111
	1600	Camp	2689	27.557444, 89.308611

## Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> October

Last night was our last in tents, and the morning started with the normal routine, this time interspersed with various farewell photos, and thanks/presentation of tips to the various support crew.

Rather than walk along the (fairly boring) road to Drukgyal Dzong we arranged for a bus to come and collect us. We then ended up at the Dzong around 10:30 am for a most unexpected morning tea of momos and beer, surrounded by almost a dozen of the local dogs! I took the opportunity to grab a last photo of Jomolhari from the top of the Dzong, almost sprinting up to the top, only to be quickly reminded that I was still at over 2600 metres.

Then we got into a more relaxed tourist mode, visiting Paro; the Iron Bridge at Tachog Lhakhang Dzong; the confluence of the Paro Chu and Wang Chu; and eventually onto Thimphu.

The Iron Bridge is located along the Paro-Thimphu highway. The bridge was built in the late 1300s by Druptob Thangtong Gyalpo, who is said to have built 108 of these bridges around Tibet and Bhutan. Many of them are still in use today, showing how strong and durable the bridges are. The bridge itself was apparently originally covered with wooden board for walking on, but today is simply three iron chains covered in fencing mesh.

Late afternoon we checked into our hotel (the Riverview), and that evening we farewelled Tandin, who was leaving for another trek, and were introduced to Tashi, who was to be our group guide for the next couple of days and then Janet's and my guide for the following three days.

## Friday 17<sup>th</sup> October

Today we visited several places of interest in Thimphu: the Buddha Dordenma; the National Memorial Chorten; the Choki Traditional Art School; the Thimphu Weekend Markets; the Motithang Takin Preserve; and the Jungshi handmade paper factory.

The Buddha Dordenma is a giant Shakyamuni Buddha sitting at 51.5 metres high, overlooking Thimphu. Scheduled to be completed about now, it was nearing completion when we visited. It is a magnificent construction, and one of the highlights of our visit to Bhutan. From the official Buddha Dordenma website:

*The Buddha Dordenma Project is the construction of a gigantic 42-meter-tall gilded bronze Shakyamuni Buddha statue (inclusive of lotus) seated on a 20-meter-tall throne in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Fulfilling the mission of Buddhas, Buddha Dordenma (meaning Vajra-throned Buddha) symbolizes peerless virility to bestow blessings, peace, and happiness on the world.*

*As many as 100,000 units of 8-inch-tall Buddha Dordenma will fill up the gigantic 42-meter-tall Buddha's body and lotus; whereas as many as 25,000 units of 12-inch-tall Buddha Dordenma will reside along the walls of meditation halls inside His 20-meter-tall throne. Numerous more Buddhas and Bodhisattvas statues are also installed in the interior.*

*This Buddha Dordenma activity was prophesied in a terma of Guru Padmasambhava and found by Terton Dorje Lingpa. Terma is a sacred treasure kept by Guru which has been*

*destined to be revealed in the future time by tertons for the benefits of future generations. When the time has come, tertons who are the reincarnations of holy beings will appear, carry out, and support the activity.*

Combined with so many of the other stories, it can be seen how just significant a part Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) has played in the spiritual development of Bhutan.

The National Memorial Chorten It was erected in 1974 in memory of the 3<sup>rd</sup> king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck who had died in 1972. It was built by the King's mother, Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Phuntsho Choden Wangchuck. We were lucky to visit on a festival day, when the Chorten was being visited by many devout Bhutanese.

That afternoon we spent a lovely hour with Phub Gyem, a friend of Paul Yates who had studied in Perth early last decade. Our time spent with Phub reinforced my very positive view of the Bhutanese people.

Last activity for the day was a trip to the Thimphu Dzong – the Tashichho dzong. This magnificent building has a heritage going back to the 1200s, although the current building has a shorter history, having first been built in its current location (slightly down the hill from the original) in the 1650s. It has been damaged and rebuilt/renovated over the years, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, largely credited with commencing the modernisation of Bhutan, had it renovated so that since 1952 it houses the throne room and offices of the king, the secretariat and the ministries of home affairs and finance.



An intriguing cultural day.

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> October**

Today we went our separate ways from our group. Howard and Grace Boorman had left very early for transfer to Paro, and our main trekking partners, Alistair, Barbara and Gill departed also for Paro at about the same time as we left for Punakha.

The Thimphu to Punakha road is a very narrow, twisty “path”, mostly unsealed, which is in the process of undergoing a major upgrade. As a result of that the road is closed for several hours each day, and traffic banks up at both ends to be let through at set times (the rest of the time being set aside for road works). As a result we left Thimphu just after 9:30 am in order to join the queue waiting for the road to open.

From our parking spot in the road we had a good view of Simtokha Dzong 4.8 km south of Thimphu. Built in 1629 by Ngawang Namgyal, who unified Bhutan, the dzong is the first of its kind built in

Bhutan. It is an important historical monument and former Buddhist monastery; today it houses one of the premier Dzongkha language learning institutes.

Just after 11 am we reached Dochu La, 3113m. The mountains were largely cloud covered, but the pass was clear and we spent some time wandering through the 108 chortens there. From the Tourism Council of Bhutan website:

*Dochula pass is located on the way to Punakha from Thimphu. The pass is a popular location among tourists as it offers a stunning 360 degree panoramic view of Himalayan mountain range. The view is especially scenic on clear, winter days with snow-capped mountains forming a majestic backdrop to the tranquillity of the 108 chortens gracing the mountain pass.*

*Known as the Druk Wangyal Chortens- the construction of these 108 chortens was commissioned by the eldest Queen Mother, Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck. The pass is also popular spiritual destination for both locals and tourists because an important temple is located on the crest of Dochula pass.*

*The Druk Wangyal Lhakhang (temple) was built in honour of His Majesty the fourth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The past and future appears to merge in the details of the Lhakhang (temple) and its structure tells the story of a supreme warrior figure, whose vision pierces the distant future in a fine blend of history and mythology.*

*Bhutanese families enjoy visiting the pass during holidays and weekends to picnic and simply enjoy the scenery. It is common to see families and groups of friends seated amongst the chortens, enjoying a packed lunch and hot tea. For tourists this is ideal location to capture beautiful pictures of Himalayan mountain range during clear, warm days.*

We also had a fleeting view amongst the clouds of Gangkhar Puensum. At 7570 metres it is the highest mountain in Bhutan, and is generally regarded as the highest unclimbed mountain in the world (mountaineering is banned in Bhutan for two reasons – firstly out of respect for local customs, and secondly because they do not have the high altitude rescue infrastructure which their neighbours possess).

Around 2:00 pm we had lunch in the village of Sopsokha, and then walked up the hill to Chimi Lhakhang. The temple it stands on a round hillock and was built in 1499 by the 14<sup>th</sup> Drukpa hierarch, Ngawang Choegyel, after the site was blessed by the "Divine Madman" the maverick saint Drukpa Kunley (1455–1529) who built a chorten on the site.

From Wikipedia:

*In founding the site it is said that Lama Kunley subdued a demon of Dochu La with his "magic thunderbolt of wisdom" and trapped it in a rock at the location close to where the chorten now stands. He was known as the "Mad Saint" or "Divine Madman" for his unorthodox ways of teaching Buddhism by singing, humour and outrageous behaviour, which amounted to being bizarre, shocking and with sexual overtones. He is also the saint who advocated the use of phallus symbols as paintings on walls and as flying carved wooden phalluses on house tops at four corners of the eaves. The monastery is the repository*

*of the original wooden symbol of phallus that Kunley brought from Tibet. This wooden phallus is decorated with a silver handle and is used to bless people who visit the monastery on pilgrimage, particularly women seeking blessings to beget children. The tradition at the monastery is to strike pilgrims on the head with a 10 inch (25 cm) wooden phallus (erect penis). Traditionally symbols of an erect penis in Bhutan have been intended to drive away the evil eye and malicious gossip.*

Our stop for the night was the Meri Puensum resort, a relatively modern hotel on the hillside outside Punakha.

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
---	---	Meri Puensum Resort, Punakha	1372	27.536222, 89.8695

### Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> October

Today we explored the Punakha valley. From the Tourism Council of Bhutan website:

*Punakha is located in the western part of Bhutan is the winter home of the Je Khenpo, the Chief Abbot of Bhutan. Punakha has been of critical importance since the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 17th century.*

*Punakha Dzongkhag has been inextricably linked with momentous occasions in Bhutanese history. It served as the capital of the country from 1637 to 1907 and the first national assembly was hosted here in 1953. It is the second oldest and second largest dzong in Bhutan and one of the most majestic structures in the country.*

Our first stop in Punakha was the Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten. It sits high on a ridge above the Mo Chhu and the Punakha valley, not far from the Punakha Dzong. It was built over a 9 year period by Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck. Holy Scriptures rather than engineering manuals were consulted to construct this 4-storey temple. It is a fine example of Bhutanese architecture and artistic traditions. This temple has been dedicated for the well-being of the kingdom, its people and all sentient beings.

Approx. Distance (klms)	Times (Approx.)	Description	Altitude (MASL)	Lat Long
---	0930	Suspension bridge over Mo Chhu	1258	27.632167, 89.8165
---	1000	Top of Chorten	1472	27.637278, 89.8165

We stayed at the Chorten for 1½ hours, inspecting the temples inside and taking in the view from the 4<sup>th</sup> level. The colours of the Punakha valley – the river, the trees and the rice crops – were lovely. On our way back into Punakha we stopped to some photos of the Punakha Dzong from the western side, before lunch at the Phuenzhi Diner.



We then returned for a proper look at the Punakha Dzong, where we again spent another 1½ hours. From the Tourism Council of Bhutan website:

*On October 13, 2011, the wedding of the King of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and his fiancé, Jetsun Pema, was held at the Punakha Dzong.*

*Two major rivers in Bhutan the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu converge in this valley. Punakha*

*Dzong is built at the confluence of these two rivers and is an especially beautiful sight on sunny days with sunlight reflecting off the water onto its white-washed walls.*

*In addition to its structural beauty, Punakha Dzong is notable for containing the preserved remains of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the unifier of Bhutan as well as a sacred relic known as the Ranjung Karsapani. This relic is a self-created image of Avalokiteswara that miraculously emerged from the vertebrae of Tsangpa Gyarey the founder of the Drukpa School when he was cremated.*

*Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal is known as the unifier of Bhutan as a nation state and he was the one who gave Bhutan and its people the distinct cultural identity that identified Bhutan from the rest of the world.*

*During 17th century Bhutan was invaded several times by Tibetan forces seeking to seize a very precious relic, the Ranjung Kharsapani. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal led the Bhutanese to victory over the Tibetans and to commemorate the triumph he introduced the Punakha Drubchen. Since then Punakha Drubchen (also known as Puna Drubchen) became the annual festival of Punakha Dzongkhag.*

*The Punakha Drubchen is a unique festival because it hosts a dramatic recreation of the scene from the 17th century battle with Tibetan army. The 'pazaps' or local militia men, dress in traditional battle gear and reenact the ancient battle scene. This reenactment harkens back to the time when in the absence of a standing army, men from the eight Tshogchens or great village blocks of Thimphu came forward and managed to expel the invading forces from the country. Their victory ushered in a period of new-found internal peace and stability.*

After leaving Punakha Dzong we briefly visited Wangdue Phodrang Dzong. It was destroyed by fire in June 2012, and so inaccessible. However the impressive structure can be seen from across the Puna Tsang Chhu. Very recently a local teacher, when standing on the road looking at the Dzong, saw an image of the Buddha in the rocks beneath the Dzong. He posted the image online, and apparently it went viral, at least throughout Bhutan.

Our last visit for the day was the Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Lhakhang Nunnery, perched very high above the Punakha valley, and not far from our hotel. This nunnery was founded by Yab Ugyen

Dorji, the father of the Queen Mothers. It was a lovely peaceful place, and we purchased a few bracelets from one of the young nuns, before returning to the hotel for our last night in Punakha.

### **Monday 20<sup>th</sup> October**

Today was a relatively lazy day.

We reversed all of our earlier journey, travelling from Punakha to Thimphu and onto Paro. The weather was very kind to us at Dochu La when we arrived a little after 10 am. We stopped for a few photos of the high mountains, and then straight on to Paro.

We had lunch at Sonam Trophel in Paro, before checking in to the Janka Resort which is a couple of kilometres west of town. We then walked into town for some last minute Bhutan shopping, prior to tomorrow's early departure.

### **Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> October**

Up early (around 4 am) to allow for an early collection to the airport and out 7am flight to Kathmandu. Farewell Bhutan, after a marvellous fortnight in this wonderful country.

We arrived in Kathmandu on Day 1 of the five day Hindu Diwali festival. Today was the day to celebrate crows, and was also the day to plan the colourful mandalas which would appear later in the festival. SO the city was even more "buzzy" than usual when we arrived. The immigration procedures are not nearly as smooth as in Bhutan, so it took a while to get out of the airport, but once out we easily found the driver from the Mi Casa Hotel, our "home" for the next three nights.

I had chosen Mi Casa based on TripAdvisor recommendations. A quaint little place in central Thamel, run by a Nepalese man who married a Polish woman and who goes by a Spanish name (Romero)!! That's a "go figure" if ever there were one. Romero met us upon arrival, and as our room wasn't ready (not unexpectedly, it was still only about 8am), we were offered tea, and started to plan our next few days in Kathmandu. We also took the opportunity to unload a whole pile of unwashed clothes and commence the process of re-entering civil (i.e. clean) society.

Having got ourselves organised for the rest of our stay, we then headed off to find the Boormans, who were staying at another hotel in Thamel, all of 600 metres away. Thamel being Thamel, after about 30 minutes of wandering around, hopelessly disorientated, we resorted to a bicycle rickshaw to get us to their hotel, which by that stage was probably only 150 metres away! Two minutes and 100 rupees later we were at their front door! We then spent a casual day wandering around Thamel and the Kathmandu Durbar Square.

That evening we went to Dwarika's Hotel, where we caught up with and had a lovely dinner with Martin Gantner from Austria, my tent-mate from my Tibet trip, and his travelling companion Andreas. Martin and Andreas had planned to climb a little known 6000 metre mountain in the Annapurna region, but the severe weather and resultant loss of life a week or so earlier had caused them to change their plans. They were now off to some mountain almost directly north of Kathmandu, leaving on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup>.