

Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon

Impressions after returning to Bangkok:

After visiting, I think of Bhutan (in the eastern Himalayan Mountains, bordered by India, Tibet, Nepal and China), as the world's largest gated community: expensive, exclusive, clean, and tame. This is not necessarily a negative evaluation. Bhutan is beautiful and interesting, but only available to those willing to pay the high price to visit and willing also to travel escorted at all times. The country prides itself on staying green, in both a literal and figurative sense of the word, and one way they do that is by limiting tourism and by aiming their tourism at the high-end eco tour market, especially the upscale American market.

From an interview with Lhatu Wangchuk, Director General, Department of Bilateral Affairs, in *Tashi Delek*, The Drukair in-flight magazine (Druk is the Bhutanese word for dragon): "The United States currently forms the largest tourist market with a substantial number of visitors from Europe and Japan. In the long term India would form the largest market segment as it is a very large international tourism market ... 2007 saw over 200,000 tourists visiting Bhutan ... In the next five years, we can probably handle up to 60,000 – 70,000 ..."

I suspect he means per year. That's not a huge number, but, then, that is the point and plan: "By promoting high-end tourism, we get mature tourists, those who really appreciate our culture and who are sensitive to our way of life." (ibid.)

One way to ensure high-end customers is to charge a high fee paid per day for simply allowing one to be in the country (about 250 USD). This fee was included in our package tour. For 11,000 Thailand Baht per day (about 326 USD), we got, in addition to the daily fee, our roundtrip airfare, all meals, accommodation, driver, guide, van and gas. Many tourists resist tour groups, preferring to go their individual way. This is possible in Bhutan, but one must still have a guide. An individual planning and paying for all I mentioned above in an a la carte fashion would end up paying a small fortune. We found a package tour to be the least expensive, most comfortable alternative. And note, especially if you HATE tour groups: our group consisted of me, Noraseth and his sister Mod. That's it. It wasn't like being in a group at all. So a package tour, as much as I myself cringe at those words, is the best way to visit Bhutan. Our itinerary was planned for us, but included lots of interesting things and we were free to veto activities and ask for others we would have rather had. Things were quite relaxed. It would have also been possible for us to roam around Thimphu (the capital city) at night, after being left by our guide and driver at the hotel. It's not a police state, after all, but the tourism is controlled. If you're a free-spirited backpacker, then Bhutan probably isn't for you (you're certainly not the target group!) There is hiking and trekking available with a guide, though. Depending on your budget, you can do a quick sightseeing tour as we did, or stay longer for trekking. But you have to be willing to give up control ...

So what's to do and see?

Impressions on the way and while in Bhutan

Thursday 17 July 2008

Nervous waiting for the cab. Don't know why. Even in Bangkok, traffic-jam capital of the earth and probably the known universe, there won't be many cars out there on the roads at 2 a.m., which is the current time. The flight is scheduled for 4.30 a.m. so there's plenty of time to get to the airport and check in. Perhaps I'm really excited and just think I'm nervous. The body sensations for both of those emotions are pretty similar: sweaty palms, racing heart, bitchy demeanor.

The airport is empty except for the chaotic group of Indians, Bhutanese, Thais and a few westerners surrounding the Drukair counter. Despite the fact that this is the only flight in the middle of the night, there is a slight delay. This is in keeping with Thai tradition. No one seems fazed, though the westerners are starting to look a little on-the-verge-of-annoyance. No, false alarm. Even the westerners are giggling now. LOTS of people with boxes, boxes of stereos, wide screen tvs, personal belongings, etc. Heavy, heavy smell of human sweat with some aromatic oils mixed in. I like the smell of sweat (the effect of my years living in Europe), but some people are wrinkling their noses. I will point out that it is only one ethnic group that seems to carry an aroma, but, in order to limit my racism, I won't say which one.

Some Buddhist monks are travelling with us on the flight. I always appreciate extra spiritual support on any flight!

Nori informs this group that checked in all at once together is probably going to shoot a film in Bhutan since the one Chinese guy is a pretty famous film star named Tony Leung Chiu -Wai. Some of the people with him also look like film industry types. (We will find out later that Tony Leung Chiu -Wai married in Bhutan that weekend and his party flew to Bhutan that weekend to celebrate the ceremony with him.) Personal note of caution for future in-flight dining: open little tubs of yoghurt with peel away foil tops in the direction of the seat in front of you and not in the direction of your polo shirt unless it is your specific intention to turn your plain-coloured print into a mod, spotted pattern.

Turbulence for breakfast. Or, as the Indian across the aisle with the beautiful, melodic accent is saying to his partner, "many, many turbulences ..."

First abstract dilemma: can I say I've been to or in India if I've sat on the runway of the airport in Calcutta? Looks green enough. Somehow I expected Calcutta to be wall to wall buildings, people and chaos with dust flying everywhere. Yet the airport looks quite suburban.

Arrival at Paro. (We will visit two cities in the west of Bhutan, about mid-way when looking on a map north to south. Paro, which we will come back to in a day or two, and the capital Thimphu, about 60 kilometers (about 36 miles) to the east.) There is only one flight in and one flight out per day. We're processed on arrival without computers. There are computers in Bhutan, but not at the airport. Nice actually, very personalized and friendly, not mechanical. Makes you remember there were days before computers and makes you realize how we don't even notice anymore how ubiquitous computers have become.

Picked up by our guide – Nima – and our driver, T.B., both of them dressed in the traditional *gho* (from *Tashi Delek* magazine: “longish robes tied around the waist by a cloth belt, known as *kera*.”) The *gho* looks a bit like a kilt with a robe top – a loose robe top into which you can tuck all sorts of things like the maps and the wallet Nima has stashed there. Like with kilts, the men here all wear knee socks and dress shoes with the *gho*. (Traditional dress for the women, going back to the article from Tashi Delek, is the “ankle-length dress ... known as *kira*, which is made of bright coloured fine woven fabric with traditional patterns.”) The patterns on both the *kira* and the *gho* are not plaid like on a kilt, though they are geometric – when there is a pattern. T.B.’s *gho* is not patterned at all, but a soft gray, much like the fabric of a westerner’s business suit. In fact, Nima informs us that men in Bhutan wear the *gho* just like westerners wear a suit, i.e. for more formal work like in offices, shops, etc. Manual labourers wear jeans and tee shirts (and we will begin to notice this as soon as we arrive in Thimphu). Children also wear the traditional dress. Actually, it is the law to wear the traditional dress (with exceptions noted above), though most people seem more than willing to wear it anyway. Nima and T.B. are very proud of their *ghos* and answer all our questions from that perspective.

On the wind-y (as in “*wind* your watch” not as in “gone with the *wind*”) road from Paro (about 2,200 meters – 6,500 feet) to Thimphu it is warm, the sun through the open 4 wheel drive van almost too hot on my arm. There is no humidity and noticeably fresh air, beautiful mountains. It is clean (no trash anywhere) and we ride alongside the shallow Paro River with its small rapids and sea-mist green coloured water. I’m reminded of the road from Santa Fe to Taos, New Mexico, with the Rio Grande – looking more like a creek than a huge river in that area – off the left of the roadside. The steepness of the cliffs and the hairpin curves and lack of guardrails, however, remind me more of the road up Mount Lemon in Tucson, Arizona. The climate feels similar to the American southwest too. Nice, but I can feel the moisture leaving my skin, which is already beginning to dry out and flake. The architecture, though, is strictly Asian/Himalayan. The low buildings are built out of mud and straw and some concrete, according to Nima. We see some along the way being built or repaired and the piles of materials – baked bricks, straw – does look organic. Most are painted white (or white washed) and elaborately decorated with colourful Tibetan-Buddhist designs. In fact, I do not think we will see a single building in all our travels here that is not elaborately decorated in this way.

It’s a new road, we’re told by Nima and TB. The road looks new, actually, with no pot holes, no signs of use, no marring other than a little dust. It’s pretty, too. Some mica or granite or other mineral in the asphalt – and in the rocks along the side of the road – causes a pleasant glittering. Noraseth notices it too. The road is only seven months old. Now, Nima says, we can cover the 60 or so kilometers (about 40 miles) between Paro and Thimphu in 90 minutes. It used to take two and a half hours on the old dirt road. I’m not unhappy that I didn’t make it to Bhutan earlier in order to experience the old, dirt road. I’ve had enough of those on trips when I was younger (Canada, Mexico). For Mod, it doesn’t matter whether the road is dirt or paved, the switchbacks will make her ill and we stop a few times for her to be sick (we will combat this by buying motion sickness pills when we arrive in town. I feel a little queasy myself after the 90 minute drive.)

Nima is a little stiff and formal at first, giving a lot of attention to making sure we’re happy and well taken care of. He’ll relax into a quiet but more open friendliness as the weekend progresses. We will too. (By the end of the visit we will feel quite a bond with Nima and TB, but we will also not lose any formality – kind of like I imagine the relationship was between a man and his butler in the past: love and devotion on both sides but within a context of formal role playing that is never discarded.) Anyway, Nima answers all questions and tells us lots of interesting things on the journey. Here are some tidbits:

Bhutan is full of devoted Buddhists. The Buddhism practiced here is Mahajana, which is closer to Tibetan Buddhism than to Theravada, the type practiced in Thailand. What's the noticeable difference? Well, there seems to be more prayer beads, prayer wheels and prayer flags here rather than the various Buddah and Hindu statues on altars that we have in Thailand. There are more reliquary Stupas – called Choeten here, whereas in Thailand there would be more Buddah images and more altars with Buddah images. And rather than honoring with garlands of woven flower petals, as we do in Thailand, little clay Stupas are used instead.

Bhutan has, according to Nima (and he's been trained to know this, don't forget, since he's a licensed guide), a population of 6,700,000 with the most people (about 60,000) living in Thimphu, the capital.

Nima tells us some Bhutanese words: druk means dragon (so Drukair means Dragon Airlines – cool!), wang is power (somehow this makes sense), chu means river, the number "1" is "chee". To say thank you use the words "es garinche" (with an accent on the second syllable) and hello is "gu zu zam po." (I won't remember hello, but I will use "es garinche" now and then, which no one seems to notice. I'm not Bhutanese – neither is Mod or Noraseth – so the Bhutanese speak English with us. And they speak English very, very well (at least the ones we speak with do), which is no surprise since we are speaking mostly with people in the tourist industry, i.e. guides, drivers, hotel and restaurant staff, sales people in the stores.)

Once we reach the center of town and get settled in our second floor, main-street-facing room at Hotel Jumolhari, I open the windows and lay back on the bed, watching the breeze twill the gauzy curtains and listening to the sounds of the capital: people talking, the putt-putt of a motor now and then, a child calling a dog, birds. Sounds more like a village than a city (though I will later notice when I try to go to bed early that there is a disco directly across the street from the hotel that thumpa-thumps quite loudly until 1 a.m. I will wonder if it is full of Bhutanese or tourists or both but, hating alcohol and bars, I will make no effort to go over and find out.) I smell ... air (always a surprise in a "city"), diesel, wood chips, wood-i-ness in general. Piney scents. What I don't smell is mold and humidity (yes, to my mind, humidity smells. Mostly like mold but there is a slight difference. Humidity has a "pre-moldy" or "on the way to mold soon" smell that is missing – but not missed – here. Nice to be without the swamp – and big city – gasses for a few days.)

After a half hour to settle, we're on the road in our Hundai Land Rover-type SUV, winding up another hillside (we'll do this a lot. At this point we have no pills yet, so Mod is beginning to sweat again.) We arrive at Motithang, a mountainside area in Thimphu with many temples. Prayer flags are hung everywhere and there is a great view down onto Thimphu and the rest of the valley. We stop at a local temple. The local word for the temple is Dzong. In earlier times the Dzongs were used half for defense, as a fort, and half as a temple. These days they have been converted to house mostly temple functions but some still have a separate half used for public administration.

After visiting the Dzong, we're taken to a rustic hotel / restaurant in the area. I'm going to overuse the adjective "rustic." The décor is constant here and that word fits the décor precisely. All the buildings we will visit will be "rustic" on the inside with exposed beams, dry wood floors, the musk of pink smoke, the smell of old fires and wood, all this seems absorbed into the walls of each building. The meal is very similar to Indian food: dahl, mixed vegetables, rice. The dishes are very, very spicy, and the vegetables are served with a light cheese sauce. There is also a cheese, green bean, pepper dish that is a local specialty according to Nima. Verrrry great. We will find out later that all the vegetables are locally grown. We will also, each time we try to order chicken or eggs, be politely told each restaurant is "all

out". Nima tells us, in response to our persistent inquiries (not because we are having chicken and egg withdrawal, but because we are curious) that because of bird flu in Asia, no chickens or eggs have been imported into Bhutan in over a year. There are local varieties of both, but they are too expensive to be served in hotels (or, perhaps, too expensive for the package tour we have paid for, but it would be impolite for us to pursue the question to this crude level, so we don't).

In the afternoon, in cool rain, we visit a factory where they make paper products by hand. There is a lack of industrialized machinery and chemicals but the small work area still looks and feels like a factory, rather than an artisan's atelier. Making paper by hand, though interesting to observe, looks as monotonous as any other manufacturing process. Perhaps the visits of tour groups break the monotony. We're welcomed and shown about, it does not seem like we're interrupting and there does seem to be a bit of pride of workmanship in how each person shows us what they do, but ... well, it's not the job for me (as if sitting in front of a computer clack clack clacking away is any less tedious). In the attached gift shop we have our first experience with how expensive souvenir shopping, especially for hand-crafted items – which seems to be about 90 percent of the trade – in Bhutan will be. We buy two bookmarks, a card and three postcards for what it costs to buy a hardcover book in Bangkok!

Later, back in town, after dinner at the hotel, we go out with Nima to do a bit of shopping in the central area of the city, which is directly across the street from our hotel. We stop at a pharmacy to buy motion sickness tablets for Mod. We glance in stores and store windows to get an idea of what types of crafts we might like to actually buy the next day. We know the public buildings will all be closed tomorrow (see below) but Nima assures us the private stores will all be open.

Regarding dinner and all meals: every meal we will be served will have enough food for a party of 10. We are only three. Yet we are happy to eat the wonderfully cooked, colourful vegetables and sauces, the local fish and pork. (Okay, the local pork is a bit tough since these are muscular pigs and not hormone fattened farm hogs, so I kind of start skipping that particular dish after the first lunch.) This is the kind of food you can eat a lot of without feeling like a pig, but there is so much at each meal that no matter how much of it we consume, we must leave large amounts left over in each serving dish (I hope they are somehow saving this giving it away to the needy or something. That would seem like something economical and green that would happen in this country, but we don't ask.)

Friday, 18 July 2008

The next morning, we head out for our excursion to Dochula Pass. The original plan was to spend the morning here and then visit a museum, but yesterday afternoon it was announced that the present King would sign the recently ratified constitution into law today so a public holiday, the first ever Constitution Day, has been declared and the museum will be closed. This is historical – Friday 18 June 2008 Bhutan will cease to be a monarchy and will become a democracy. The locals are chatting about it among themselves excitedly and there is a special feeling in the air. We are here on this day by chance. No one knew ahead of time that this would be the day the document would pass into law. Foreigners are not allowed to attend the ceremony, though, so we do not adjust our agenda to be near the parliament building. We do adjust our agenda, though, to cancel the planned afternoon at the museum. A visit to a small zoo is possible instead. Mod and Noraseth will have a chance to photograph parliament from a distance on their way to the zoo. I will opt to remain at the hotel since zoos, even a small farm-style zoo, doesn't really interest me.

We wind and wind up the mountain for almost two hours (Mod chipper as a bird now that she has motion sickness medication), stopping only once at a roadside stand to buy fresh plums. Looking around, we ask: what are these powdery white finger-sized things hanging together in clumps. They look like pieces of square, white chalk. Oh, that's Yak Cheese, Nima tells us. Hey, I say, I've heard of that. Some of my colleagues at the University told me I should try it. It's famous, Nima tells us while handing us each a hard, complete piece. You may try it, he says. You have to chew it for a long time, he says, before you can really eat it. I try it. It is hard as a rock and has no taste. But I'm game. I will chew it for two hours before it breaks into tasteless, nasty little pieces I can finally swallow. I assume Mod and Noraseth are doing the same, but they will tell me tomorrow (after I suffer the consequences of my actions) that they discreetly tossed their piece after only sniffing it. Not that it smelled bad, mind you, but they realized right away that it was not something they should eat. I, however, had to learn the hard way. More on this shortly.

Dochula Pass is 2,600 meters (about 6,000 feet) and, when fog and clouds are absent, there is an amazing view of the Himalayas. We have a bit of fog, but we're able to take a few photos with the mountains somewhat visible behind us. At this location are 108 small white Tibetan-style choeten which the Queen Mother had commissioned to be built. It's sweater-cool here, especially after a half hour of exploration when the fog really rolls in, obscuring the mountains totally now and misting our hair and jackets. We take the prayer flag lines we bought the night before in town and string them out on the hillside across the small road from the mound of earth where the choeten are. There are many, many strands and lines of prayer flags here – the newer ones still bright blue, red, green and yellow, the older ones faded. We add ours to the lot. We walk up another small hill and then up some steps to another building, which is closed. We turn and get another great view of the mound of choeten/stupas. I am huffing from the uphill walk. It is not too steep here, nor am I out of shape – I imagine my heavy breathing is caused by the elevation. I had noticed earlier that I was out of breath just walking up the five or six front steps at the hotel. I notice Nima is huffing too, so I don't feel so bad. I ask him about himself. He's 27. He has a younger brother and a mother and father, both still alive. He has been married for two or three years but has no children ... yet. They want kids in the future. "We married early. My mother is 66 and I thought she's getting older and can't do everything around house. Now my wife can do that work." He doesn't sound sexist when he says that, just matter of fact.

Lunch today is at the Zen Café. It's Chinese style buffet, but the dishes are still the simple local veggie and sauce affairs, though not as fresh as at the hotels. We are one of four tour groups eating there.

Each group has four members. Four identical SUVs wait outside (I will make the embarrassing mistake after lunch of opening the door and getting into the wrong vehicle. As I realize my mistake, I will leap off the seat as if it is hot and jump back out of the van. This will amuse the Bhutanese drivers sitting in a group nearby, who will laugh uproariously, shining eyes looking directly into my confused eyes, inspiring my own laughter – they are not laughing at me. They are laughing at the situation, which is, after all, quite funny. Maybe it is even the funniest thing to happen today in this small, peaceful corner of the world.

The members of the other groups are all white. I assume they're all Americans since that is the main market for Bhutan's tourist trade. Some may be European, but I overhear mostly nasal English. Two of the male tourists have not only bought the traditional Bhutanese *gho*, but are wearing it. Hmmm. They look a little awkward and certainly inauthentic. I had wanted to buy one myself. I now think the idea ridiculous. Ricky should come visit Bhutan and buy one, though – for the traditional clothing collection of the Luna Parc museum. As for these tourists, I admire their pluck but they just don't pull it off. They're not Bhutanese; the *gho* looks strange on them. And a bit pretentious, like dreadlocks worn by white teens, though these two have sheepish and awkward looks on their faces rather than arrogant or show-offy expressions.

Later, after I relax writing at the hotel while the others go to the zoo to see the Takin, the national animal of Bhutan (which looks like a small yak or buffalo), up close, we head out for a large, typically awesome and tasty dinner at a big, rustic (you were expecting a different adjective?) and locally famous restaurant, we head out again for some shopping. Last night we were looking to get ideas about what we might like to buy, so tonight's excursion is the real deal, the actual "buying" trip.

The prices are listed in ngultrum, the local currency, but also in US dollars. The ngultrum is pegged to the Indian rupee and the U.S. dollar (41:15). When we see the US dollar prices and then convert that to baht, we're shocked. Everything is extremely expensive. Okay, I can see it for the textiles. The 20 dollar machine made shawls look like the same 20 dollar machine made shawls you can buy in Bangkok. But the hand woven shawls are beautiful – soft, subtle greens, golds and oranges, geometric patterns particular to the Himalayan area, luxurious to the touch. I check out a few price tags. They range from 250 to 300 dollars. Mano! That's a bit out of my range, but I realize that the caliber of American tourist who can afford to come to Bhutan would not blink an eye at these prices.

When Nima registers our surprise, he tells us the prices used to be even higher – too high even for the rich Americans – but were lowered somewhat after the Americans complained. He tells us he can bargain for us, but bargaining here, we find out, means merely a 10 percent discount on the chic black Chinese style jacket Mod wants to buy. There is no discount on the statues of the Hindu goddess Tara. I have promised to buy one of these for Ricky. Even the tiniest silver and bronze ones are out of the range of my meager Thai budget, so I opt for one of a small but decent size (about 6" high) that I am told is made of "bone." It feels like plastic resin. But I am assured by the owner of Zambala Handicrafts that it is bone. When I ask what kind of bone, she just shrugs and looks at me as if I have asked a dumb question. Finally she admits she doesn't know. Some animal. Bone of some animal. Noraseth will tell me weeks later, when I tell him Ricky has written to say he loves the statue but noticed as soon as he looked at it that it is made of resin, that this was the moment he suspected himself that the statue was plastic.

Other weird things happen now with shopping as we go from store to store. I buy prayer beads and both Noraseth and I understand that they cost about 5 dollars as we speak to the salesperson on the wooden

shop floor. Yet when we get to the register I am charged 20. Nima is there, but stays to the side rather than intervene. I find this price still reasonable for these beads, the one souvenir I really wish to have, so I pay it willingly and without any bad feeling. At another store, however, Noraseth buys two small, round metal pins/buttons with pictures on them. Or at least he tells the woman that's what he wants. The sales person will wrap them and then deposit the package at the register downstairs while we continue to shop. At the register, Noraseth is annoyed when he is charged a higher price than he was told upstairs. He asks why and finds out that the sales person has substituted two larger buttons with the same design to replace the small ones he originally selected. I suppose it is expected that Noraseth will just say "oh well" and buy the larger pins, but he requests that they be changed to the smaller pins. When the package arrives a few minutes later back at the register where we have been waiting, he is asked again to pay the same higher price. They have replaced the two large pins with FOUR smaller pins so that the higher price remains. Noraseth insists that he only wants two of the small pins, as he originally selected, and finally ends up with them. We leave the store shaking our heads, wondering if the communication problem has to do with a language barrier or if we are being taken advantage of by shrewd shopkeepers and clerks. It will leave a bad – or at least a suspicious – taste. Shopping will be the least favorite part, the least happy memory, of our trip. But, then, this was never meant to be a shopping trip.

Saturday, 19 July 2008

Up early and on the road from Thimphu back to Paro after breakfast at the hotel. Pancakes. I'd love to have eggs, but that ain't gonna happen. Mod's up front happily negotiating the curves with the aid of her medication. I'm feeling a bit queasy here in the back seat. The window of the van is open; it's dry and dusty but the air is fresh. My skin is dried out and scaling after only two days in this environment and I find myself missing the humidity of Bangkok (though not the swampy/moldy smell).

Once back in Paro we take a drive across the river and up the mountainside to a spot overlooking the airport and the Paro valley. This area is more sparsely populated and less built up than Thimphu. Perhaps that is why it is cooler here even though the elevation is about 200 meters (600 feet) less than in Thimphu. Lots of low buildings. Nima informs that even hotels – especially hotels – are not allowed to be more than six stories. No building in Bhutan is allowed to be more than 6 stories high. This will not become the land of the developed tourist high rise hotel. The Bhutanese are really careful about these things and it is encouraging that even at the city planning level the surroundings are considered more important than the development.

We had noticed, while shopping the night before in Thimphu, that with each purchase we received a small re-usable cotton bag. How exclusive – these bags were often nicer than the trinkets in them. We asked Nima if the bags were part of the “high end” approach to customer service. No, he told us, everyone gets the cotton bags, not just the tourists. Plastic bags are illegal in Bhutan and not used. They simply don't exist here and, sure enough, when you look around you don't see a single one. Anywhere. How wonderful would it be to have that experience in other cities and countries? We'll probably never know! But that it is possible really makes one stop and consider ...

We stop at a local restaurant for another beautiful lunch of bright colored veggies, local fish and pork. The vegetables are good, very sweet. Nima informs that veggies in Bhutan are all organic, no chemical fertilizers are ever used. Chemical fertilizers were used in the past but the government did some studies and found out that organic fertilizers were better for the environment and for health – not to mention that they improve flavour – so they encouraged the local farmers to switch and go organic. This took some time and convincing but eventually the farmers all came around. Am I hearing this correctly? The government did the right thing and had to convince the populace rather than the other way around? No wonder they call this place “Shangri La.” Though the food is, as usual, great, I'm not that hungry so I don't eat too much. I'm still feeling a bit off. I think it's from the drive and expect it to pass in a moment. Oh how little I know!

After lunch we pile back into the SUV to drive out to the resort we're staying at before heading up the mountain on the opposite side of the valley to the National Museum. It is raining now and has turned cooler and gray. This resort is new and set back off the road a kilometer or so, which means we will be bumping up a rutted dirt path and, at one point, riding up the middle of a swift flowing creek. Definitely a four wheel drive kind of place; Paro is a four wheel drive kind of town. Not that Thimphu wasn't, but Paro is even more so. We arrive in front of the main building, which is big, white and elaborately painted with Tibetan/Buddhist designs. The brand-newness of the paintings makes them stand out even more than the designs we've seen on every other building here on our journey in Bhutan. We enter the large lobby of the main building and then proceed to the glass enclosed dining room for tea. The décor is ... you thought I was going to say rustic, right? Well, here it's more faux-rustic since there are all brand new furnishings. But in a few years it will settle into plain rustic, I'm sure.

After tea we are escorted to the out building where our modern, large (very large – two king size beds, sofas, chairs, satellite TV, etc.) rooms await us. Still feeling a bit woozy, I'm thankful for the plush, western style comfort and turn myself into an island in the middle of one of the king-size bed seas. I'm busy turning the pillows into mountain ranges at my north shore when there's a knock on the door. Nima is advising five minutes to departure for the afternoon activities. No nap, but I figure I'll get comfortable as soon as we return. Oh how little I know! I will not be comfortable again until Wednesday of next week, but since I am blissfully unaware of that at the moment I venture out with our small group to visit the National Museum.

As we drive through Paro, we can see the building where we are headed – round, red and white – on the hillside opposite us. Further down the hill is a more traditionally square Dzong, which was used as the fortress protecting this more round building above it. Both buildings look deceptively close – to each other and to us from where we are now. They look low on the mountain. It will take about a half hour of hair pin curves to reach them, though, and by the time we arrive in the parking lot, I am reeling. Nima takes Mod and Noraseth into the museum while TB takes me – by the arm, physically – down the path to the small building where the toilets are. I'm going to be sick. TB asks if I need water, which is back at the van and I say yes, though I don't think I can drink any. I want him to leave me for a few minutes. I want to be sick alone.

I'm nauseous but can't quite puke yet. Should I put my fingers in my mouth to help me? I want to get it over with. I walk in the toilet and it is so foul (beyond rustic, okay?) and bad-smelling that my fingers become a moot point. I'm inspired enough to throw up now. But not in here. I bolt outside and hide in the bushes. It's just me, my lunch and the Bhutanese hillside ... well, and the three Australian tourists who happen to come along to use the restroom while I'm singing my song of sickness. Seems like the Australians always show up whenever one wants privacy. Happens all the time in Bangkok too.

Finally I feel well enough to begin walking back towards the museum. I meet TB, who is carrying the water and I actually take and drink a little of it. I am sure my illness stems from the twists and turns in the road. I am sure I am well now since I have thrown up. Oh how little I know. Two seconds later I'm running back to the bushes for round two. I'll be there for another half hour and two more rounds of illness before joining the others in the museum. If I had known I'd feel this way when we left the resort, I might have stayed there in the hotel room. But I'm glad I didn't know. The National Museum will be turn out to be a highlight of the trip. It houses a wonderful, extensive collection of Buddha figures that are peaceful as well as pretty to look at. Like at the Guggenheim in New York City, it's best to start at the top of the building and wind your way down the various levels. In addition to the Buddah figures, which have histories written on plaques beside them in both Bhutanese and English, there is a current exhibition of photos of the 100 years of the Wangchuk Dynasty Monarchy. This is quite interesting. The lower levels contain old medieval weapons as well as items used for daily life in the past. We all enjoy the few hours we spend here. I enjoy it in spite of feeling weak and wobbly. I sit whenever I see a bench. But I never sit for long. I sit shortly recovering a bit of strength and while sitting see things all around me that I simply must get up and go look at.

The building interior, by the way, is rustic.

We leave the museum and Nima asks if I'd like to be taken back to the resort before the group goes on to make another short stop before dinner. I almost say yes until I find out that the stop will be the Taktsang Monastery. This is the temple complex built into the side of a high mountain that is featured in almost all promotional pictures of Bhutan. It is even featured in our English II textbook at Chulalongkorn

University in the small reading exercise on exotic places. It is the one image I had of the country before coming here and I don't want to miss it.

We drive a bit out into the Paro valley and then stop by the side of a road that snakes through wet fields of rice paddies; there are women working, half hidden, bent over, in the rice. But there is nothing to see here, really. Normally we stop when there's a view. Or if we've been driving too long, especially on curvy roads, and want to walk along a bit, chatting. But this stop seems odd. Perhaps they want to give me another chance to be ill (which isn't a bad idea, actually, since I do feel like the need to be ill is not going to desert me anytime soon).

Nima walks away from the SUV to the edge of the road and points through the light rain off towards a green, fog covered mountain in the near distance. Do you see it he asks? All I see is swirling clouds of white fog moving about half-way up the mountainside. Moving banks of fog is not something I should be looking at – moving anything is not a good idea for me at the moment. No, there, he points again. There are two or three white specks that don't seem to be moving. In fact, these tiny white specks seem to be attached to the mountain. They are. They are the Taktsang Monastery. This is as close as we will get. Nima informs that to actually get near enough to see the buildings, or to visit the monastery itself, involves a half-hour drive to the mountain base and a three hour trek up steep trails. The trails are dangerous – one Indian tourist fell to his death about a year ago but, according to Nima, this is because he was not exactly following the directions of his guide. We do not have time to make this trek and this hike is not in our agenda anyway, though it could be easily added if we had more time. Nima has made the trek up to the monastery often. He has led many hikes in various parts of the Himalayas in this area, many of a week or longer duration, many in winter (these are, he says, admittedly more difficult but very rewarding). Trekking, especially a longer trek, is something I would be willing to return to Bhutan to do. I would even, in spite of my fear of heights, like to attempt to reach Taktsang Monastery, I think as we drive pile back into the SUV and drive away. The speck of Taktsang, the rolling fog bank, the mountainside, the rice paddies fade in the receding distance as we look out the rear, rain dotted windshield.

I am exhausted and feeling even more, rather than less, ill. I don't usually get car sick unless I try to read in a moving vehicle. Even looking at a map for a moment or two will do it. But I have not been reading while we have been moving during this trip. Usually winding roads, even with dips and rises, don't bother me. Perhaps because there have been so many of those switch backed roads since we've arrived? But the road we are on at present hasn't a curve or a dip anywhere on it, in it or near it. So what is the problem here? And why won't it stop. My stomach feels extremely even queasier and I am looking forward to getting back to the hotel. I close my eyes, focus on my breathing rather than my stomach. Those plush, modern beds back at the resort have replaced the visions of Taktsang Monastery in my mind. Suddenly we stop. That was quick, I think. Yes, it was quick because we're in the middle of Paro and not yet back at the lodge. It looks like there is a vegetable market in the town square, which Mod would like to visit, and the shops also look inviting. I'm asked if I want to relax in the car and wait for the others, but the inside of the car seems dull in comparison to the colors over at the market, so I gingerly, slowly ease out of the auto and make my way, lagging behind the others, over to the town square. The square itself is dull concrete, no elaborate decorations of any kind, but the vegetables that men and women are beginning to lay out on blankets and wooden carts are bright and interesting. There are not many vendors, which, according to Nima, is nothing unusual since the market really begins on Sunday morning. It is a big weekly event which attracts people from the entire surrounding area. The ones setting up now have come probably the furthest and have arrived a night early to get a good spot and to set up properly. Some look like entire families.

As we walk through the market and visit some of the stores that border the square, I note that people in Paro, even the children, seem dressed more in jeans, tee shirts and other more western style garb. Guess it has to do with the fact that these people are farmers rather than businessmen. The *gho* was more prevalent in the capital.

There are a lot of stray dogs here in the plaza. Yet they are all in one spot, lazily sleeping or milling about in front of this one particular shop. Then I see the store name. Karma Meats: It's the only butcher shop in the immediate area. These dogs aren't dumb. No telling what might come their way if they just play it cool in front of Karma Meats. I'd do the same if I were a dog.

We finally leave the area and return to the resort. At the end of this 20 minute trip, I am weak, dizzy and on the way to being really ill. I am sick again, and have diarrhea as well upon returning to our room. I tell Noraseth I won't be coming up to the main dining room for dinner. He heads out. He's back a few minutes later with Nima and two of the resort staff, looks of deep concern on their faces. Can they get me anything? Soda crackers and water, I say, nothing else. They return with that and soup – they insist on giving me soup and I take it, though I know I can't eat it.

They leave and I ease back into bed. I am shaking now, with sweats and chills, but feel secure under the heavy, fluffy comforters and other bedding. It's only the insanely frequent trips to the bathroom that are uncomfortable – I feel dizzy enough to fall over and I start to freeze outside of the warm bed. I turn on the TV to distract me. There's a very bad Ben Stiller movie in English. He is the night guard in a museum where the exhibits come to life. Something about trying to impress his son who lives with the recently divorced wife. I'm so ill I'm tearing up at the movie's sentimental ending. Why am I so sick?

Why are you so sick? Now it's Nori asking this as he pops in to check on me. Could it be something you ate? The hotel staff is very concerned that it might be their fault; that you might have eaten something bad at tea. No, I say, I've eaten the exact same things that you and Mod have eaten and neither of you are sick. Besides, it would take 12 to 24 hours for food poisoning to start, if it were that.

"Did you eat anything unusual yesterday, then?" asks Nori.

I think. "Well, just the hard Yak cheese from that roadside stand, but you and Mod ate that too."

"We did not."

"But you did. I saw you both take a piece. And put it in your mouth and bite it."

"We both tried to bite it. But it was clear that you couldn't bite, that it was inedible. And it was clear that even if you could bite it, you'd be insane to try to eat it. But it was impossible to eat, so case closed. We tossed them in the trash when no one was looking."

I just look at him.

"You didn't?"

I nod, weakly.

“How could you? I mean, it was hard as a rock!”

“I put the whole piece in my mouth and sucked on it for two hours – the whole time we were at Dochula Pass – chewing now and then until it finally dissolved enough so I could finish chewing it and swallow it.”

“How was it?”

“Nasty.”

We both burst out laughing, which actually hurts me physically. They will be relieved to hear that it wasn't their food, Nori tells me. And what food tonight! We are the only guests at the resort but it's as if a table has been set for 10, according to Noraseth. Tonight the head of the local agency that Mod booked the tour through – her networking for future business with this guy is what brought about the trip in the first place – will be by for dinner with a colleague. In addition, Nori says, Nima and TB will actually eat at the table with the group tonight instead of at the next table or in the kitchen with the staff (which is what they've been doing during most meals, in spite of our invitations to join us. I get it – it's not a weird class thing, which one does encounter in some Asian cultures, it's simply a work thing. Their job is to look after us, not to sit and eat with us. Reminds me of when I was a wedding photographer in Florida. I was always invited to eat a plate of wedding feast food, which I always did – after I finished taking the necessary shots and never really sitting with any of the guests.) There is local chicken! French fries made with local potatoes!

I'm sorry to miss this meal (and I'll be even sorrier to miss breakfast the next morning which will have local scrambled eggs and leftover fries!), but I am happy that this is the only event I am missing. I am actually quite ill, but I haven't let it interfere with the tour, with the places we've had on the agenda to visit. I haven't even been crabby towards anyone!

I do manage to take a shower, dress and take myself up to the dining room after dinner and dessert is finished. The visiting, the chatting, continues but I am only able to stay five minutes before I break out in a sweat and return to my room. The gesture, though, is appreciated and I feel good for having got out of my sickroom for a few minutes. While I'm there, the staff asks me if I need anything. Sprite would be nice, I say. I really need Sprite or Ginger Ale or 7-Up. They don't have Sprite or the other brands, but they have Mananado. I wonder what this is, if it is anything like Sprite. Heads are nodding; it is just like Sprite they assure me, but yellow. I ask to see a bottle, to get a better idea of what it is. As the bottle is brought to the table, I smile. I would laugh heartily if I were able.

“Yes,” I say, “I can drink that. It's Mountain Dew.”

“Right,” say Nima and TB simultaneously, “Mananado.”

As we arrived and checked in at the resort earlier, before I took completely ill, I had noticed a white, folded piece of cardboard which somewhat resembled a large matchbox sitting on top of one of the dressers. The words “Swing Kit” were stamped on it in cursive, gold script. I showed the package to Noraseth.

“What's that? What's a swing kit?”

“Something to give one rhythm, I suppose.”

“Ha, ha, I get it, but what is it really?”

“Well, my experience as an English teacher in Asian leads me to suspect that we will find a needle, thread and a few plastic buttons when we open it. I suspect it’s Bhutanese style English for ‘sewing’ kit.”

And, sure enough, I’m correct. So I should have seen Mountain Dew coming from a mile away. Had I been in better shape physically, I probably would have!

Sunday, 20 July 2008

I am weak, still queasy, but can manage. The soda crackers are staying down, the Mountain Dew bottle is empty and I’ve even managed a glass of water (to wash down a few of Mod’s motion sickness tablets). I’ll skip breakfast rather than risk feeling ill during the four hour flight (though had I known there were eggs, I’d have eaten at least that. For some reason, I always seem to be able to eat eggs when ill.) Check-in will be relaxed. I’ll run to the men’s room once or twice with false alarm illness attacks and on the plane I will continue to refuse all food and will sleep like a rock. When we get back to Bangkok in the late afternoon, I’ll be hungry, starvin Marvin hungry. When Noraseth and Mod ask me what do I think I can eat and where should we go to get it, I will say I am craving a Big Mac and Fries. Noraseth and Mod are more than happy to accommodate this craving since they love fast food, so we stop at Esplanade Mall – just down the road from our apartment – and walk past the wai-ing* Ronald statue into MacDonald’s. Perhaps it’s strictly the psychological comfort of something culturally familiar since I usually hate eating at MacDonald’s and don’t (nor do I normally eat beef), but, for me, getting back to Bangkok and eating at MacDonald’s is like coming home twice. (* “wai” is the Thai greeting, which looks like two hands placed prayerfully together in front of the face.)

We have now, in a very short time, almost come full circle. But before ending the story of this trip, I’d like to share a short coda that takes us briefly back to Bhutan:

Mod and Noraseth have finished breakfast and are raving about the fresh scrambled eggs as we haul our suitcases out to the SUV. TB takes our bags and places them gently in the back of the vehicle. Nima leads us slightly away from the vehicle and announces he has a little farewell ceremony to perform. He says a blessing of friendship and safe travel to each of us as he place a small, white silk scarf – the Bhutanese Buddhist traditional blessing for luck – around each of our necks.

We’ve only been together four days, but we are sad to leave Nima and TB and they seem also sad to see us go. Nima tells us he gets quite attached to all his groups. We are all then quiet for the rest of the journey to the airport.

Before you have blinked, the trip is over.

Now the circle closes.