

The land of the thunder dragon

A pilgrimage through Bhutan with Jes Lim

The legendary country of Bhutan in the East of the Himalayas is just slightly bigger than Switzerland. With only 700,000 people it is sporadically inhabited. After the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese, Bhutan became one of the last refuges for the Tibetan Buddhist culture and a popular travel destination for spiritually interested tourists.

Qi-Mag Feng Shui consultant Cornelia Preuß travelled through the country together with Jes and Juli Lim. She reports exclusively in "NewsAge" about her journey through "the land of the thunder dragon".

"July is the monsoon season in the Himalaya and there will only be few tourists on their way", we were told before we started our journey, "we are, however, travelling to see the holy places and it's wonderful to have them all for ourselves. These places have very special vibrations, for the saints from the Himalaya were meditating here for the enlightenment of all creatures. Jes Lim will give us instructions to make us sense and experience all the places."

After having met in Katmandu, Nepal, our group took a flight over the roof of the world and entered "the land of the thunder dragon". During the flight we could take a quick look at the peaks of some of the eight-thousanders, which broke through the clouds. What a gorgeous feeling!

It seemed as if we had entered a different world as we landed on Bhutan's only airport in the narrow Paro valley between mountain ranges. With great expectations we set foot on the land that until recently was known to be an inaccessible kingdom in the Himalaya. "Druk Yul", as Bhutan is called in the language of this country, opens hesitantly to tourism. After being greeted by our traditionally dressed tour guides, the scholar Khenpo Tashi gave us a warm welcome at the Olathang Hotel. He provided us with a great deal of valuable and interesting information about Bhutan.

The very next day we went in two little busses to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. The town gave us a warm and sunny welcome. The atmosphere there was emphasized by half-timbered houses painted with religious motives. Our hotel, the Yeedzin Guest House, was magnificently painted as well. We admired the religious "eight propitious symbols", a series of picture which should keep crossing our way throughout our journey. In Thimphu we visited the medical center where traditional Tibetan medicine has been practiced for centuries. Due to modernization and western influence the people have started practicing western medicine in combination with their old traditional remedies and plants still collected in the Himalayas by mountain farmers and shepherds. The Monk Kings who came from Tibet to Bhutan in the 17th century called the country "Menjong Ghylkhab" - land of medical plants.

In the following days we experienced a wonderful landscape and a scenery of vigorous vegetation full of lively Qi and picturesque mingtangs. The original charme of the land and culture mesmerized us deeply. We travelled along the East-West

route, the only big connecting road between East and West Bhutan to visit the valleys of Thimphu, Punakha, Trongsa, and Bumthang. Our busses meandered through mountains, endless valleys and windy curves as well as breathtaking gorges. Step by step we got used to the views deep down into the gorges next to us.

On our spectacular trip into the Punakha-Valley we crossed the 3,050 m high Dochu-La pass. The top of the pass is marked by a huge Choerten (Stupa), embedded wonderfully into the amazing landscape. Countless prayer flags were fluttering in the wind, and after a ceremony with Dr Lim our flags joined the others. After a night at the Meri Puensum Resort, which is located above the Punakha Valley, we practiced Tai-Chi with Juli Lim in the morning. Refreshed we started a walk to the Khamsum Yuelley Valley Namgyal Choerten, located on a small hill on the edge of the valley. It was a steep way up, but in the end we were rewarded plentifully: The three-storeyed, wonderfully carved Choerten is idyllically located with a wonderful view over the Mo Chhu delta - it was indescribable! The Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Choerten was built to protect the country, hold off negative energy and to spread peace and harmony. Well, that was exactly what we felt: peace and harmony. Thus it was hard for us to leave this place.

In the afternoon we visited Punakha Dzong, a fortress strategically located at the junction of two rivers, only to be reached across a single suspension bridge. The courtyard was decorated with Thankas, the Himalayan fresco. We admired the seemingly modern Mandalas with their beautiful spiral arches, circling a centre-point like galaxies. We were delighted to finally spot a Thanka with a drawing of a Bagua surrounded by the twelve Holy Animals.

The next morning our journey continued to Trongsa, central Buthan. Half way there we made a little excursion to Gangte Goemba, the "monastery on the mountain" built in Tibetan style. The famous saint Pema Lingpa once visited this area and predicted that one of his descendants would build a monastery in this place. The small town of Gangte is dominated by the outline of the huge monastery. It was laundry day and the monks' dark red robes were drying in the yard, spread out on the new wooden beams used for refurbishings. In the monastery's entrance area hung very old thankas, the edges of which coming off the masonry. The deep belief and worship of the people working and living there was to be sensed. The pillars and the walls inside the monastry were sumptuously painted and as such emitted a notable charm in the semi-darkness.

The continuing journey to Trongsa led us over the 3.420 m Pele-La pass. We had a rather clear view over the high mountain ranges of the Himalaya. All over the area grew dwarf high-mountain bamboo. The landscape changed noticeably after we had crossed the pass. Nature seemed to be softer and milder and towards the afternoon the valley of Trongsa was gently exposed to our eyes. From there we had a spectacular view of the huge Trongsa Dzong, which we planned to visit the next day.

The Trongsa Dzong was erected on the promontory that reaches into the Mangde River gorge. In the 16th century a Buddhist priest named Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel had a vision of building the Dzong at this very spot after meditating near the promontory. During the 19th century the fortress served as Bhutan's capitol, today it hosts the administration of the Trongsa district.

A little later a steep slope with sharp bends took us over the 3,425 m high Yotang-La pass to Bumthang. After having surmounted the pass the landscape changed again. Still Rhododendrons were flourishing, but the view was also filled by a dense coniferous forest. We went to the holy river, also called "The Burning River". Here Pema Lingpa had found the famous treasures, once hidden by Guru Rinpache. At the holy place a lot of prayer flags were fluttering above the lively river, which had a highly cleansing effect on us.

It was our last day before the departure to Paro, but still another highlight was waiting for us. There should be a ceremony held for our wellbeing in the monastery of Karchung. After a friendly welcome the monks dignified Dr Lim by assigning him a special seat. We were sitting on the floor with mats underneath and sensed the energy emitted by the size and the clarity of the room which was dimmed. A monk trickled some rice into our hands, which later we threw to the front, as we do in Germany to bless couples at their wedding. We were blessed with a long life and good health by mantras accompanied by Conchs and hanging drums. We were grateful and highly appreciated the monks of Bhutan praying for us.

Before dawn we started our trip back to Paro. The experiences passed us by one more time: The luxurious, fertile land, the cultural treasures, the friendly people. After completing our daily Tai-Chi exercises in the morning the highlight of the journey was waiting - the world famous Tiger's Nest. The Taktsang monastery is spectacularly located on a ledge in 3,050 meters and is known as one of the most sacred places in Bhutan. Legend has it that once Guru Rinpoche flew to this place on the back of a tigress. He meditated there for three months and then converted the Paro valley to Buddhism. At night, while listening to native folk songs, we said good-bye to our guides and also to Jes and Juli Lim, who had an invitation by King Jigme Singye Wangchuk for the next day.

Deeply grateful for all the unforgettable and unique experiences we started our trip back home the next morning.

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