

# India/Bhutan November-December 2007

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November 21, 2007 - We landed in Kolkata, formerly Calcutta this morning at 1:30 a.m. and met our group. Our first class flight from London was very nice and with the World Class seats provided by British Airlines, one is able to lie completely flat and sleep well. As we are now 10 1/2 time zones from home, the two flights from New York, totally 15 hours have consumed more than two days. Upon arrival, there was a delay as two of our comrades reporting missing luggage. We finally arrive at our hotel at 3:40 a.m. This is a great distress as we are in Kolkata only one day, leaving Thursday early in the morning and if their luggage is not found, they will go to Bhutan without it for the rest of the week. Bhutan is in the Himalayan Mountains and warm clothes that would have been packed will not be available even if the suitcase arrives and is forwarded to New Delhi, our next stop. Alas, with our close connection in London, that could have been us.

Many would say that Kolkata is a dirty place, overrun with beggars however my impressions are not that bad. Sure there is some litter, but so is there in New York. There are some beggars but they do not irritate travelers, more obnoxious are the merchants trying to get to stop in their shop. The city is the ethic capital of India, all of the Noble prize winners lived there, the universities produce more than 100,000 graduates per year. 13 million people live here and 18 million work here. Compare with New York City which has 8 million residents. There are many merchants but the economy does not seem very efficient, many people are standing around. Prices for clothing are very good compared to the prices at home, the two men whose suitcases have not arrived were given an allowance to buy some clothes and went to the mall to do so. Were I in that same position, I might have some trouble. Few Indians are as tall or as broad as I am so fitting would be a challenge. Fortunately our hapless travelers were shorter and slighter. It is notable that in Kolkata, there are no cows on the street. The city government decided to remove all of the cows in the interest of their safety and public health so they live outside the town. We understand that elsewhere in India this is not the case.



Our first stop was this beautiful Jain temple. Jain is a separate religion from Hindu though it has similar principles. Though we could not take pictures inside, the interior displays cut mirror glass that is quite stunning and with the colored glass that brings the light in produces a beautiful display.



This statue of the man on the guided elephant appears just

to the left of the temple.

Recently there was a cyclone that devastated Bangladesh. Many refugees have come to Kolkata and camp on the streets here.



This is the monument to commemorate the tragedy where 143 of 150 British merchants died from suffocation. The merchants refused to pay taxes to the King of Bengal. After the final ultimatum, the king arrested the merchants and packed them into a small cell. The next day, most of them had died. This monument previously had been located in the place where the prison was but was moved to this church yard when the new post office was built.



These two photos contrast the new (on the left) and the old bridges on the river. Though it has a Bengali name here in Kolkata, this is the same Ganges River that is the mainstream of Indian life from the Bay of Bengal, through the fertile north past Agra and Delhi.



We ate dinner at a Bengali restaurant to savor the food characteristic of this area. We asked the waiter about the level of spice, telling him that we did not like spice at all, and ultimately settled on his choice, a sampler including rice with potato soup, mutton and prawn with rice pudding and a sweet (somewhat like icing) for dessert. He would not hear of our sharing so Judy got a serving of rice with a spinach dish. Some were too spicy for me, even though the server said they were mild and almost everything was too hot for Judy. The prawn, an oversized shrimp, was my favorite as the mutton was mostly bone but I ate all of the potato soup as it was a good cleanser of the palate after each sample. We left the restaurant saying, "its good that the food was not considered spicy because we surely couldn't handle anything more spicy than that."





November 22, 2007 - We continue our travel to the Kingdom of Bhutan by air and arrive at this beautiful airport nestled in the Himalaya Mountains. This area is very different from the Kolkata area in that the high mountains are home to people who appear lighter skinned and more Chinese than Indian. Most of the people of Bhutan are Buddhist. I asked our guide about the kings and found that the four kings have all been good to the people and good followers of Buddha. Prior to the king being elected in 1907, the country was ruled by various leaders from the different areas. The consolidation of

government followed then in 1907 and this year is the 100th birthday. Nevertheless, this is not an auspicious year so the celebration has been postponed to 2008. Also, the fourth king abdicated his throne last year and the new king, his son, will be crowned next year as well.

As we drive from Paro to Thimpu, the capital, we drive past rice farms. 90% of the population is involved in subsistence farming. The next biggest industry is tourism.

This type of Buddhist altar is very common along the roadway.





At the confluence of the two rivers, the river changes name and continues to flow towards India.



Road building continues in preparation for the coronation. The road will be widened to two lanes in each direction. Note the brigade which is passing along trays of cement to build the wall. In Bhutan, Indians are commissioned to do road and building work as these are not considered suitable occupations for the Bhutanese. Also, the Indians know what they are doing.



The building on the right houses the National Library, a collection of general books on the first floor and Buddhist scriptural books and works on the upper floors. Below the building is the new annex, designed in the Bhutan tradition with beautiful stone craftsmanship.



November 23, 2007 - We went to the radio transmission tower today for a beautiful overview of the City of Thimpu. Between the Buddhist prayer flags, one sees the city surrounded by mountains. Wood is used to heat many of the homes hence the haze is wood smoke which is visible in the early morning.





The Takin - a unique animal closely associated with Bhutan's religious history and mythology..

Lama Drukpa Kuenlay (1455-1529), the "Divine Madman," is one of Bhutan's favourite saints, known for his outrageous antics. One day his devotees were gathered to witness his magical powers and they asked him to perform a miracle. Before complying, he demanded that he be given a whole cow and goat to eat. Having devoured both, leaving only the bones, he stuck the goat's head on the bones of the cow. To everyone's amazement, upon a command uttered by Drukpa Kuenlay, the animal came to life, arose, ran to the meadow and began to graze. The animal came to be known as the dong gyem tsey (Takin) and can still be seen grazing in mountain meadows of the kingdom.

Due to its uniqueness, the Takin continues to befuddle taxonomists. Unable to relate it to any other animal, they have put it in a category by itself, *budorcas taxicolor*.







This fortress displays the traditional architecture of Bhutan and houses government offices.

We visited a school of fine arts and saw students working on their projects, embroidery, weaving, sculpting and drawing.





On the left, this lady was washing dishes at the school.



Below, this lady embroiders while collecting parking fees.



At the weekend market, farmers and merchants sell almost anything needed for the household.

Buyers and sellers come to the capitol and pay \$20 (equivalent) for a stall for the three-day weekend.







This metal artist came from the eastern province of Bhutan to sell his ceremonial cymbals.

More characteristic of the people of this area, is this photo of our guide, Tshering Gyeltshen.





We visited a factory where workers were doing very fine weaving. This type of work would be used to produce the fabric on the traveler above.





November 24, 2007



Today we traveled to Punakha by bus stopping at the Royal Botanical Garden. The Himalaya mountains are breath-taking, Tibet is on the other side of the mountains. Children always pique a visitor's curiosity. Note the little wooden toy on the ground next to the girl, undoubtedly made by her father from a piece of scrap wood to which he affixed homemade wheels and an axel. As is so common, kids enjoy the simple toys. Continuing on our way we saw this water-driven prayer wheel. The stream runs through the waterwheel at the bottom making the drum inside turn. Prayer flags cross the roof in the foreground of the picture. The white flags are for prayers for the dead.



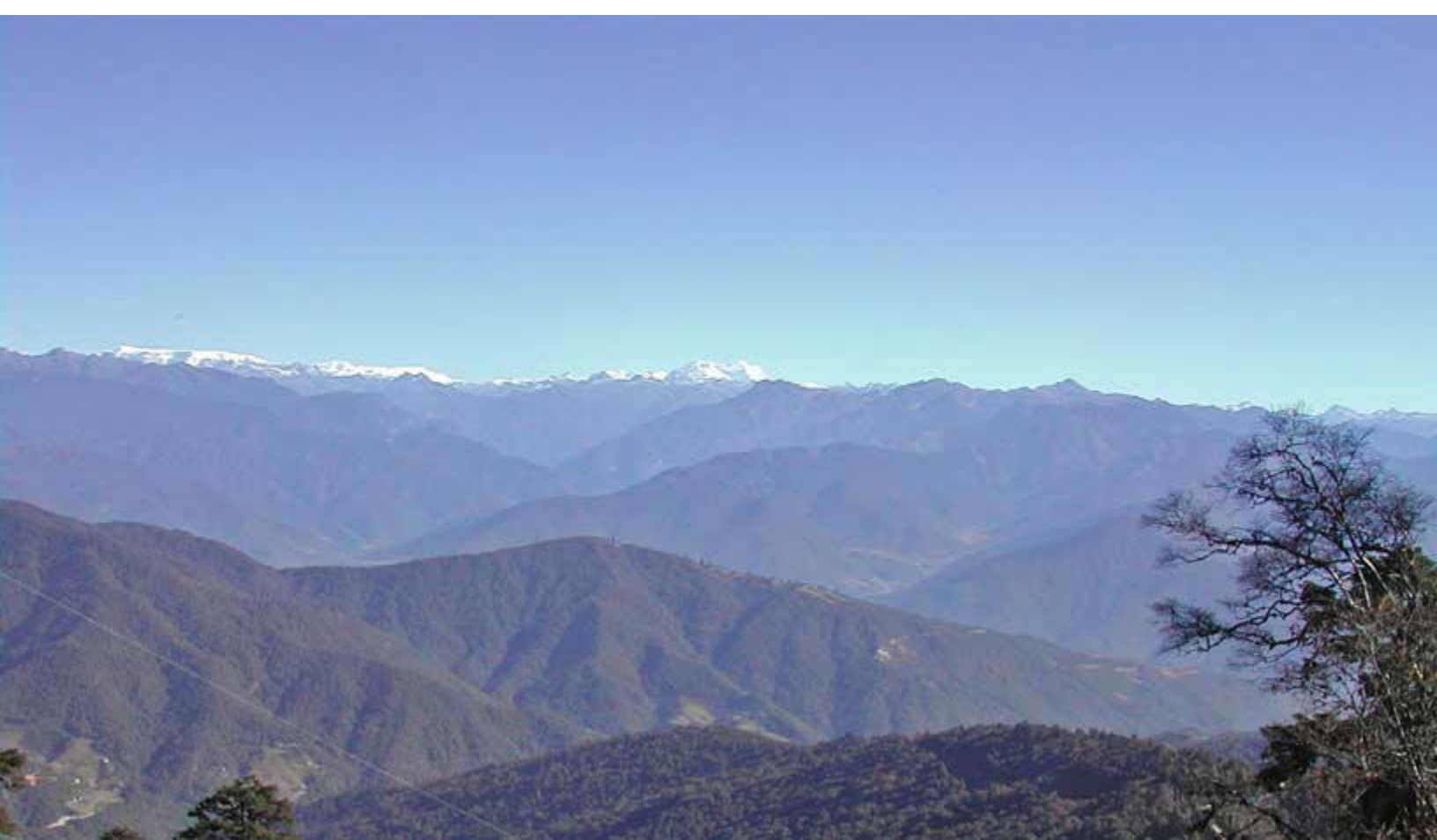
Our fearless leader stops to buy some apples.  
Roadside markets are very common here.

In the Royal Botanical Garden there are 108 chorten, these hold relics and are for the commemoration of the dead.





Below the mighty Himalaya Mountains, a photo does not do justice to the majesty of this mountain range.





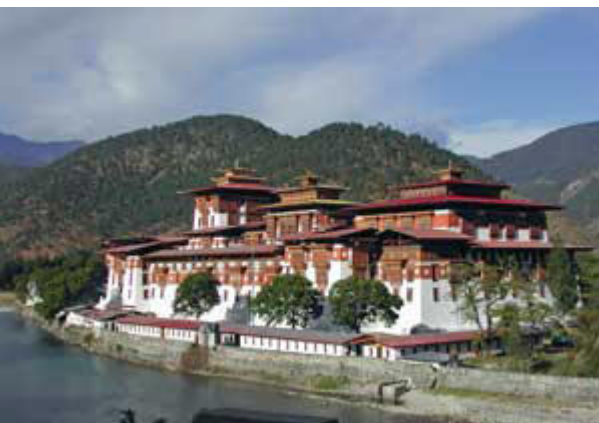
Roadwork is done by Indians on temporary work visas. Only on rare occasions are non-Bhutanese people allowed permanent residency on Bhutan.







Threshing rice is very hard work; the rice is thrown over the head against a rock. This steppe formation shows how the rice is grown in paddies.



This dzong is a fortress built between the two rivers. We visited it this evening and heard the complete story of Buddha. At present, they hold government administration offices and a monastery.









November 25, 2007

We went on a nature trip today and saw some monkeys, (sorry they moved too fast for a photo, but you've seen monkeys before). At Wangdiphodrang Dzong we visited the lama who gave us blessings. Here he is in his bedroom.



We visited the home of an average farmer. They were having a wake for the grandmother who died at age 85.







November 26, 2007

Today we return to Paro as we drive the six-hours from our hotel. On our way we saw Indian ladies working on the roadway. These boys are holding a veal and a beef is in the back of the truck. In Bhutan, only cows that have been killed accidentally are used for food. The other meat is imported from India. These may have been struck by vehicles or fallen off a cliff





Our travel was impeded by this overturned water truck. The tow truck at the upper right will

use a cable on a winch to right the truck.



After

about 1/2 hour delay, we are on our way and stop at the Paro airport, the only airport in Bhutan for a photo of our entry point.



This is about as close to a yak as we will get as they are high in the mountains at this time. The nomads use yaks for their milk and fur. Nevertheless, we tried our hand at archery this afternoon, one of the national sports of Bhutan. No one, not even our tour leader, hit the target at 40 meters.



It is mused that OAT, Overseas Adventure Travel, really means, "Oh, another temple" and here we visit another dzong. This one however was built in the 7th century and is a tribute to the Buddah of Compassion, a god who has 1,000 hands and eleven heads, adequate to provide compassion to the entire world. There is one god, Buddah, however there are numerous reincarnations, a concept similar to the Trinity, perhaps.

November 27, 2007 - This lady is spreading manure with her bare hands. Thereafter we passed a farmer driving his cows to pasture.







These young monks were enjoying their self-made skate board on the hill outside the National

Museum. This museum was very well organized and displayed recent and ancient relics as you traveled from the sixth floor down to the ground floor.





This traditional, covered, cantilever bridge shows the very sturdy construction that lasts hundreds of years.



We four travelers go up the mountain on horseback. This was an exciting experience as the trail was quite steep. At the teahouse you can see the Tiger's Nest



Monastery on the mountain behind us.





As you travel through Bhutan, you often see chili peppers being dried on the roof or in the window. On the right is a typical nomad home made of rocks with a roof of woven yak hair.





The Four Harmonious Friends symbolize harmonious living with all beings, incorporating the respect of the youth for elders and the love and affection of the elders for the youth. The Buddha told his followers this account: Under a bodhi tree in a large forest, the bird, the rabbit, the monkey and the elephant began discussing which among them was eldest so that they would know the proper way to show respect.

The elephant said: "When I was a baby, the size of the tree was equal to my body." The monkey said, "When I was a baby, the tree was equal only to my hand." The rabbit said, "When I was a baby, the tree was just the size of four fingers, or a little more." The bird said, "The tree was sprouted when I excreted its seed onto the Earth." In this way, they knew the order of their ages and not only lived with respect but also avoided the lying, stealing and killing that cause all suffering. All animals in the forest, as well as the king and all the people in the surrounding kingdom, also followed their good conduct and acquired significant blessings and merit.

The elephant, monkey, rabbit and rooster are also the national symbol for measurement of the Gross

National Happiness, rooster: social and economic development, rabbit: preserving of the environment, monkey: promotion of cultural heritage and elephant: good government.

November 28, 2007

We leave Bhutan for India today and arrive in New Delhi, the capital.

