

Magical **Bhutan**

In this Buddhist Kingdom in the heart of the Himalaya, happiness, hospitality, and centuries-old traditions await, as **Curtis Chin** and **Dhamey Norgay** discover

photos **GABRIEL DIAZ, CURTIS S CHIN AND DHAMEY NORGAY**

IN THIS MAGICAL HIMALAYAN KINGDOM OF wonders, it was hard to tell if we had saved the best for last. But there before, and above, us perched Taktsang Lhakhang, or Tiger's Nest monastery – one of Bhutan's most sacred religious sites.

Clinging to a cliff more than 3,000 feet above Paro Valley, and some 10,200 feet above sea level, the monastery still lay an hour's hike ahead of us as we paused on our way onward and upward, back and forth on steeper switchbacks, through a forest of rhododendrons and blue pines.

Dating from the late 17th century and rebuilt through the years, the small monastery complex had drawn pilgrims and travellers on foot, and more recently by mule (for some modern-day visitors with weary feet), and is now perhaps the best-known attraction in this remote mountain kingdom. The monastery's spectacular setting makes it certainly one of the most photographed places in Bhutan.

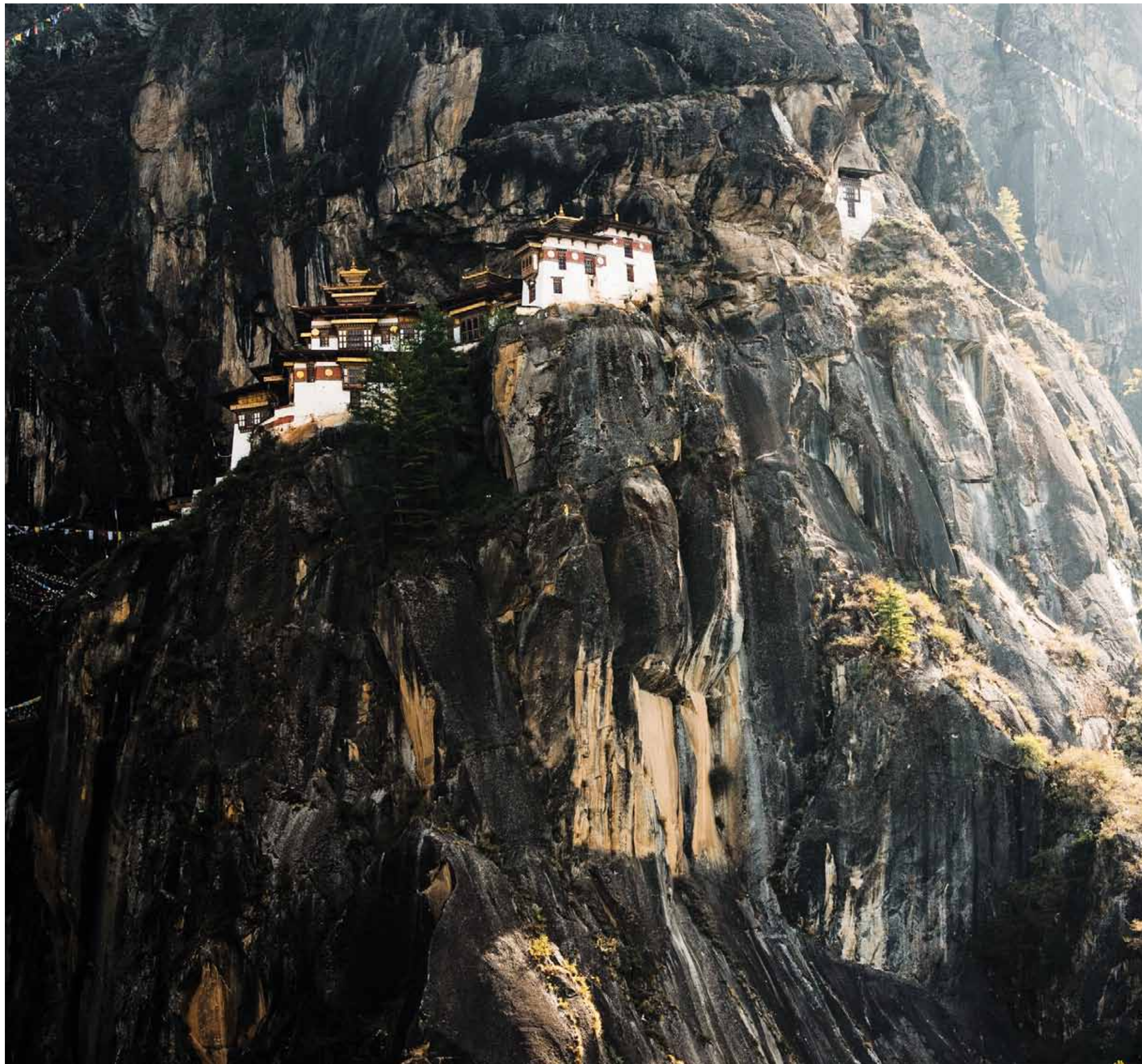
And so, Tiger's Nest drew the two of us – the best of friends – Curtis S Chin, most recently the U.S. Ambassador to the Asian Development Bank, and Dhamey Norgay, the youngest son of the legendary Tenzing Norgay Sherpa. Tenzing was the first man, along with Sir Edmund Hillary, to scale Mount Everest in 1953.

Chin and I had worked together in Hong Kong and Switzerland, and then moved on separately to Manila, Bangkok, and New Delhi. But now, looking up at Tiger's Nest, our corporate and diplomatic lives were a world away. “How much further,” we both wondered – as no doubt did many of the travellers we had passed. But there was to be no turning back. We had held off on coming to Tiger's Nest until the last day or so of this reunion in Bhutan.

And indeed, for the last 10 days, each new sunrise had brought new adventures in this “Land of the Thunder Dragon” though one of us, Dhamey, now called Bhutan home after taking a break from the corporate life to launch the boutique adventure travel company, The Noble Traveller, with his Bhutanese wife, Sonam. And the other of us, Curtis, was making yet another return journey to this landlocked Buddhist kingdom sandwiched between Tibet and India.

A week and one-half earlier, we had bid farewell to Dhamey's wife and their seven-year-old daughter Nangsel in the capital city

UP AND AWAY
THIS PAGE:
Taktsang Lhakhang
or The Tiger's
Nest monastery



of Thimphu to embark on a trek with friends and family to secluded highland lakes in Western Bhutan in the Haa Valley area.

From traditional heated stone baths to pristine rivers, the Haa Valley also is home to Dhamey's in-laws, and our trip was a chance for Dhamey's two sons, Khenrab (aged 11) and Norbu (9), to visit their family home, as well as embark on their first Himalayan adventure. Our destination of Nob Tsonapatra was some 13,000 feet above sea level. And so off to granduncle's house we went.

We travelled first by road, piling into two cars loaded down with our tents and gear. Our route took us out of the Thimpu Valley and over the Chele La Pass at 13,000 feet above sea level, the highest motorable pass in Bhutan. We paused for the views along the way, and magically, distant clouds parted momentarily for us to glimpse a view of Jomolhari, a sacred Himalayan peak on the Tibetan-Bhutanese border.

Pausing now and then to savour a cup of traditional Bhutanese tea or yet another spectacular view, we travelled quickly. Before we knew it, we were being treated to traditional roasted rice and barley snacks and more milk tea at Sonam's family's ancestral home in the village of Wangcha in the Haa Valley. Massive wooden beams were everywhere. Traditional Bhutanese symbols decorated the main house's exterior walls. Stone walls and paths abounded.

That first day ended with a sunset that turned the waters of the Haa Chu, or Haa River, to gold. And the following days also went quickly as we trekked along rarely trodden – at least by tourists – forest paths perhaps once travelled by Tibetan and Bhutanese traders of

SWEET RETREAT CLOCKWISE:

Curtis Chin and Dhamey Norgay; an impressive view of the Himalayan mountain range; camping on the Nob Tsonapatra; the elderly preparing the hot stone bath in the HAA River



The monastery's spectacular setting makes it certainly one of the most photographed places in Bhutan

salt and other goods who walked these very steps years ago.

Pine trees. Wild flowers offering up a patch of bright yellow or brilliant blue. Yak caravans. Maybe even the hint of a snow leopard. A night sky full of stars. Mist-shrouded trees, and then open vistas, welcomed us as the days passed by, making all too real the saying that sometimes the journey, not the destination, is what matters most.

A rainy September morning did little to dampen our spirits as we breakfasted our last morning on pancakes cooked somehow over our camp "stove." A rainbow appeared and slowly faded away as we began our return to Haa and onward to Thimpu.

For the relatively small but growing number of visitors who make the journey to Bhutan – the Kingdom received a then record 64,000 tourists in 2011, according to the Tourism Council of Bhutan – the reasons are

varied. For us, and particularly Dhamey, it is the mountains of the Himalayas will always draw us back.

2011 saw the celebration of the Royal wedding of Their Majesties the King and Queen of Bhutan, drawing in special guests from around the world. Another wedding, between Hong Kong celebrities Tony Leung and Carina Lau in 2008, led to a spike in visitors from Hong Kong movie fans. Indeed, perhaps Bhutan offers the ultimate destination wedding locale, with luxury hotels from Aman Resorts, the Taj Group and Uma Hotels and Resorts.

For others, this remote Kingdom – where spirituality, respect for nature and tradition, and the recognition that happiness is more than about money are a way of life – offers a destination of star attractions, from joyous festivals, or *tsechus*, to centuries-old fortress-monasteries, known as *dzongs*, in lush green valleys.

For centuries, Bhutan was isolated from





The Noragay children on the trek site flashing their biggest smiles

MOUNTAIN HIGH

FROM TOP: Healthy cows nourishing their body; the magnificent fortress amidst the lush valley

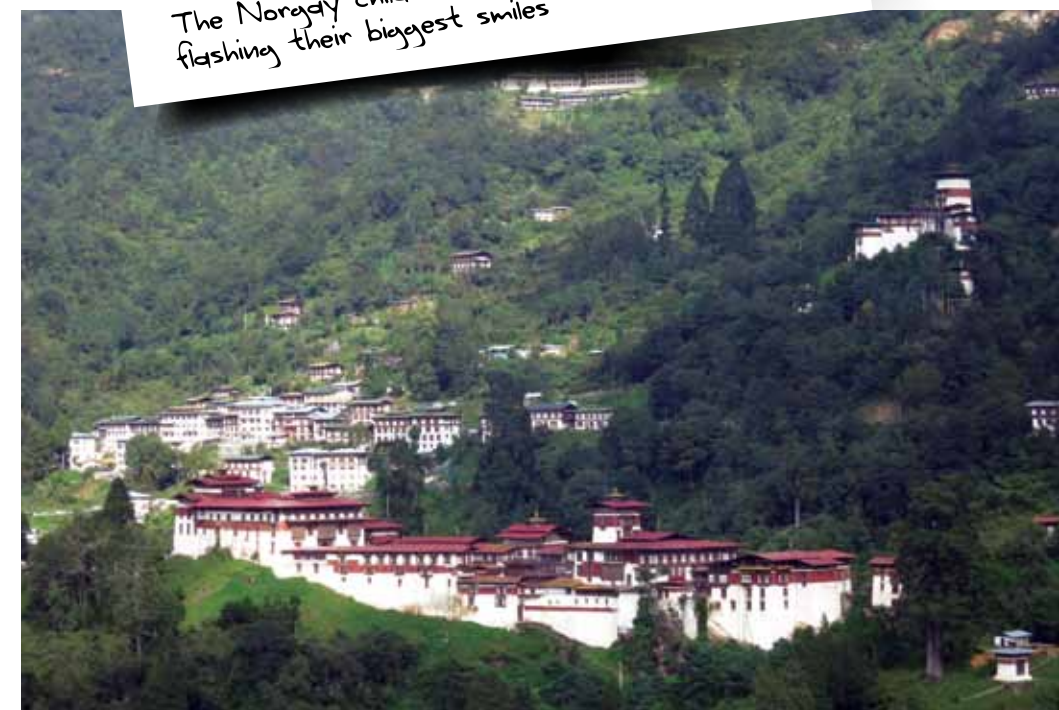
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most of the world, forbidding tourists to enter the country until 1974. Those days are long past. Prince Charles came trekking in 1998. And Cameron Diaz, Sarah Jessica Parker, Brad Pitt, Jennifer Lopez, Keanu Reeves, and Richard Gere have all been spotted in town, whether on holiday, on location or in support of Bhutan's conservation efforts, which have helped keep some 60 percent of the nation still under forest cover.

Much like another small mountainous nation, Switzerland, this landlocked kingdom

has succeeded so far in charting its very own unique path forward amidst much bigger and more powerful neighbours. And there the similarities do not end.

Indeed, soon after our return from Haa, the two of us embarked on another "friends and family" road trip to Central Bhutan. This time, we travelled with Dhamey's father-in-law to Bhutan's own little piece of Switzerland – the mountain valley of Bumthang, which is the spiritual heart of the kingdom and some nine hours' drive from the capital city.



The drive took us through the Dochula Pass, at 10,000 feet, where distant snow-capped mountains formed a backdrop to 108 Druk Wangyal chortens, or stupas, commissioned by the eldest Queen Mother.

Near another simple but magnificent Buddhist chorten in a mountain valley, we stopped for a picnic lunch of traditional Bhutanese food, including rice and our favorite dish of *ema datchi*, made of cheese and chilli peppers. After lunch we journeyed on, passing the mountain fortress monastery known as Punakha Dzong. This architectural wonder and the surrounding district have been inextricably linked with momentous occasions in Bhutanese history. It served as the capital of the country from 1637 to 1907, and hosted Bhutan's first national assembly in 1953. The magnificent structure is the second oldest and second largest of its kind in the kingdom.

Onward we drove on winding mountain roads through dense forests, and by late afternoon we had made our way into the town of Jakar in the heart of Bumthang Valley. Site of some of the kingdom's oldest monasteries, the Bumthang Valley is also home to The Swiss Guesthouse, run by longtime family friend Fritz Maurer. The Swiss Guesthouse was the first guesthouse in Bumthang, and is located in Karsumphe, a historical place with a small, traditional farmhouse. The old house served in the 1970s as the headquarters of a dairy and forestry project supported and staffed by Swiss. No journey back home to Thimpu from Bumthang is complete without a stop for a unique souvenir of Swiss cheese

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

THIS PAGE: The Trongsa Dzong, the largest *dzong* fortress in Bhutan



SCENE STEALER

FROM TOP: Prayer flags on the way to the Tiger's Nest;
OPPOSITE: The Dochula pass (*Druk Wangyal Chortens*) gives a panoramic view of the Himalayan mountain range; the powerfully built fortress and an exemplary piece of *dzong* architecture



Chin, Norgay, and his two sons together with his wife's brother enjoys the beautiful view



and perhaps some Bhutanese apples and apple juice. And how a bit of *khule* (hearty Bumthang buckwheat pancake) or a piece of Bhutan's best Swiss apple strudel would have served us well a few days later as we took a break halfway up on our journey to Tiger's Nest.

Legend has it that Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, visited and sanctified Bhutan centuries ago when evil spirits abounded. Flying in on a tigress' back, he subdued a local demon and meditated for three months in a mountain cave at what is now Tiger's Nest monastery.

With no flying tigers of our own at hand, we climbed onward on foot toward Taktsang Lhakhang, reaching a rocky outcropping that marked the final approach to the monastery. Hundreds of steps carved into the cliff face led us to a small temple, where we offered *puja*, or prayers, and lit butter lamps for peace.

Continuing on, the steps took us back down into a gorge criss-crossed by prayer flags, and then back up, across a bridge past a spectacular waterfall and to the very gates of Tiger's Nest.

Breathtaking scenery, a pristine environment, rich Buddhist culture, friendly people, and relatively few other visitors. If you have not yet visited Bhutan, why wait? Why indeed save the best for last? [T](#)

What makes a noble traveller?

With more than 400 tour companies operating in Bhutan and growing air connections and interest, one key challenge for the Kingdom is to ensure that tourism's impact remains a positive one – high value, low impact (according to the Tourism Council). Dhamey and his wife Sonam say travellers can do their part by being "noble travellers," whether travelling in Bhutan or in their home country.

"A noble traveller is one who embarks on a rare journey – not simply a vacation – for personal growth and to enrich one's inner self through interaction with people and cultures in distant lands. Wise words indeed from the Norgay family.

Let the journeys begin.
www.noblebhutan.com