

# BHUTAN

By Carrie Polhill



*Sang Choekor Buddhist College, Bumdra trek start – Carrie Polhill*

Bhutan is a country roughly the size of Switzerland (but with 10% of the population!) nestling in the Himalaya, sandwiched between the Tibet autonomous region of China and India and due east of Nepal. The country has a broad topography with a subtropical climate in the south, sub-alpine in the north, and 72% of the land is forest.

Since first allowing visitors from abroad since 1974, in 2016 visitor numbers to Bhutan increased 35% to 209,000 lucky people (mainly from India) who got to explore its beautiful hiking paths, traditional culture and architecture. Famous for measuring its progress through a “Gross National Happiness” instead of GDP, carbon-neutral, and tobacco-free, we decided to find out what it’s all about before the country changes forever.

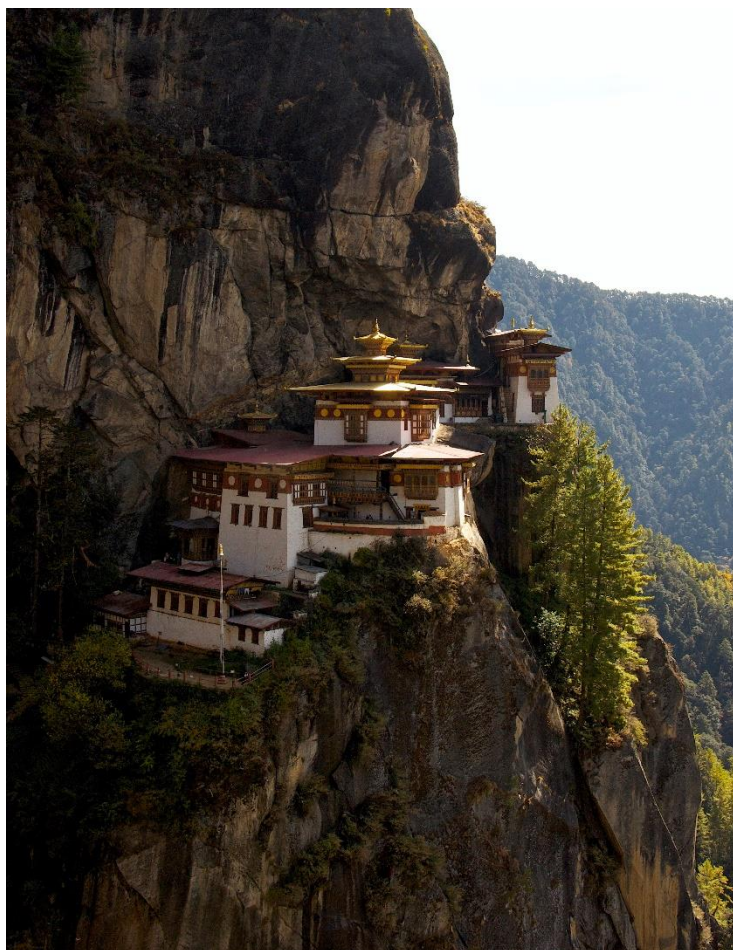
Arriving one sunny Sunday in November on a thrilling 1 hour flight from Kathmandu, we were met at Paro airport (2235m) by our guide, Pema (wearing traditional Bhutanese dress), and were quickly whisked off to an afternoon of sightseeing. Our first trek, the Bumdra Trek, commenced the next day, and we chose this as an alternative way of seeing the Tiger’s Nest monastery (Taktshang Lhakhang). The hike started at Sanchoekor Buddhist College (2800m), where we joined morning prayers, before a 5 hour acclimatisation hike to the Bumdra monastery at 3800m. Climbing up through an ancient hemlock forest, with air so pure, metre lengths of lichen hanging from the trees, we definitely felt the effects of the altitude. On reaching the monastery, we climbed a further 45 minutes to a beautiful summit decorated with prayer flags, before descending to our camp at Bumdra.



*Prayer flags Bumdra summit – Carrie Polhill*

The following day took us past temples, through forest and yak pastures to reach the famous Tiger's Nest monastery (3180m) ahead of the crowds. Descending from the hike, we were soon met by our

driver, who took us to the base of the Dagala Thousand Lake trek, 2 hours away. Hiking up through the forest, we enjoyed the view across the valley to the village of Gyhekha, before reaching a clearing where our horses and support team joined us to set up camp for the night (3290m).



*Tigers Nest Monastery, Taktshang Lhakhang – Carrie Polhill*

On day 3 we continued our climb beyond the tree line, crossing frozen streams, with the Himalaya coming into sight in the distance behind us: Jomolhari (7314m), and Tshering Gang (6789m). Pausing at a windy col for lunch at 3700m, we continued the slog to the yak hut at Labatama (4300m) where we made camp for the night. Despite the freezing temperatures we were well looked after by our kind Bhutanese guides with tents, 4 season sleeping bags, blankets and hot water bottles.

Day 4 was summit day, and I awoke feeling quite nervous! Passing a series of lakes (mostly frozen but definitely worth coming back to in summer for a swim and the rare blue poppies), we reached the base of the intended Jomo peak, and a slow 30 minutes' scramble took us to the summit at 5500m. Despite some haze, we had views of the Himalaya in the distance and could just make out Everest itself!



*Dagala Lakes View from Jomo summit – Carrie Polhill*



*View of Bhutanese Himalaya from Tsari La Pass – Carrie Polhill*

The next two days were spent descending towards the capital city, Thimphu. I should mention we had many amazing meals during our trek: dishes of rice, chicken, beef, noodles, edible fern, paneer and much more. We descended across neves and rivers and bush-whacked through expansive rhododendron fields, before a final view of the Himalaya at Tsangla pass.

On our final night, we made camp in the forest, looking down at the lights in the tiny capital of Thimphu. After 6 days cut off from civilisation, we finished our trek in the village of Chamgang, welcomed back by the sound of Buddhist chants wafting up from the valley.