

Why Is Everyone Going to Bhutan?

By Jane Margolies
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TWO years ago, Penny George "couldn't have located Bhutan on a map." But after hearing friends rave about their trip to the tiny Buddhist kingdom tucked in the Himalayas, Ms. George, president of a foundation that promotes holistic medicine, was hooked. This fall, she and her husband made the long journey from their home in Minneapolis to Bhutan's sole airport, then spent seven days on a guided tour, trekking into virgin forests, tiptoeing into temples and passing through villages where men and women still go about in traditional dress. "Bhutan has bubbled up in the collective consciousness," said Ms. George. "I just felt like I had to go."

Move over, Cambodia. Bhutan is the new must-see destination in southern Asia. With Tibet in the grip of Communist China and Nepal deemed unsafe by the United States State Department, this peaceful nation half the size of Indiana is emerging as a big draw, attracting those in search of a spiritual journey, a hiking adventure - or just a chance to experience a place before the rest of the world gets there. The number of visitors to Bhutan, as small as a few thousand not long ago, increased to 9,000 last year, a third of them Americans. Travel agents report an upswing in interest in Bhutan, and tour operators like Abercrombie & Kent are adding both trekking and cultural trips to their rosters. "Among those who have been everywhere, seen everything," said Rok Klancnik of the World Tourism Organization, a United Nations agency based in Madrid, "interest in Bhutan is growing."

But why? How did a place with one main road, and only five months of prime travel weather, catapult to the cutting edge of high-end tourism? And how, indeed, does any destination suddenly appear on the radar screen? Bhutan - a Brigadoon of astonishing beauty - has done what it takes to become a travel hot spot:

CREATE A MYSTIQUE Never gave Bhutan much thought until recently? You're not alone. Until 1972 outsiders

weren't even allowed into the hermetic kingdom sandwiched between China and India. That year, Bhutan invited foreign dignitaries to the coronation of



the present king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, and roads, lodges and an airfield were built to accommodate the guests. Once that basic infrastructure was in place, the country began, in 1974, to admit tourists - but only a select few. The lesson, according to Lisa Lindblad, a New York travel agent, was: "If you keep

something out of the offering, it captures the imagination, it develops a mystique."

"It's difficult to get to, obviously, and there's very little in the way of infrastructure, which is part of the reason people want to go there," said George Morgan-Grenville, president of Abercrombie & Kent Inc. "I think what you're seeing in Bhutan is the early adopters. These are the people that want to travel to a destination before anybody else gets there."

SET A HIGH THRESHOLD Unlike, say, Nepal, which threw open its doors to visitors and was quickly overrun, Bhutan has taken a cautious approach to tourism. "We learned from the mistakes of others," said Dasho Lhatu Wangchuk, director general of the Department of Tourism in Bhutan. From the start, travelers were required to get visas and book with an authorized tour operator (independent travel in Bhutan is not permitted), and they had to pay a minimum per-day fee (\$200 in high season; low-budget backpackers need not apply). That fee wasn't the only thing that helped establish Bhutan as an exclusive destination. There were also the "quotas." According to Mr. Wangchuk, Bhutan never actually set hard-and-fast tourist quotas, but rather came up with target figures based on the number of people it felt its limited lodgings could accommodate (the original figure was a few thousand visitors; the current number is 7,000, which has obviously been exceeded). Still, the notion of there being a finite number of trips available every year has, many feel, contributed to Bhutan's cachet.

WELCOME A FEW LUXURY HOTELS Gray washcloths as rough as sandpaper. Skimpy hand towels for drying off after a bath. Bhutanese guest houses, though they might offer the charm of stenciled walls and handpainted furniture, have been notoriously lacking in hotel amenities (and even, at times, adequate heating). But now two new five-star resorts in the settlement of Paro are upping the ante. Open since June, the Amankora Paro - with 24 paneled suites for \$1,000 a night, double occupancy, plus tax and service, but including meals - is the first of six spa-equipped lodges being built in Bhutan by the Singapore-based Amanresorts chain. (When the other five properties open this year, Aman groupies will be able to make a circuit of the kingdom, all within the company's pampering embrace.)

And in November, Uma Paro, the latest from the Hong Kong developer Christina Ong's Como Hotels and Resorts, began welcoming guests to its 20 rooms and 9 villas (the latter, which start at \$900 in high season, plus meals, tax and service, come staffed with butlers). Now travelers can unwind after a hike up to the cliff-clinging Taktsang monastery, one of Bhutan's most famous sites - with a deep-muscle massage. "Clients who have refused to consider Bhutan because of its reputation as a tough destination are now all excited about going," said **Pallavi Shah**, president of **Our Personal Guest**, a New York travel agency.

CREATE A BUZZ Sixteen pages in the November issue of Condé Nast Traveler, in which James Truman, the editorial director of Condé Nast, recounts his own adventures in Bhutan, don't hurt. (Although a warning from Ruth Reichl, the editor of Gourmet, that Mr. Truman was about to encounter "the world's worst cuisine" might have put off some readers.) Nor does having a few celebrity visitors to boast about. In response to a query about high-profile guests from this reporter, an Amanresorts official revealed that David Tang, founder of the Shanghai Tang stores, had chosen the Amankora for his recent 50th-birthday celebration, attended by "Fergie and a whole bunch of socialites from London." Mr. Tang's cellphone number was readily supplied, and the retailer, reachable in Hong Kong, was more than happy to drop the names of a few of the glittering guests (Kate Moss, the model Frankie Ryder and, yes, the Duchess of York) at his weeklong shindig. And, of course, to rave about the resort.

HOLD THE GUILT At peace with itself and its neighbors, Bhutan isn't marred by political conflict or extreme poverty. Travelers don't have to contend with beggars or worry about crime, and it's possible to come into friendly contact with the Bhutanese people (English is taught in schools). Besides, who wouldn't be captivated by a country where the king,

who is revered by his people, has instituted a policy of Gross National Happiness as a way to measure progress in his land? "Going there during our presidential campaign was almost healing," said Penny George of Minneapolis.

CULTIVATE THE EXOTIC Although satellite TV has landed in Bhutan and cellphones are in use, the government has mandated that women wear the traditional kira, a Bhutanese kimono, and men the gho, a smocklike wrapper that comes to the knees, in schools and public offices. (The country was also the first to ban the sale of tobacco and smoking in public places, just last month.) The Bhutanese live pretty much the way they always have - in pastoral hamlets. Their traditional culture, which revolves around Buddhism, is largely intact. "It's more Tibet than Tibet," exclaimed Marsha Blank of Watchung, N.J., a docent at the Newark Museum.

IMPRESS THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS The alpine highlands! The lowland jungle! Thanks to the government's farsighted conservation measures, Bhutan possesses flora and fauna that is unrivaled in the Himalayas. While Nepal and India's forests have been plundered, Bhutan's, which cover 72 percent of its land, are in fact increasing. One popular pilgrimage spot for Bhutan-goers is the Phobjika Valley, where endangered black-necked cranes migrate for the winter.

CROSS YOUR FINGERS The government, banking on revenues from tourism, has set a goal of 15,000 visitors by 2007, and is encouraging the country's fledgling hospitality industry. Hotels - and not just the foreign-owned "destination resorts," such as Amankora and Uma Paro, but also Bhutanese-owned lodges - are springing up. And the country's single airline, Druk Air, which provides the only flights in and out of the country, has just bought two Airbus 319's to handle the additional traffic.

Bhutan watchers, like the Bhutanese government itself, are waiting eagerly to see whether cracking open the kingdom's doors a little wider yields the benefits hoped for - or results in the undoing of this place so often referred to as Shangri-La. "Bhutan is going from a medieval to a postmodern culture very quickly - from no phone to cellphone, from no mail service to the Internet," said Brent Olson, who has been to the country more than 35 times since 1986 and is now the director of business development for Geographic Expeditions, a tour operator based in San Francisco; (800) 777-8183; www.geoex.com.

Marsha Blank, for one, is glad she and her husband visited Bhutan this fall. Avid travelers, they have been twice to China and twice to Vietnam in the last dozen years. "We saw tremendous changes in those countries in a four- or five-year span of time," she said. "I'm glad we got to Bhutan when we did, before it was too late."