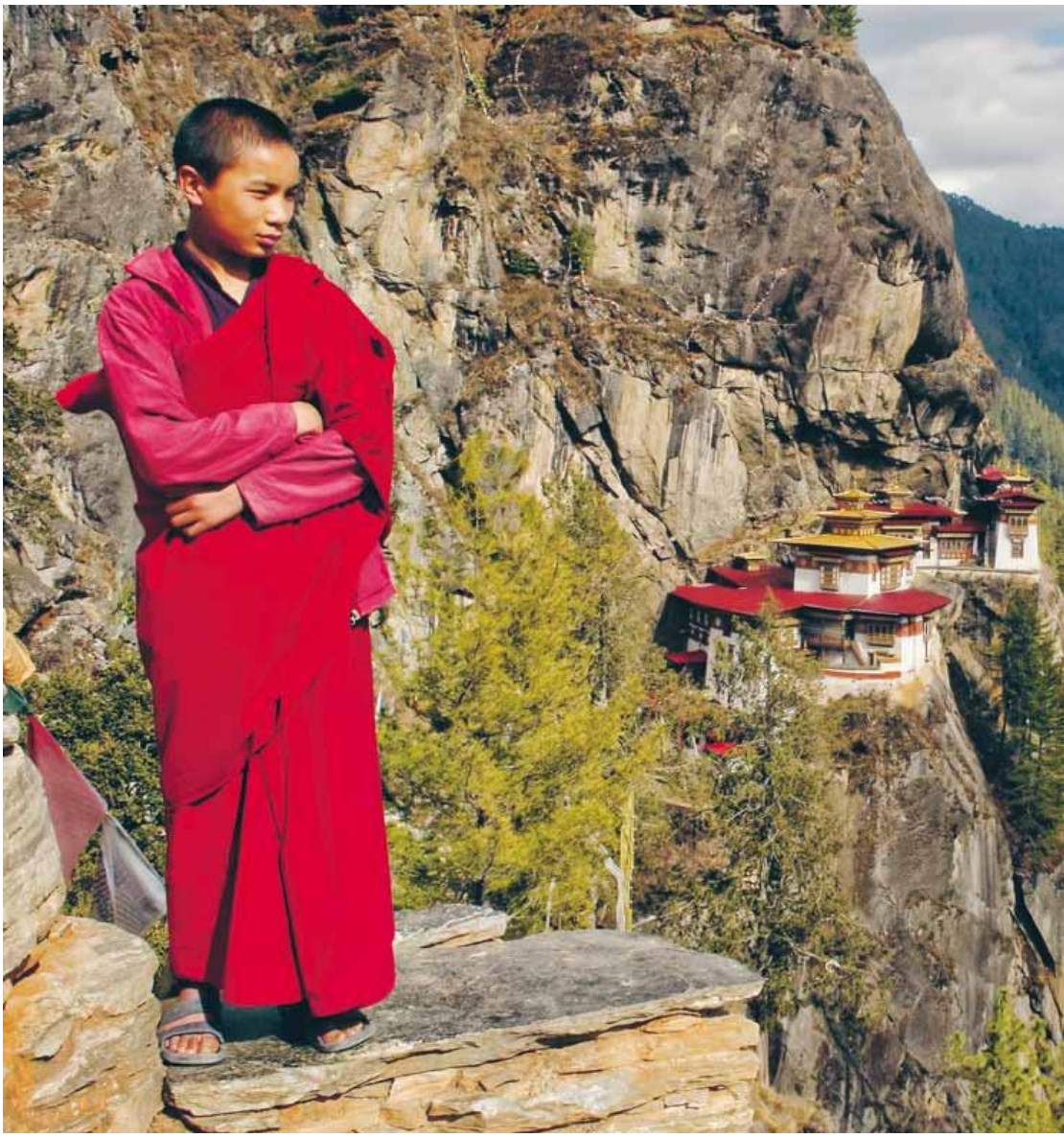


PEOPLE say one of two things when I tell them I'm going to Bhutan. Either: "Where the hell's that?" Or: "Oooh, you're so lucky, I've always wanted to go there." To the first, the answer is: it's a kingdom in the Himalayas between India and the Tibetan plateau. To the second: yes, very lucky – it is one of the most magical and beautiful places on Earth where truly you travel back in time.

Something different is promised before we even land. The Druk Air in-flight magazine carries stories of dragons, mermaids, pilgrimages and karma – the stuff of everyday life in Bhutan? The plane almost scatters the virgin snow off the mountains as it wings its way down valleys, passing 14 of the planet's highest mountains. Then the pilot manages one of the world's seven most difficult landings, negotiated only during daylight because of the close mountains and sudden runway dip.

The arrival card reads: "Happiness is a Place." This with a nod to Charles Schulz as much as to the country's famous guiding principle of Gross National Happiness, in which its inhabitants' contentment is prioritised over gross national product. The clean, high-altitude air itself is enough to make me happy: smoking is forbidden and car numbers strictly controlled. Plus the Bhutanese insist on low-volume, high-spending tourists – visitors who were only allowed into the country in 1974; whose minimum daily spend is set at $250US per person; and who now average 50,000 a year, a mere fraction of the 160,000 who watch the Edinburgh Tattoo annually. We're lucky indeed.

At the Taj Tashi hotel in the capital Thimpu, I look at my notes. Our guide Karma has imparted gems in Queen's English peppered with archaic phrases: "Please be informed that when a man wants to marry he goes night hunting and climbs through the girl's window. If he is still there in the morning, he is considered married." And: "No traffic lights, no street names ... closed to the world for centuries, never colonised. Didn't get television until 1999. Speak Dzongkha. Constitutional monarchy: king and queen revered. Population 675,000. Just 98,000 internet users. Tomorrow is Day of Blessed Rain, end of monsoon season. Chalet-like houses/trefoil windows/beams painted with lotus flowers etc. Red chillies drying on tin roofs..."

ON TARGET A child takes aim with a traditional bow and arrow. Top: A young monk from the nearby Tiger's Nest monastery looks into the Paro valley. Main photograph: Paula Bronstein/Getty

My concentration is interrupted, delightfully. "Would you like to learn archery, our national sport?" someone asks. We're helped into the national costume of kira (me) and gho (him) – everyone in Bhutan wears it – to try our luck with bamboo bows and arrows.

My husband and I spend nine days in the kingdom, visiting Thimpu, Punakha, Gangtey and Paro – being driven bumpily from the west to the centre of the country over winding roads that aren't always even simply pot-holed Tarmac, but rather mere dirt tracks beside which langur monkeys chatter and on which landslides cause delays; past kingfishers, banana plants and marijuana which grows wild; and being charmed all the while by our guide and driver (his name Pema means 'lotus flower').

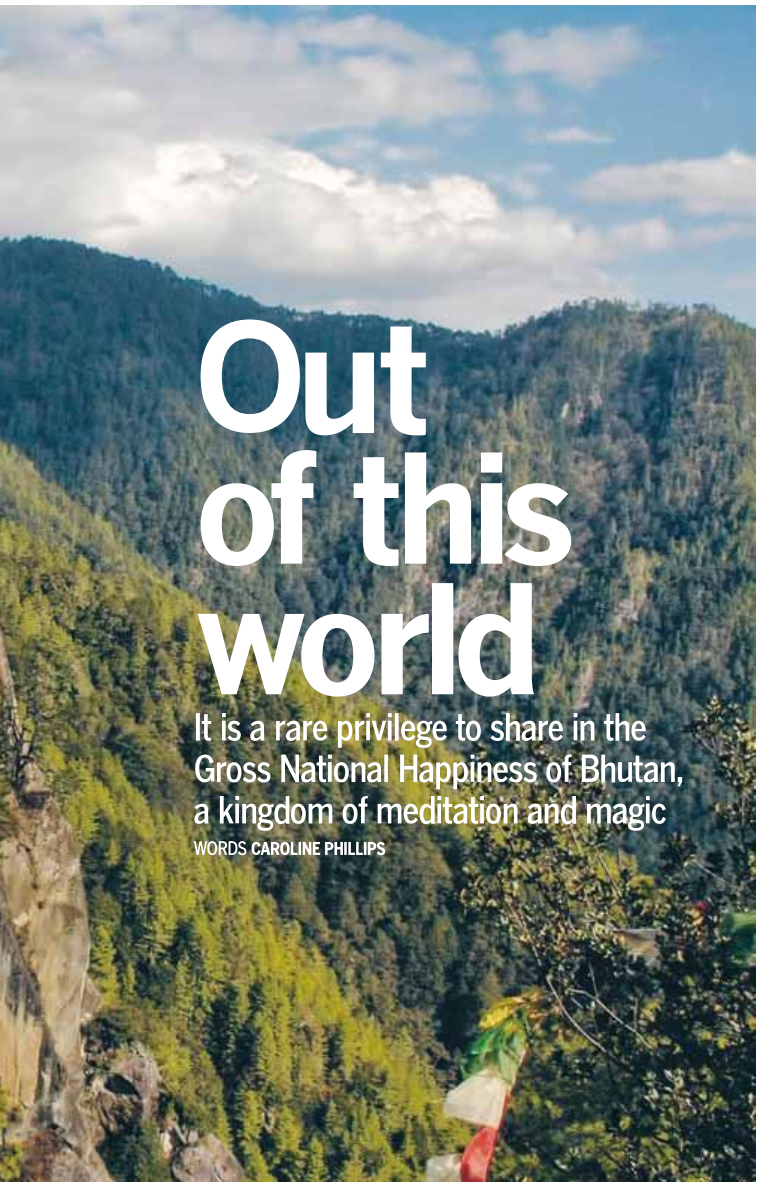
We stay in luxury in the Amankora – temple-like in its glorious silence – on blue, pine-cloaked slopes overlooking Thimpu. They book us a private ceremony in the nearby Dechen Phodrang Monastery: seven burgundy and saffron-clad lamas sitting cross-legged on the floor chanting for our health and wellbeing, amid candles, food offerings to Buddha and the haunting sound of temple cymbals and clarinet.

We laze next in the Uma Punakha hotel with its double-height glass-walled lounge overlooking fluorescent paddy fields, vertiginous mountains and the emerald green glacial waters of the Mo Chhu River – a view better than heaven's and worth the trip in itself. We soak hiked-out muscles in traditional Bhutanese hot stone baths at the spa, the mineral-infusing rocks baked in the fire for hours before being put into the water.

We enjoy the newly opened Gangtey Goenpa Lodge with its flickering bukhari (wood-burning stove) and bath tubs in its bedrooms overlooking the remote Gangtey Valley. It's to this valley that the rare black-necked cranes migrate; here in the Goenpa, where the lamas claim to have hidden yeti remains; and over which, this year, they're starting Bhutan's first hot air balloon safaris.

We end our trip in Uma Paro with its circular, wooden dining room in which we spend hours savouring a Bhutanese feast of river-green soup with nettle curd, yak curry and the national dish of cheese and chilli, gazing at forests and their organic garden into which the occasional Himalayan black bear – under the watchful eyes of security – comes to pinch a peach.

It's here, too, that we have the best massage this side of the equator and the GM invites the world's expert on Gross National Happiness, Khenpo



Out of this world

It is a rare privilege to share in the Gross National Happiness of Bhutan, a kingdom of meditation and magic

WORDS **CAROLINE PHILLIPS**

Phuntsok Tashi, to dine with us. What to choose as the highlights of a holiday in this mystical, magical kingdom of gods, hungry ghosts, titans and thunder dragons? The Vajrayana Buddhist people with their gentle and compassionate ways, tangible spirituality, mantras, stupas, streams turning prayer wheels and prayer flags forever fluttering in the wind? The pristine environment where plastic bags are forbidden, plans are afoot to make it the world's first self-sustaining organic nation and where there are Himalayan peaks that no man has ever scaled for fear of upsetting the gods? Or Gangtey or Punakha, where time goes so slowly that the hands of the clock almost go backwards in front of our eyes?

Let me flag up some unforgettable experiences. We're in Bhutan in September, at an auspicious time in the lunar calendar. So we experience the tsechus (religious festivals) that take place in the dzongs (ancient fortified buildings) in Thimpu, Punakha and Gangtey. We witness masked monks with whips and drums purifying the ground, holding symbolic wooden phalluses, dispensing holy saffron water from receptacles made of human skulls while performing sacred dances that are divinely inspired and said to cleanse those who observe them.

Another experience is engraved forever in my heart: the four-hour hike by foot to Tiger's Nest. It's a monastery clinging precipitously to sheer rock face 10,000ft above sea level, and makes me wonder how anyone without a flying tiger could ever have built it.

So: "Bhutan: where the hell's that?" The longer this charmed place can stay unintruded upon by the modern world, the better for travellers. But with the introduction of television and the internet, such days are numbered. Go soon, before it gets spoilt. Go while crime is almost non-existent. While the landscape is little tarnished. And while its Buddhist values hold and its near feudal system works.

Are we lucky to have visited? Profoundly blessed, more like. □

FACT FILE

Cox & Kings (0207 873 5000, coxandkings.co.uk) has a 15-day/13-night escorted tour to Bhutan priced from £3,795 per person including flights from London, transfers, excursions and accommodation with breakfast daily and most other meals. The same tour on a private basis is from £3,945 per person, with a supplement for the Edinburgh flights of £195 per person.

DO NOT DISTURB

AIRTH CASTLE HOTEL & SPA, AIRTH, STIRLINGSHIRE

FROM the motorway, the turreted castle of Airth stands out splendidly from its surrounding trees. It is an unusual corner of Stirlingshire, just before you cross over the Kincardine Bridge north to Alloa and the Ochil Hills beyond, which float on the horizon of the Forth Valley. Airth Castle and Spa is a hotel of two parts. The castle itself, which has had a chequered history stretching back to the 14th century, was largely refurbished in the 19th to give it its shortbread tin appeal. The other part is a newer hotel built out of the former stables.

You are likely to be put in rooms in the newer block as the castle is a popular location for weddings – there were events on both days of the weekend we stayed. The castle offers two rooms for ceremonies – including the smallish, recently refurbished Robert Bruce room downstairs, which should lend smaller groups a feeling of having a wedding in a candle-lit private keep. Both make the castle a lovely backdrop for holding and celebrating nuptials. The castle essentially becomes an exclusive venue for some larger weddings. Its honeymoon suite, also recently refurbished with the thickest carpets I have ever seen, features a round jacuzzi bath perfect for two, providing lucky couples with a particularly opulent choice.

For those who are just having a getaway, you can still enjoy the hotel's amenities. Another wedding party, being held in the main hotel's round function suite, was far enough away that it didn't impinge on our stay.

WINING AND DINING

The Grill Room and Piano Bar is where you can have breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and supper. It is located in a vast solarium in the courtyard behind the main hotel and does indeed feature an amusing, if cheesy, player piano. The varied dinner menu offers wide appeal. There's tapas; the beer-battered Scrabster cod loin is a posh version of the British favourite; but it's the steaks you will want to go for. The kitchen boasts a Spanish 'Inka' charcoal grill, and whatever the merits of that piece of kit, our shared steak board for two, which had fillet, sirloin and rib eye with a range of sauces, was magnificent. Make sure you book early, though, as it is popular with residents and seating may be limited.

ROOM SERVICE

Rooms in the main hotel have a range of sizes – we stayed in a plush premier suite decorated in a tasteful monochrome. The windows opened out into the centre of the U-shaped building, letting in a welcome breath of fresh air but no noise.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

Airth is close to plenty of gems. We had already seen the amusing folly nearby, the Dunmore Pineapple,

built by the Earl for his wife Susan in 1761. But if you are fond of castles, there are two more within striking distance. There is the ruined grandeur of the Palace of Linlithgow not ten minutes' drive away. We also stopped at Blackness Castle. Intriguingly named (they really should produce T-shirts) the 15th-century fortress sits on a prominent point on the Firth of Forth overlooking a stretch of beach and the rail bridge in the distance. We also visited the Falkirk Wheel, a genuinely interesting visitor attraction, even if you're not sure what an Archimedes Screw is (hint: you will find out).

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

With a deluxe room in the main hotel on Saturday night going at £117, this is higher than budget but not an eye-watering expense. Extend your stay until Sunday night and prices fall to £65.

LITTLE EXTRAS

Oh yes, how can I forget the spa? There is a small but perfectly formed (and welcomingly warm) pool, with hot tub, as well as dry and wet saunas.

There are six treatment rooms for the indulgent. Pad down in the fluffy white robes and slippers available in your room and enjoy a quick swim before dinner.

And if you are curious about the history of the castle, its relationship to the family of Robert the Bruce, and what might happen to the dramatic ruin of the former church next to it, ask Hugh Loudon, the castle's concierge, who has worked there for so long he is almost part of the building's history.

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

Young, enthusiastic and friendly staff. □

Erikka Askeland

Airth Castle Hotel & Spa, Airth, Stirlingshire (01324 831411, www.airthcastlehotel.com), deluxe rooms from £179 DBB per night (£89.50 pp per night).

Special offer: enjoy a special rate of £49.50 per person per night, inclusive of dinner and full Scottish breakfast, based on two people sharing a classic double/twin room. Valid until 31 March, 2014, subject to availability (excluding Valentine's weekend and Mother's Day). Call 0844 800 4000 and quote 'Scotland on Sunday.