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EMBRAER MAGAZINE
VOL 20 ➤ 2023

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LAND OF THE DRAGONS

Bhutan, the last surviving Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom tucked between India and the Tibetan Plateau, is a tiny nation with an outsized commitment to preserving its culture, traditions and pristine natural setting

When global borders closed during the pandemic, Bhutan seized the opportunity to upgrade its travel infrastructure in order to bolster its sustainably minded “high value, low volume” tourism approach.

“The Bhutanese government actively promotes community-based tourism, ensuring that local communities benefit from all tourism activities,” said Choening Dorji, Director of Partnerships at MyBhutan, a locally based bespoke travel designer that boasts unprecedented access. With the halt of international travelers during COVID-19, the Bhutan government launched an initiative that required travel-related businesses to undergo recertification, making sure all services offered were of outstanding quality. In addition, a group of national volunteers (affectionately referred to as the “Guardians of Peace”) banded together to upgrade walking trails and bridges across the kingdom; hotels and airports were renovated; and tourism professionals received additional training.

The government also raised the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) from USD 65 to USD 200 a night (a new promotion provides complimentary additional nights for travelers staying four nights or longer). “Revenue from the nightly fee plays a pivotal

role in various aspects of Bhutan’s development, including free education and healthcare, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, transportation and infrastructure improvements, and, perhaps most importantly, poverty reduction programs and community development,” said Dorji.

The SDF is part of an overarching philosophy of governance anchored in the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which prioritizes the happiness and well-being of Bhutanese citizens over economic growth. “The Bhutanese way of life embraces peace, appreciation and interconnectedness,” Dorji explained. “The government is committed to creating a society where all beings have the opportunity to flourish, and this deep-rooted reverence for life has allowed Bhutanese society to coexist in prosperity with nature as well as neighboring countries.”

Matthew DeSantis, the Founder of MyBhutan, explained that by limiting a deluge of mass tourism, Bhutan focuses its efforts on attracting discerning individuals interested in learning about and engaging with Bhutan’s unique philosophies. “Guests can intimately experience Bhutan’s culture in its most natural state while making meaningful one-on-one connections that give rise to lasting friendships,” he said.

WORDS Nora Walsh, IMAGE © MyBhutan



Bhutan boasts spectacular festivals that celebrate the local culture and religion with elaborate masked costumes, traditional dances, music, and religious chants



EMBRAER TIP

Enjoy access to the most challenging airports using the Praetor 600's full fly-by-wire technology that offers reduced pilot workload for a smooth flight experience into Paro International Airport (PBH).

“The most special places, in my opinion, lie deep within Bhutan’s remote villages and natural ranges,” said DeSantis. “Heritage is alive in these villages, and each has its own style of dress and way of life.” DeSantis recommends visiting the nomadic Layaps community in the northern reaches that have managed to preserve their ancestral culture, which relies on yaks and medicinal cordyceps to survive at altitudes above 12,000 feet. Or when journeying to the eastern region, travelers will encounter the Brokpas, who live in a wildlife sanctuary dedicated to protecting the habitat of the *migoe* (commonly known as the yeti). “Other isolated villages inaccessible by road have populations that can be counted on two hands and have existed in complete isolation from the rest of Bhutan for centuries,” he added.

rainforest thrives with lush jungles and species like the Bengal tiger, Asiatic elephant, rufous-necked hornbill, and golden langur.

The Paro Valley, in the western region of the country, is where the international airport lies and where most travelers begin their journey. Paro boasts the most spectacular *tshachus*, or festivals, that celebrate Bhutanese culture and religion with elaborate masked costumes, traditional dances, music, and religious chants. The country’s most iconic site, Taktsang, or Tiger’s Nest Monastery, is also located here. A three-hour hike from the valley takes visitors to the sacred temple complex, which clings to a vertiginous cliff more than 9,800 feet above Paro’s red rice fields. Legend has it that in the eighth century, Guru Rinpoche—a revered master responsible for introducing Buddhism to Bhutan—flew to this rocky perch on the back of a tigress and meditated in a cave for three months. The monastery was erected near the cave in the 17th century, and for many, a pilgrimage to the site bears great spiritual significance.

Opposite (top): Bhutan’s finest architecture can be seen in castle-like dzongs perched on hilltops, monasteries hanging from cliffs, and temples and stupas found in every village and town

Opposite (bottom): Monks are encouraged to wear their monastic robes elegantly, keeping them neat as a symbol of Buddha’s teaching

Below (left): The Paro Valley is covered with terraced paddy fields and quaint farmhouses, while its upper reaches boast coniferous forests

Below (right): Bhutanese folks represent their well-preserved culture through the way they dress, the food they eat and the language they speak



In Bhutan, the tenets of Buddhism permeate every aspect of daily life, which manifests itself in an authentic culture of kindness, compassion and benevolence. Impressive *dzongs*, or fort monasteries, are attended by monks in vermilion robes, and ubiquitous prayer flags flutter in the breeze. Hand-painted *chortens* (Buddhist shrines) and prayer wheels are found alongside rivers and roads. Astrology also plays a significant role in the lives of the Bhutanese with astrological charts serving as a trusted guide throughout one’s life.

Everything in Bhutan gleams with beauty. Scenic valleys, snow-capped peaks and rushing rivers are home to charming villages, temples and farmhouses. The ornate architecture of *dzongs* and Bhutanese homes often showcase elaborate woodwork, colorful paintings and religious sculptures. Locals look striking in traditional dress, with men donning knee-length robes tied at the waist with a cloth belt known as a *gho*, while women wear a *kira*, or long-sleeved blouse, with blazers and ankle-length skirts. Artisanal crafts, including brightly colored textiles, ceramics and woodworks, reflect the country’s rich heritage.

For such a diminutive country, Bhutan surprises travelers with a diversity of geography, outdoor pursuits and cultural experiences across a handful of prominent valleys.

IMAGES left page © Aman, right page © Six Senses



Another must-see 17th-century relic in Paro is the National Museum of Bhutan. Fresh off a nine-year restoration, the museum showcases more than 3,000 pieces of Bhutanese art, traditional dresses, temple antiques, and other cultural artifacts.

Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, sits roughly an hour's drive from Paro—a paved road that snakes through high-mountain passes, grazing yaks and freshwater streams. The city has a more urbanized feel with high-rise apartment buildings, modern restaurants, shopping centers, and nightlife. Top attractions include a visit to the Tashichho Dzong market, the Textile Museum, Choki Traditional Art School, and a small museum at the National Institute of Traditional Medicine.

In central Bhutan, the Gangtey Valley (also known as the Phobjikha Valley) is a snowbound basin bordering Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park along the western foothills of the Black Mountains. The region abounds with a plethora of wildlife, including black-necked cranes, Himalayan black bears and barking deers. Further east, travelers come across rugged landscapes dotted with isolated villages, monasteries, temples, and bird-filled forests.

The newly launched 250-mile Trans-Bhutan Trail links east with west on a hiking route that traverses the middle of the country. Once part of the Silk Road, the ancient trail later served as a pilgrimage route to sacred Buddhist sites in Bhutan and Tibet. In the 1960s, it fell into disrepair when the first highway was constructed to connect the country. Broken into 28 sections, the trail has numerous access points for shorter trekking experiences. The community-driven project is lined with places to feast on local meals and a variety of choices to bed down, including campsites, homestays and luxury hotels.

Much like the new trail, Bhutan offers a selection of lodgings strewn throughout the country. Premier global brands include Aman and Six Senses. Both offer fully immersive journeys to their various lodges while taking care of logistics such as visas, private guides, transportation, and domestic flights. The highly anticipated andBeyond Punakha River Lodge is expected to open next year. After a multiyear renovation, Gangtey Lodge recently reopened in the Phobjikha (Gangtey) Valley, while MyBhutan's Comfort Camp glamping experiences offer ultra-bespoke eco-sensitive itineraries within the unspoiled wilderness.

Below: Surrounded by pine forests and within walking distance of several ancient monasteries, Six Senses Paro offers views and authentic experiences at every turn

Opposite (top): Perched on a sprawling hillside, Six Senses Thimphu features traditional yet contemporary design and cloud-reflecting outdoor ponds

Opposite (bottom): With just eight suites and one two-bedroom villa, Six Senses Gangtey is an intimate alternative for unsurpassed sightings of the rare black-necked crane

Opposite (far right): Prayer flags are inscribed with auspicious and sacred emblems, symbols and texts in the forms of invocations, mantras and sutras



BHUTAN'S GREEN PLANS

Bhutan's sustainability efforts are a shining example of how a country can prioritize well-being and environmental conservation while still achieving economic growth.

- The Bhutanese government regulates tourism to ensure that it is sustainable and doesn't harm the culture or environment. Tourists must pay a nightly Sustainable Development Fee, and a portion of this levy is used to preserve the country's cultural and natural heritage and fund community development projects.
- To conserve forests, the government issued a constitutional mandate to maintain at least 60% of its land area under forest cover—and currently, over 70% of the country is covered by forests. Policies also created protected areas for wildlife conservation as well as sustainable forestry practices.
- As a leader in the production of hydropower, which accounts for almost all of Bhutan's electricity generation, the country set up a fund to invest in renewable energy technologies and plans to become carbon-neutral by 2030.
- Bhutan has a goal of becoming a 100% organic farming country, and the government provides support and subsidies to farmers who adopt organic practices.
- The government has banned the use of plastic bags and is promoting the use of biodegradable alternatives. It also has a waste management policy that prioritizes the reduction, reuse and recycling of waste.

The Aman group launched its first Amankora hotel in Bhutan in 2004. Since then, it's expanded to include four more lodges scattered across the country from Thimphu to Bumthang. Each hotel has a distinctive design echoing traditional architecture with natural materials such as stone, wood and clay. Interiors channel a deep respect for Bhutanese culture with handcrafted furniture, local artwork and restorative amenities, including spas, meditation rooms and tea pavilions.

Six Senses' full five-lodge circuit was completed in 2020, with hotels peppering Bhutan's main valleys. The lodges reflect traditional farmhouse architecture with rammed-earth walls, wooden accents and expansive windows gazing over majestic hilltop landscapes. Sustainability efforts are woven into all aspects of the experience, including the use of hydroelectric power and waste reduction. The spas are particularly outstanding—book the signature *dotsho* hot-stone bath treatment. On property, guests can sample emblematic local dishes like *ema datshi*, a stew made with chili peppers and cheese, and flavorful curries served over red rice. Guests can also prepare gourmet meals in chef-led cooking classes.

"For intrepid adventurers seeking remote journeys, Bhutan provides an opportunity to discover the allure of a remote land—one that evokes a sense of wonder akin to a time when the world felt vast, mysterious and much less explored," DeSantis remarked. ◀



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