

The Land of the Thunder Dragon



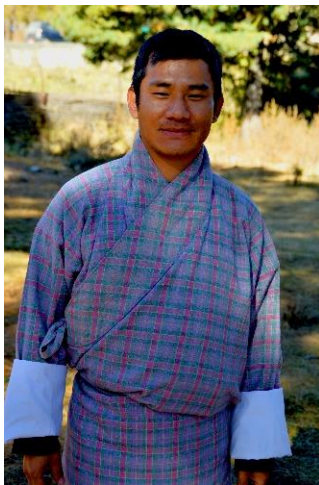
We boarded our Royal Bhutan Airlines' Druk Air flight 651 from **Bangkok, Thailand** with a whistle stop in Bagdogra, India. We experienced an astonishing approach and landing at the airport in Paro, Kingdom of Bhutan.

In our brief conversation with the Druk Air Captain in the terminal building, we learned that Paro, Bhutan is an **Extreme Airport -VQPR-** and only **eight pilots** in the world are currently certified to land here. Paro is surrounded by the towering peaks of the Himalayas. Landing at Paro Airport, located in a deep valley, involved weaving through a series of closely-spaced **18,000 foot** mountain peaks, frequent banking of the wings to avoid peaks with trees and mountainside houses just a few feet away, steep descents and then a very steep bank to the left immediately before the much-longed-for landing on a runway a mere 6500 feet long. At all the airports in the world at which we've landed, this



approach and landing was especially thrilling and memorable. But then any safe landing is noteworthy.

Immigration and Customs entry was without incident with the right Letters from the Bhutanese government. Bhutan doesn't issue visas to tourists. Letters of Entry require a specific travel itinerary with checkpoints at various provincial borders during the journey. We chose Windhorse Tours because it provided a private Guide and Driver just for our specific photographic holiday and will also take us to Sikkim and Darjeeling, India.



Kinley, our Bhutanese guide, and Kunzang, our driver met us at the terminal. We checked into the Ariya Hotel before exploring Thimphu, the capital of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Unlike other Asian countries, English is a part of all student curricula beginning in first grade. English is practiced in all business transactions.



Kinley, our guide, not only speaks perfect English, but he even looks like me!

Our experience in Myanmar (Burma) advanced our decision to visit this destination because Bhutan is deeply steeped in its unique Buddhist heritage and like Myanmar has remained intact because of its isolation from the rest of the world until the mid-20th century. It's only a matter of time before this incredible kingdom will rival other major destinations in Asia.

Here in the Land of the Thunder Dragon and sacred home of Guru Rinpoche, Bhutanese tradition adheres to the basic

philosophical tenets established by their previous king. The Royal concept of “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) was established to ensure the preservation of Bhutanese culture and traditions of the country through its secular and spiritual tantric principles. This metaphysical concept has been in place since 1970s and is probably the reason Bhutan has become known as the Xanadu of the eastern Himalayas.

The Road to Nirvana takes a circuitous tangent through the Eastern Himalayas to the Land of the Thunder Dragon whose philosophy of “Gross National Happiness” is congruent to its practice of the Tantric Buddhism.

From our balcony room at the rustic Padmasambhava Lodge, dawn burst through the night at the Gangtey Summit with an unmistakable quietude that permeated the Black Mountain Range of Bhutan. Here, one can fully understand what peace there is in solitude.

The early morning silence was deafening with only the “mourning” cries from the thousands of fluttering prayer flags communicating their messages to the pantheon of gods willing to listen. Diane and I attached our Prayer Flag wishing all our family and friends good health and happiness.

Taktsang Trek

On our visit to Paro, in the Kingdom of Bhutan, Diane and I thought we were prepared for this grueling hike from the base of the Paro Valley to Taktsang Monastery, famously known as Tiger's Nest Monastery. The monastery is one of the most venerated places of pilgrimage in the Eastern Himalayas.

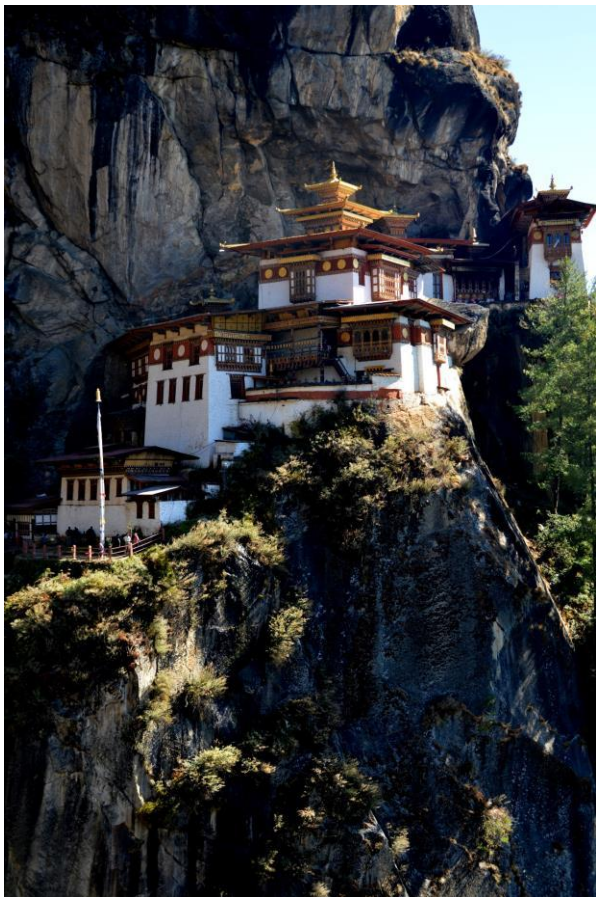
The legend of Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) advanced in 747 AD when Guru Padmasambhava, aka Rinpoche, chose a cave on a sheer rock face to meditate. After assuming a wrathful form (Guru Dorji Drolo) he rode a flying tigress to the cave and subdued the evil spirits in the locality of the cave. From that time, Taktsang has become one of the most significant Buddhist monuments in the Himalayan Buddhist world.



Taktsang cleaves to the sheer rock face towering 10,000 feet above the valley floor with only mountain goat trail as it's only access to the top. We started our hike with an elevation gain of

3,000 feet and countless switchbacks to ease the climb. I was amazed to see a number of seniors undertaking this

punishing trip. Many had to turn back due to a lack of the basic element called oxygen. It was like the other hikers on the path were sucking up more than their share of air at 6,500 ft. We continued hiking without looking up. It was better to take one step at a time than to see the required distance to the top. When we finally reached Tiger's Nest, it was somewhat of a victory until the thought of going back down over the same steep, rocky trail diminished our accomplishment.



But what the hell, at our ages we made it to the top. With our shoes off, we listened to the chanting of the Classic Tibetan Buddhist Scriptures with rhythmic drums timed to the Lama brass symbols and Duchen horns, and the conch shell trumpets sounding a haunting wail that transcends one beyond his sensory perception of time.

When the observance ended, the reality of our exploit surfaced its ugly head forcing us to focus on our journey back down to the valley. Descending the mountainside required muscles

we never knew we had. Our thigh muscles cramped and our toes smashed against the inside toe boxes of our Nike shoes. We descended the mountain with self-esteem undamaged, knowing this hike was not to be missed.

With our legs fully separated from the rest of bodies, our hotel concierge recommended the “Taktsang Hiker Massage” at the hotel spa with a supplemental foot reflexology as a cure for

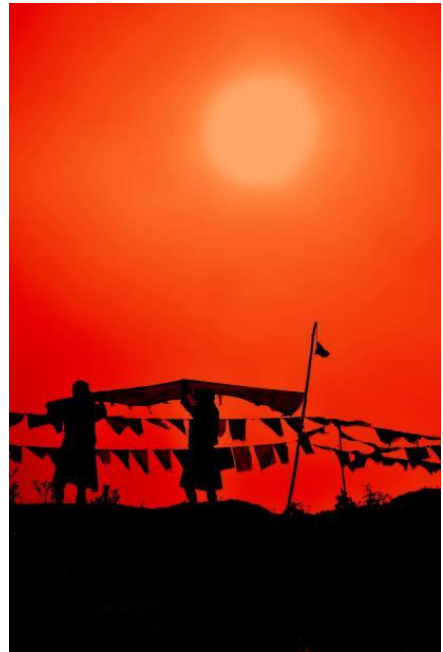


the Taktsang Trek. His prescriptive recommendation was spot-on. We were now ready for our journey to the Kingdom of Sikkim.

The Road to the Kingdom of Sikkim

Today it's an Indian Holiday in Bhutan and to our disappointment, the Indian Embassy was closed for Visa issuance. Diane and I needed a 30-day extension to

continue our journey to the State of Sikkim, India but with a few phone calls to the Consular General of India from our friends at Windhorse Tours, the Indian visa department graciously opened its doors on a day off to process our visa to India.



It was a 6-hour drive from Paro to Phuentsholing in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Phuentsholing is the gateway from Bhutan to India's State of West Bengal. Descending from the peaks of Bhutan's mountain passes hugging the narrow blacktop roads with unguarded 4,000 ft. overhangs and armed with our mp3 player attached the car stereo and an arsenal of our favorite 60's songs, we all caroled along with Dylan's classic refrains from "Like a Rolling Stone". It's amazing that the even in Bhutan, isolated for so many years, the X Generation understood Dylan and knew the words to his songs. Music has to be the universal ingredient for a great road trip.

As the shroud of fog completely lifted at 3,000ft, the Crown Jewel of the Mauryan Empire of Ashok unfolded as the

vastness of the Indian subcontinent revealed our passage to India.

Turning to look back from the foothills, the Kingdom of Bhutan appeared to be floating as a Citadel in the clouds where visitors fortunate to experience its transcendent traditions leave a portion of their souls in the revered sanctuaries of the Dzongs of the realm.

Passage to India



In the town of Phuentsholing, Kingdom of Bhutan, the Indian border is blatantly flaunted by a 14ft high wall along the town and manned under the watchful eye of Indian sentinels. Bhutanese and Indian citizens can move freely between Bhutan and India at various checkpoint gate openings without passports or entry certifications. The trick to entering India from Bhutan without a passport is “no eye” contact as Diane and I passed through in both directions without notice. It was 5:30pm when we returned to the lobby of the Hotel Druk in Puentsholing, Kingdom of Bhutan. There we met Nima Dhondup, our new Windhorse Tours guide for the Indian portion of our trip. Nima was a middle-aged man of medium stature with distinctive Tibetan features and a smile that warmed the room. His handshake was firm



and confident and his English was without accent. He detailed his agenda for our journey to Sikkim and Darjeeling, India. From this briefing, Diane and I concluded that we were fortunate to secure Nima's services as our guide in India, as his previous clients included the BBC, National Geographic, and actors Sir Peter Ustinov and Richard Gere. We said goodbye to Kinley and Kunzang, our Bhutanese guide and driver. The drive to Sikkim, India would require a 7-hour road trip, a distance of 222 km. We looked forward to more photo-rich environments that will cover and towns and villages of the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal including the Dooars Region of India, home of the premium Asam Tea.

The Sun Also Rises

Darjeeling West Bengal, India

It was 4:00am when Nima met us in the lobby of the Mayfair Hotel Darjeeling. He was bundled in

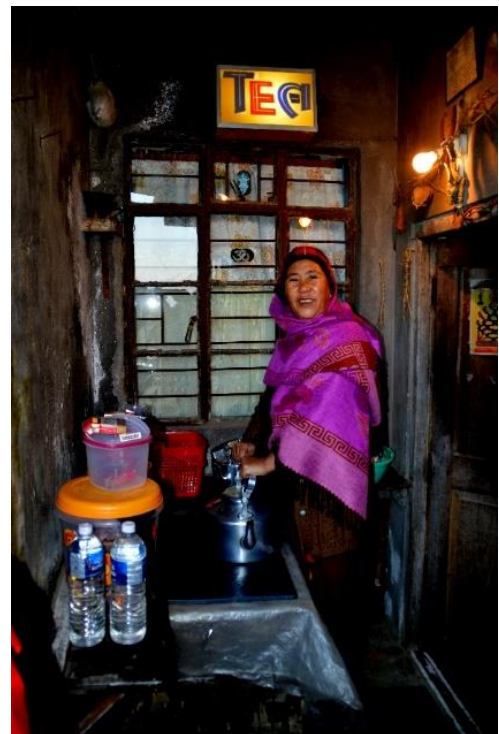


black



down jacket and armed with flashlights for our morning sunrise observance on Tiger Hill, the highest point, in Darjeeling where

one can view the sunrise paint the surrounding regal Himalayans Summits, a fluorescent orange giving life to the sleeping giants of Darjeeling. This is an everyday occurrence when the 500 to 600 people march to Tiger Hill to celebrate the morning sunrise. Walking to Tiger Hill is not an easy undertaking at an elevation of 8000 ft. It was not the view of the majestic Himalayas that took your breath away, it was the altitude. To ease the chilling temperature, Chai Vendors, carrying giant thermoses, moved effortlessly thru crowd pouring



their morning elixir in tiny bathroom Dixie cups while continuing their familiar chants "chai, chai, chai". At 6:00am

the sun rose in the east to the throng of observer's cheers welcoming the day and like a religious service left with the blessing of sun.

Leaving Darjeeling



Mayfair Hotel Darjeeling India

Receiving the sun's blessing on Tiger Hill and after a wonderful buffet breakfast at the extraordinary Mayfair Hotel, Nima and our Driver prepared us for our 4 hour trip back to

the valley and the city of Siliguri, India. Road trips without music is like a day without sunshine, and Tom Petty's "Learn to Fly" offered a melody and composition that melded the ups and downs of highways in West Bengal India Himalayans range. We were informed that leaving India was a necessity because of impending Political Party Strikes in West Bengal that block Roads, closes business and shuts down the government. Arrangements at Baghdogra Airport with Arline escorts ensured our timely departure on DrukAir flight 131 to Bangkok, our Asia Sanctuary. It's at time likes this in India where ques are not enforced, you have to push your way to the gate through the mob of hopefuls. There is no seniority or political correctness. It's a sign of respect to make it to front and

receive the acknowledgment of those left behind. You have to be an extreme extrovert under the Meyers-Briggs standard to survive Gate Crashing 101.

Story of Karmic Remunerations

Nima Dhondup, our guide, was born in Darjeeling's Tibetan Refugee Camp in 1960. His parents followed the footsteps of



the 14th Dalai Lama along with 150,000 Tibetan refugees who fled to Darjeeling, India. Nima was gracious enough to take us to the camp where his brother still resides.

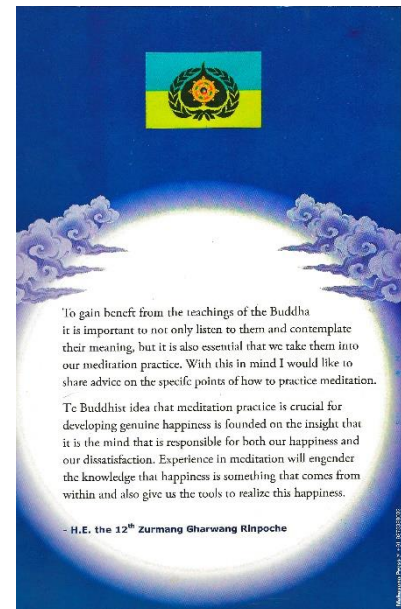
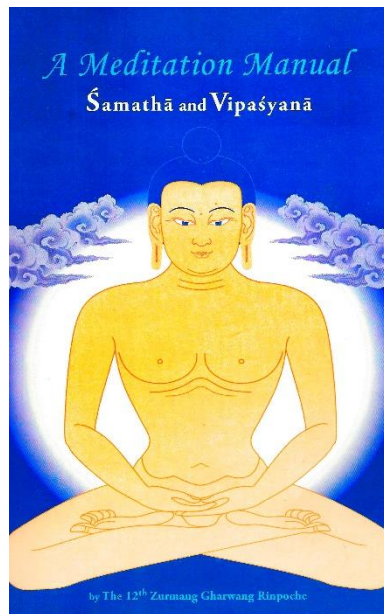
Refugee accommodations were minimal at best 10x12 rooms per family but Nima and his family survived. His story is one of karma remunerations. As the first baby to be born in the Camp, his photograph was publicized in newspapers around the world, resulting in an educational fund from 2 women in England who supported him through his university years. His benefactors never revealed themselves and to this day, Nima passes that same kindness and support to the Tibetan at the Refugees Tibet Self-Help Center.

One Night in Bangkok

Before we boarded our Royal Bhutan Airlines Druk Air flight 130 at 2:45pm in Siliguri, India. Nima alerted us that H.E. the 12 Zurmang Gharwang Rinpoche would be boarding our flight to Bangkok. As recognized by the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa as the twelfth incarnation of the Gharwang Tulkus and as an emanation of Tilopa, He is the supreme lineage holder of the Zurmang Ear Whispered Lineage.

After 4 hours and another time zone, we breezed through Thailand's Immigration checkpoint in a que designated for Senior Citizens, Monks and Airline Crew Members. Age has its privilege in Thailand and Diane and I graciously accepted Thailand's offer of an expeditious visa issuance.

As Karma would have it, we were fortunate enough to meet H.E. the 12 Zurmang Gharwang Rinpoche and his entourage at Immigration. As we approach H.E. we were reminded by his handlers not to touch H.E. the 12 Zurmang Gharwang Rinpoche. There was something lost in the translation and with a photo-op not to be missed, I handed my Camera to another fellow traveler who took the shot with my hand on his shoulder. We were rewarded by H.E with a copy of this book.





With his blessing, we exited customs into the main terminal where a memorial exhibition of Thailand's Chakri Dynasty King Bhumibol Adulyadej was conspicuously present to recognize the Country's one-year period of mourning. On December 1st, a new King will be coroneted, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, aka, Rama X. We only have 12-hour layover and will missed the coronation celebration.

As we followed the exit signs for limousine services, we passed the gauntlet of drivers awaiting their rides. We recognized our scheduled driver by his placard and our name embolden in an Arial Font. We pointed to the sign and without word spoken, he carried our luggage to an awaiting SUV in the Taxi Lot. It was obvious, he spoke no English,

but in an hour, we ended up at the Montien Riverside Hotel, our Thai Sanctuary, on the **Chao Phraya River** and 47 miles from the Suvarnabhumi Airport.



Within Bangkok's cosmopolitan metropolis known for its haute couture cuisine, Diane and I again chose Mazaaro Thai Cuisine at 42/1 Bang Rak for our evening dining followed by a Thai Massage at the local salons. These were the only activities we could fit in One Night in Bangkok.



