

Taktsang Trek

On our last day in 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

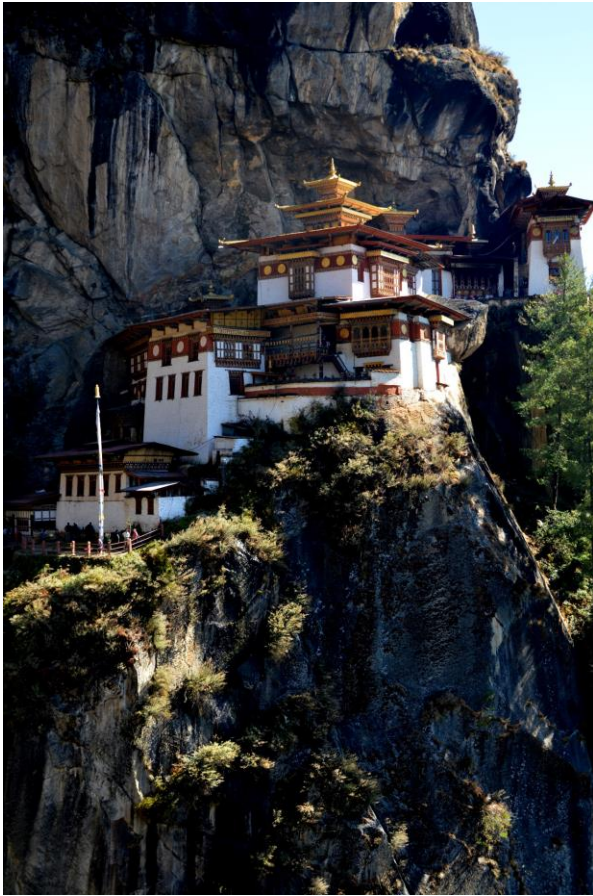


element called oxygen. It was like the other hikers on the path were sucking up more than their share of air at 6,500 ft. We continued hiking without looking up. It was better to take one step at a time than to see the required distance to the top. When we finally reached Tiger's Nest, it was somewhat 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” with the sentinels. 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 Phuentsholing, 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.



Sikkim Gangtok & Darjeeling

Today

