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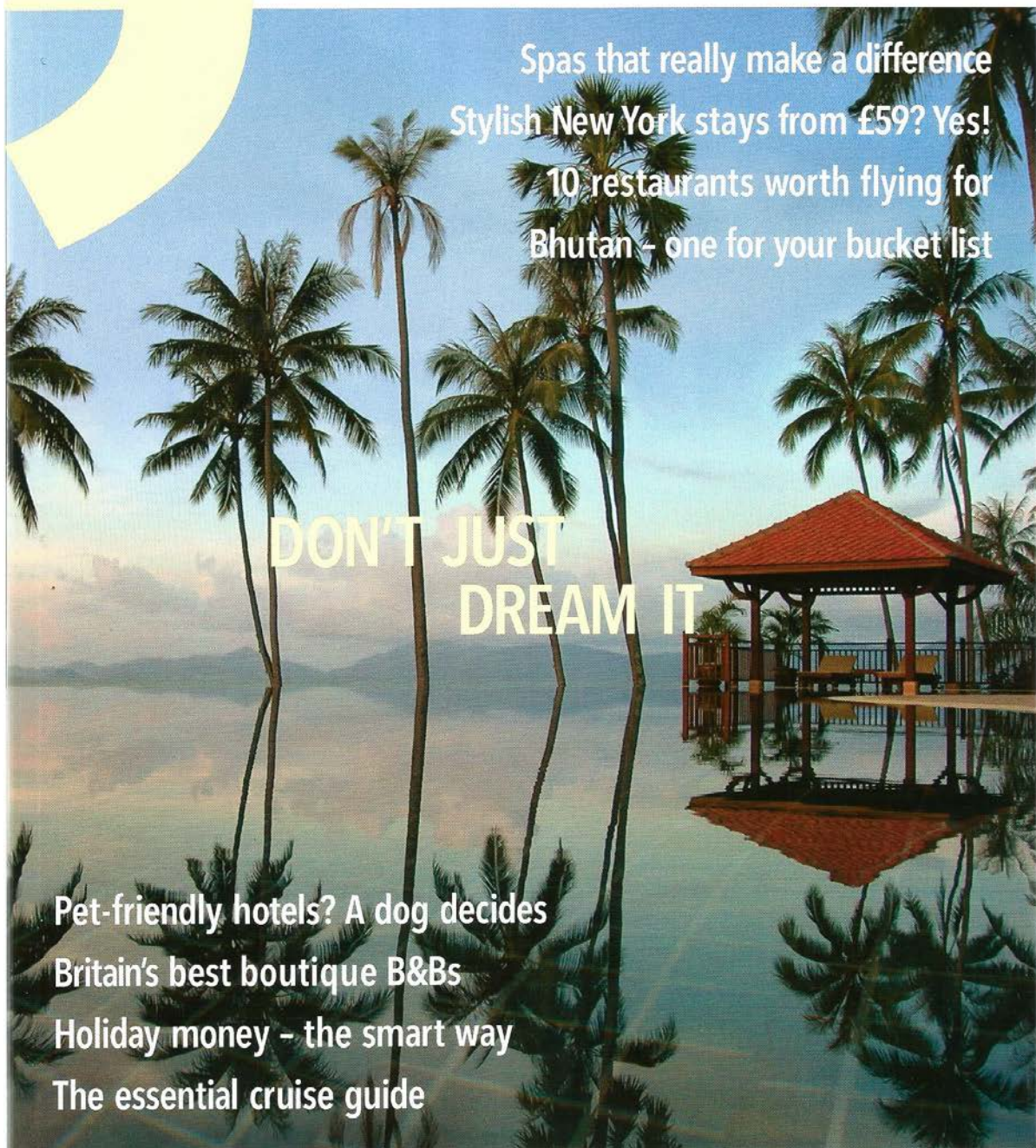
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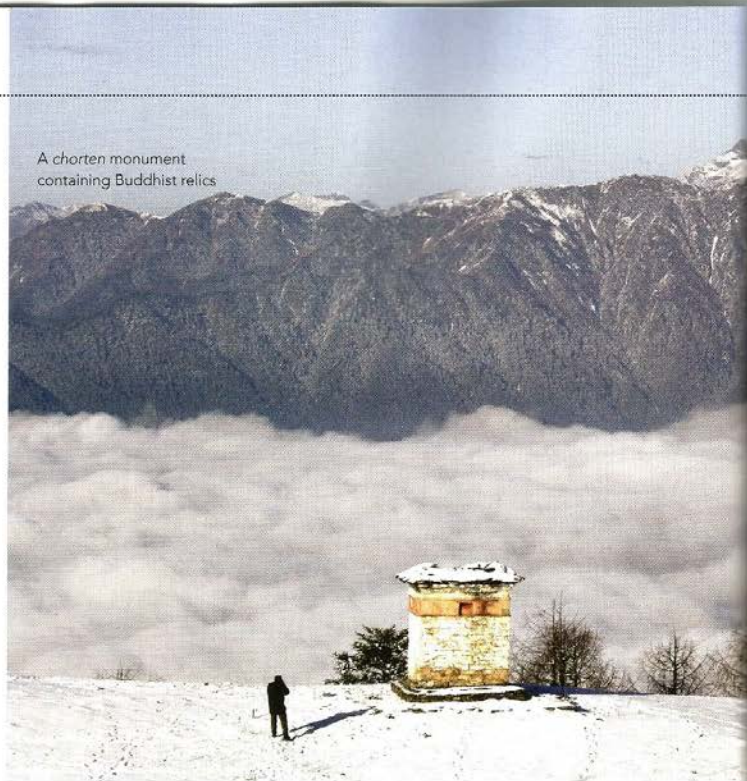
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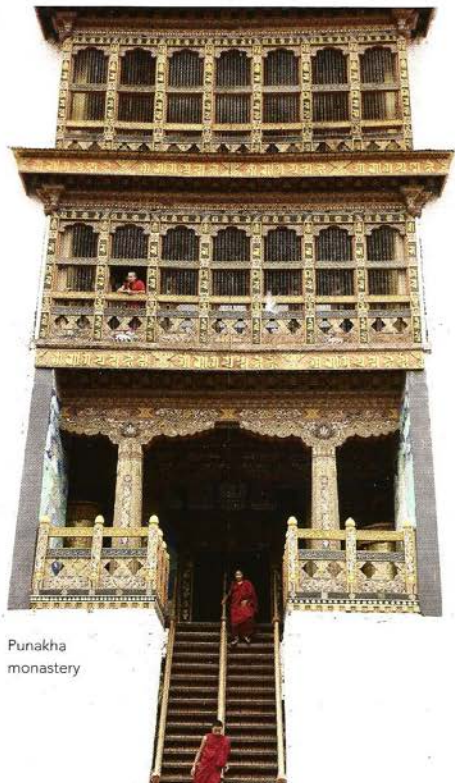
International / The big trip



Monks at Pata
monastery

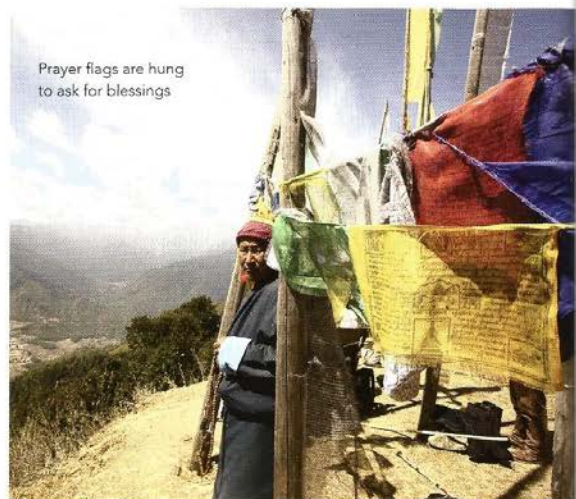


A chorten monument
containing Buddhist relics



Punakha
monastery

The tiny Bumdra
monastery is just
above us, clinging to
the mountainside. It's a
magical spot, the hilltop
covered in prayer flags



Prayer flags are hung
to ask for blessings



Cold mountain



Tiny Bhutan – the last of the Himalayan kingdoms – is still in a beautiful, medieval time warp. Thrill-seekers, look no further

Words: Susan Ward Davies

It's around midnight. Three of us are cocooned in a tiny tent on top of a mountain in the Bhutanese Himalayas, and it's bone-chillingly cold. Snow is pattering on the canvas – tiny little balls of it – like miniature hailstones. It is -11°C, and I've been violently shivering for hours. Is this what hypothermia feels like? I try to take my mind off my perilously chilled state by remembering our guide's campfire talk of leopards and black bears...

How can I not be asleep? We climbed for five hours today – up from the little town of Paro (2,280 metres), through beautiful forests of pine trees wreathed in lace-like lichen, along rocky, narrow paths that wound around the mountain. As we got higher, branches clinked with icicles, the altitude made our hearts race and our breathing like a 50-a-day smoker's. And when we (finally) clambered to the top, it felt so amazing, I half expected a 21-gun salute.

We pitched camp around 4pm, on a small, snowy plateau 3,800 metres up among the spectacular white peaks. The tiny Bumdra monastery is just above us, clinging to the mountainside. It's a magical spot. In front, a hilltop is covered in white, five-metre-tall prayer flags

(the Bhutanese put these everywhere: the higher, the more auspicious – so archers even fire them up to really inaccessible peaks). On another hilltop stands a small *chorten* (a stone monument containing Buddhist relics). Black yaks graze through the snow. Our guides unloaded the ponies, put up tents, gathered firewood and prepared supper. We just photographed the sunset, huddled around the fire drinking yak-butter tea and hot ginger, and ate our vegetable paneer and dahl by candlelight, before stumbling about giggling in the dark trying to find the loo tent (a sentry box over a hole in the ground).

But now it's pitch dark and very silent – except for the distant bells on the wandering ponies – and my heart is pounding.

I have a vivid imagination and Woody Allen-style hypochondria, and can recreate a symptom within minutes of hearing about it. We've been getting the low-down on Acute Mountain

Sickness (AMS: nausea, headache, palpitations) all day long, so I'm anticipating a full-on attack any minute. I've turned our tent into a mini ER: aspirin (for DVT); Imodium (for diarrhoea – I'm already regretting the yak-butter tea) and Fisherman's Friends (breathing difficulties), all laid out on the ground sheet.

And then there is the utter blackness; did I mention I am claustrophobic?

Inside my sleeping bag, I grip on to my hopelessly weak torch in case I wake thinking I'm in a coffin. We've camped in the shadow of a 'sky burial' site, a dramatic

As we got higher, branches clinked with icicles, and the altitude made our hearts race



peak where dead bodies are taken to be eaten by vultures – not an image you want cropping up in your dreams.

Next to me my sister, Caroline, is determinedly feigning sleep. Suddenly I hear muffled crying. Julia – in the neighbouring tent – is having an AMS moment, too. Panic attacks and indigestion can mimic AMS, but the real thing can be fatal and our guide is taking no chances. The only cure is to get to a lower altitude. Two of the guides are dispatched to lead her down, and they disappear into the darkness for the three-hour descent.

Completely upstaged, I finally fall asleep. We wake at dawn to a fresh coating of snow, and the sunrise flooding the mountains with rosy light. It's beyond spectacular. I feel like Sir Edmund Hillary on Everest (which isn't far), and would do it all again in a heartbeat.

Sandwiched between India, Tibet and Nepal, Bhutan has long been on my wish list. The last of the Buddhist Himalayan Kingdoms, everyone still wears *House Of Flying Daggers*-style traditional costume (men in ghos – a kind of knee-length kimono; the women in silk jackets and kiras – long sarongs); success is measured as Gross National Happiness and not as GDP;

Harry Potter-esque monasteries tower over sacred rivers; pigs get stoned on wild cannabis (really); houses – built in the three-storey, ancient style – are works of art; and even petrol stations are decorated in hand-painted friezes.

You need a stiff drink before flying in. The only room for an airstrip among the valleys, river gorges and mountains is Paro, a small, pretty town in the west. But even here the pilot has to weave in between the craggy, snow-topped peaks and swoop down,

almost clipping rooftops, banking sharply as he approaches the tarmac. The three small Drukair planes are the only ones that can land here, as their specially trained pilots are deemed to be the world's best – a thought you may want to hold on to as you watch the wing tips practically grazing the mountainsides.

It isn't only the landscape that used to make this tiny Kingdom inaccessible. The size of Switzerland, with a population of around two million, it only opened its doors to Westerners in the Seventies, but since privatising tourism in 1991, more tourists (of the high-spend variety) have been encouraged. Six years ago, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck handed over power to his then 26-year-old son Khesar (making him the world's youngest head

of state), and announced the country's first elections.

From Paro airport, it's a two-hour drive to Thimphu, Bhutan's tiny capital, winding past rivers and through valleys

dotted with wooden farmhouses, and across ancient bridges festooned with prayer flags. Perched above the city is Amankora, one of Bhutan's five Aman lodges. The group is renowned for luxury minimalism and this one is true to form. Built like a *dzong* (fort/monastery), it is a white, austere building with fortress-style slit windows and a huge stone courtyard. Log-burning stoves warm the rooms, giving the feel of a cosy hunting lodge. As night falls, we loll on cushions while dancers perform around the blazing courtyard fire. It's like a scene from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: all swirly, silk robes and ferocious masks.

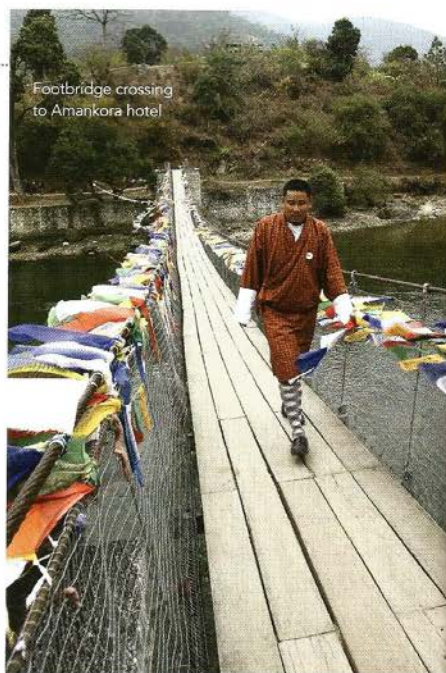
At dawn, we clamber up a steep hill, almost hidden under thousands of prayer flags. As the sun emerges from behind the mountains, incense smoke (the daily dawn offering to the spirits), spirals skywards from the city. Buddhism – with a touch of animism (where everything has a spiritual essence) – is the main religion here, and people believe spirits are everywhere: in the lakes, forests and

particularly the mountains. Making offerings is second nature: a blessing before journeys and putting up prayer flags at every opportunity.

Thimphu is a quaint, dusty little town of 31,000 people, the world's only traffic-light-free capital. Streets are lined with little jewellery shops, and general stores selling bright plastic homeware. The whole place looks like a medieval costume-drama set, with people in traditional dress – but on mobile phones.

A monk's blessing ritual (incense, holy water, cymbals) sends us off on our minibus journey to Punakha – the old capital – only 79 kilometres away, but three hours of winding roads and beyond-photogenic scenery. Independent travel is practically impossible here: everyone has to book a tour, but they can be tailor-made and groups (we are eight) are small. A daily minimum fee of \$200 is charged to tourists, \$65 of it for the government, the rest towards your tours, board and lodging, with the posh hotels charging a supplement.

The *dzong* at Punakha is the country's most impressive, rising imposingly from the banks of Mo Chuu and Pho Chuu (Mother and Father rivers). Inside, little



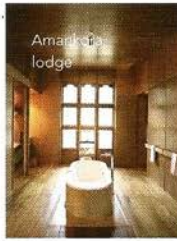
Footbridge crossing to Amankora hotel



Ponies grazing after the trek



Photographs: Chris Caldwell



Amankora lodge



Taj Tashi hotel



Below Bumdra monastery



Tiger's Nest monastery



Trek guide

monks (they start at seven years old) clamour to have photos taken. The haunting sound of golden trumpets drifts out from the prayer room, punctuating the low hum of chanting. In a fantastically ornate hall we peer at massive Buddhas

and golden statues of demons.

You could stay at Punakha and then head east, or just go there and back to Thimphu in a day, as we do, the next morning returning to Paro along the same scenic, twisty-turny road, past sculpted rice terraces. On a hill just outside town is Uma Paro, another stylish boutique hotel, ringed by mountains. The 20 rooms have amazing valley views, but the nine villas dotted around the grounds have wood-burning stoves. When you're not snuggled up here, you can learn archery (the national

sport) or mountain biking (down steep, hairpin bends). Far better is the amazing 'hot stone bath' in the Shambhala spa. A luxe version of what the locals do by the riverside: hot rocks are heated in a fire for two hours and then dropped, sizzling, into a hot, herby bath. After a long wallow, flop on to a massage bed to have your muscles kneaded with oil. It's the perfect pre-trekking treatment.

So here we are on our final day, scrabbling over snowy rocks trying to reach the tiny Bumdra monastery. We meet two monks about to embark on a three-year, three-month and three-day silent retreat here. Invited in, we climb up steep ladders to their new home: a tiny, dark room containing a Buddha. We make an offering for a

blessing and dice are rolled. I get 13 – good luck here.

We wish the monks well and make our way down the mountain, stopping for tea with toasted rice at a monastery opposite the gorgeous Tiger's Nest dzong (the only place we see other tourists).

Bracing ourselves for our flight out, we stock up with prayer flags from the monks' shop in Paro.

The next morning, our plane is cancelled and we get a whole extra day in Bhutan; not lucky for everyone, maybe, but it certainly felt like it to me. ■

GETTING THERE

Greaves India offers tailor-made itineraries to Bhutan, from £4,599 for eight nights, full-board, including British Airways (ba.com) flights to Delhi, and Drukair (drukair.com) flights from Delhi to Paro, transfers, guides, overnight trek, daily yoga, visas and

Bhutan government charges (around \$200 a day). 020 7487 9111; greavesindia.co.uk

TOP TIP

On the flight to Paro, sit on the left for views of Everest.

WHERE TO STAY

Taj Tashi has elegant rooms bang in the middle of Thimphu. Doubles from £417 B&B. Taj

Tashi, Thimphu, 00975 (2)

336699, tajhotels.com

Amankora, part of the Aman group, does luxurious minimalism on the outskirts of Thimphu.

Doubles from £1,139, full-board. Upper Motithang, 00975 (2) 331 333, amanresorts.com
Uma Paro has beautiful villas and rooms in what looks like an

enchanted forest, as well as a first-rate spa.

Doubles from £361, half-board. Paro, 00975 (8) 271597, comohotels.com/umaparo

WHEN TO GO

Autumn is best for trekking, with cold nights and warm days. Rainy season is from June to August.