

# Ghosts, gods, demons, and kindness in abundance

Every tourist feels the inherent Bhutanese trait of compassion. It is easy to blend the natural with the supernatural here

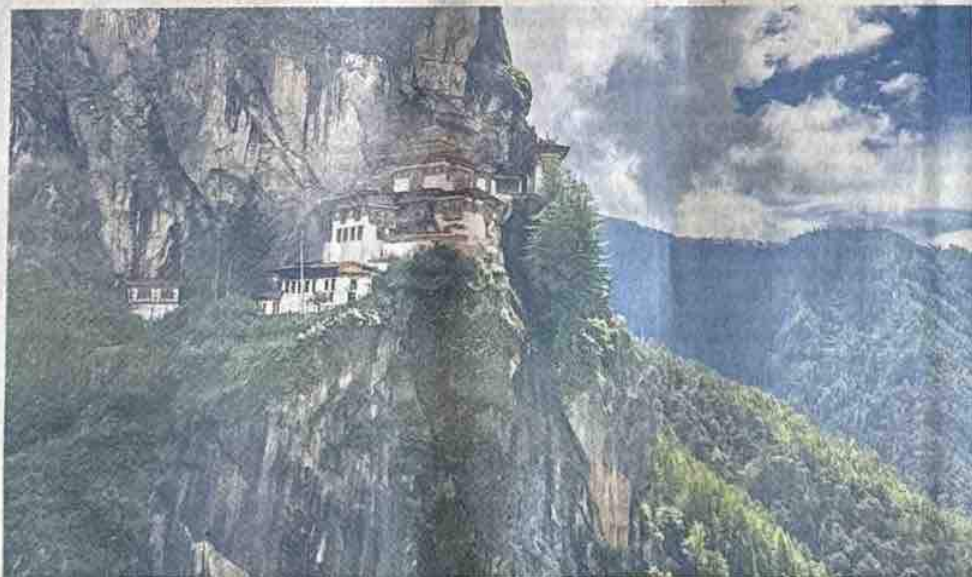
Shoba Narayan

Does thinking about death five times a day increase your happiness? The Bhutanese seem to think so. Throughout the mountain kingdom, death blends with life in ways that are subtle, yet beautiful. Consider *tsa tsas*: Families fashion these tiny stupa-like pyramids from clay mixed with the ashes of dead relatives and leave them as roadside offerings. The ubiquitous prayer flags memorialise the dead, as do some *thangka* paintings and *cham* dances. Funerals are communal affairs—since Buddhists believe in reincarnation, death is seen as a beginning.

My death-defying experience began on the Druk Air flight from Delhi to Paro. Only 24 pilots in the world can land in Paro because it is done manually. As the plane turned sharply in the gap between two mountains, I muttered incoherent prayers, but the landing was smooth.

People visit this fabled Land of the Thunder Dragon (Druk Yul in the Dzongkha language) in search of wonder, beauty, enlightenment, and, yes, happiness, but the Buddhist take on happiness is nuanced, as I discovered while travelling to Paro, Thimphu and Punakha.

Bhutan ranks high on the world happiness scale, winning an honourable mention in the 2023 report. "When we say happiness in Bhutan, we mean collective



(above) Tiger's Nest, 3,000m above sea level, and a Buddhist monk.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN

happiness, not individual happiness," explained my guide Namgay Tshering, listing good governance, sustainable development, environmental conservation and preservation of culture as measures of happiness. I thought about this as I hiked up to Paro's Taktsang Monastery or Tiger's Nest, easily Bhutan's most photographed spot. Stunningly picturesque, it clings to a rocky cliff face, 3,000m above sea level.

Cultures, particularly complex ones like Bhutan and India, demand more from tourists. James Low, general manager of the Uma Paro hotel, alluded to this when

he explained "the two Bhutans"—one on the surface and the other that is "felt if you have an open heart". In Buddhism, though, an open heart brings to mind the now popular "loving-kindness" meditation, which I saw in action in every monastery I visited. A common prayer uttered by the monks, and indeed all Bhutanese, is a blessing for peace: *Tashi delek*, good luck and good health.

Bhutanese believe in divination—much like the Dalai Lama, whom I once interviewed for this newspaper. When you live as close to the land as they do, when 60% of the country is under forest cover, it is

easy to blend the natural with the supernatural. Bhutanese take ghosts, gods and demons seriously. After a day of sightseeing, I walked alone at sunset around the Amankora Thimphu, where the extended royal family lives. Trees rustled. Streams gurgled. Even I could imagine hungry ghosts and snake gods that required propitiation. In my room, the staff had left protective "chem" rosary beads, which I wore before going down for dinner.

My next stop was Punakha, about four hours from Thimphu by road, and quite literally heaven for a birdwatcher like me. We traversed Dochula Pass (3,100m) with



a great view of the Eastern Himalaya, and descended to Lamperi Gardens where minlas, barbets, laughing thrushes, niltava and warblers thronged the bushes. With 775 bird species, and a staggering abundance of flora and fauna, Bhutan is among the most biodiverse countries in the world, especially given its tiny size.

We visited the famous Punakha Dzong, where coronations take place, rafted, hiked up to see spectacular monasteries with colourful murals, and enjoyed a surprise breakfast beside a temple. All too soon, it was time to drive back to Paro airport. On the drive, I called former model and actor Kelly Dorjee, who now runs a high-end travel company, to ask him what was distinctive about his country. "Bhutan has chosen the path less travelled—to protect its forests, its culture, and cultivate a kinder and more mindful society," he explained.

Kindness, as he said, was abundant. At

Your Café, run mostly by women and popularised by actor Deepika Padukone's visit, posted on Instagram, I chatted with 20 young performers, dressed in *cham* masks and costumes, who were preparing to perform for a large group of tourists. They were in college and worked part-time as performers to make extra money. I asked them about the themes the dances portrayed and what they considered important in their culture. To a person, they said, kindness. They used different words, of course—loving kindness, compassion, tolerance, generosity, but their underlying meaning was all about giving.

This inherent Bhutanese trait of compassion—*nyinjay* in Dzongkha and *karuna* in Sanskrit—is felt by every tourist visiting Bhutan. It is perhaps why so many return.

Shoba Narayan is an independent writer based in Bengaluru and has been a long-time contributor and columnist for Mint.