

Just Awesome - Bhutan 2010

Mystical Land of the Thunder Dragon

We were in Thailand for a couple of days floating around on ferries, visiting golden palaces and getting to know one another before heading off on our Bhutanese adventure. The question was asked – “what do we expect in Bhutan” Nearly everyone had visions of a very underdeveloped impoverished country, perhaps not as advanced as Nepal with basic hotels, food and roads.

How wrong we were – We landed in Paro and immediately saw a beautiful, clean airport with immaculately dressed staff in their traditional uniforms. We then proceeded to discover this wonderful deeply religious Kingdom of “Gross National Happiness” with hardly any crime, a national sport of archery using traditional cane bows passed down through the ages and a unique food culture and accommodation quality to match anywhere in the world . They also have a national animal called a Takin which has a kind of goats head on the body of a cow. Spring flowers were abundant including many colours of rotodendrums, irises, primroses and the rare blue poppie. Lots of Dzongs and Stupas with stories of Gurus riding in on the backs of a Tigrress and a “Divine Madman” to keep us interested. For lessons on how to avoid too many Dzongs ask Les to lend you his stubbies.



As usual we were a fairly diverse bunch. Well travelled and never short of fun. Some of us had established a wine trail of Pomegranite and Thai reds in Thailand which were very ordinary to say the least. Lucky Les was on hand to take care of the unfinished bottles with statements like “that’s not a bad drop”. Then the challenge was on to find a decent wine from India and South Africa. Not as easy as it sounds however after a couple of bottles of Zinzi (India) we discovered a pinotage called footprint (Sth African cross between pinot noir & cinsaut)and proceeded to seek out and drink the 48 or so bottles in the country.



I was in my element with Fran and John as the sport nuts. We discussed every sport in depth and bored everyone with our chattering. We realized that not everyone follows sport when Christine asked whether there had been another bad weather disaster in Melbourne when she overheard us talking about the “Melbourne Storm Crisis”.

We started our Cultural tour in Paro where we were introduced to the Bhutanese style of food. A walk through the markets showed us a wonderful healthy diet of natural foods without any packaging or preservatives. All meals are a buffet style consisting of a variety of dishes such as cheesy potato, chilly mushroom, red rice, Fern, Asparagus and accompanied by a chicken, beef or pork dish. In general all meals were very tasty even though most of us weren’t able to eat a lot of the spices and hot chilly accompaniments.



The first cultural adventure for us was to climb 900m to the “Tigers Nest Monastery”. This monastery as folklore would say was where the Guru rode in on the back of a tiger and spent 3 years, 3 months, 3 days in a cave in the mountains. After an effort like that you would expect people to erect a monument to your efforts and so the Tigers Nest was built. Actually it was a truly amazing place and the mind boggles at the level of difficulty to erect such a monastery in such a precarious situation. The café about two thirds from the top made a great stop point for some and was a great lunch spot on the way back. This monastery is the spectacle of the trip.



Next day we were off to Thimphu, the new capital where we were shown the kings palace and a host of interesting places. This is where we first saw the national sport of archery in full swing and through Kiensing from Bhutan Visit were given our fist archery lesson. Some of us like retired warriors john and bob did well while others struggled to get the arrow away from the bow. Keep building up those muscles Chris – at least you gave it a go!



Happy hour became a regular part of the trip with wines ranging from really bad, not bad and average plus some duty free “Jack” and “johnie” sneaking in on the festivities until we ran out. I find it amazing that no matter how tired you are, 5 minutes and a face wash is all the time needed to get ready for a get together before dinner.

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After a couple of days we boarded the bus for the next leg to Punakha and Wangdi. This is the prickly pear capital of the world, where Les decided to climb down and get one to show us. Unfortunately, he finished up with a handful of prickles which Dr Sue had to pluck out one by one. Fran quipped "If Les falls in he'll have a prickly pair to deal with". Moving on we finished up in a traditional Bhutanese lodge in Pobjikha. The rooms were fitted with wood heaters and the buildings in that area, were all painted with huge penises to symbolize fertility. There were even large wooden penises hanging from the rafters. After listening to the stories about the "Divine Madman" we started to wonder about the strange fertility folklore in the area. Chris had the ultimate luck of being blessed in the temple of the "Divine Madman" by being tapped on the head by his bow, arrow and giant wooden penis, lets hope there are no lasting effects. We had a wonderful night in the lodge even though Bob and Pam caused a stir by placing a candle on the stove in their bedroom. Next morning the stories of their bedroom waxing antics were the talk of the group.



Pobjikha is the home of the "Black Necked Crane" which migrates from Tibet. We spent the day wandering from the lodge to the school and watched the happy kids at a sports carnival. They played Netball, Soccer, Shuttlecock and outdoor darts which I guess leads them on to archery. The interesting thing was that the Black Necked Crane mating dance was the dance they and the archers use when they hit the target. We tried the dance and failed. The rest of the walk around the valley was very relaxing through forests and past local villages.

The next day we headed to Tongsa and, the cultural heartland of Bhutan, the Bumtha valley. We drove through some of the most spectacular scenery, traversing the Black mountain range and crossing the Pele-la (pass), at 3,300 metres. Finally we reached Jakar, the main town (2700metres). Here we planned one of the highlights of the trip – a masked festival. Tshering our guide offered me a traditional garment called a "GHO" for the festival and I accepted even though as usual I would be out of my comfort zone.



Next morning we headed off on one of the most amazing days you could ever have. The masked festival is a celebration of fertility and a sorting out of good and evil. Firstly the masked dancers cleanse the ground of all impurities and bad vibes. Then there is a succession of masked dances involving the twelve animal characters plus some clowns waving around enormous penises. These dances celebrate fertility and assign evil below the ground and good above. The whole program takes all day and is broken for lunch at which time we headed off into the apple orchard for a picnic lunch. Wanda was lost in her own photographic world and I think it was a very special day for all of us



After the festivities we headed back to the hotel for happy hour and another wonderful meal. During the night the Bhutanese staff performed traditional songs and dance and found me a guitar to sing a few Aussie songs. We ended the night drinking a few too many wines and doing the Hokey Pokey which the locals loved. Thanks for the suggestion Pam. The whole day and night was magic and it was a time I will never forget.



This was our last night as a full group before splitting up for the Eastern Tour and Jhomalari Trek and we were a bit sad the next morning as we said goodbye for a week. We met up again in Paro for our last couple of days before heading home where the first stop was a wine shop then off to the hotel to catch up on stories. For our last day in Bhutan it was arranged that we would have some archery lessons and a cooking class which turned out to be a fantastic end to our trip. That night we went to a Karaoke bar expecting the worst and was pleasantly surprised by traditional dancing and singing. Wanda got up and danced beautifully with the local dancers and I was lucky enough to be able to find a guitar and sing one more time.

Wow what a trip, lots of culture, exercise and fun. We did Bhutan completely and I would recommend it to any travelers who like to explore countries and cultures as one of the best trips you will ever do.



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Recipes for some of the dishes are below.

CHEESY POTATO

6 x Potatoes – Cube or slice and steam until tender.

4 x Chillies, butter, salt, 2 x garlic cloves, Chives, cheddar cheese – Place in a wok and combine. When cooked add water, bring to boil then add cheddar cheese and stir through. When mixture is consistent add potatoes and stir lightly

CRISPY POTATO

4 x Potatoes – Slice thin potato fingers in bowl. Add equal amounts of plain flour/corn flour with a pinch of salt. Toss till coated then add water and mix lightly.

Cook fingers in hot oil then drain.

Chilly paste, onion, salt, cornflour liquid (warm) soya sauce, coriander, spring onion – Place in a wok and combine. When cooked add hot water, When mixture is consistent add potatoe fingers and toss till crisp.

CHEESY MUSHROOMS

12 x Mushrooms – Slice and steam until tender.

4 x Chillies, butter, salt, grated ginger , Chives, cheddar cheese – Place in a wok and combine. When cooked add water, bring to boil then add cheddar cheese and stir through. When mixture is consistent add mushrooms and stir lightly

ASPARAGUS SPEARS with cheese

Snap spears to remove old stalk, slice in half lengthways then cut to length.

In wok place red onion, salt, diced tomato, oil and water. – boil slowly until mixture combines. Then add asparagus spears and boil for a few minutes.

When consistent add shredded cheese and stir lightly until smooth. (5 to 10 minutes)

MOMOS – VEGETABLE

Plain flour & water – Firm dough then knead till soft.

Fill – Onions finely chopped, cabbage finely chopped, grated cheese, melted butter, salt, spring onions, fresh chopped coriander, grated carrot, oil.

Roll out dough to small 50mm rounds, flour both sides, add teaspoon of fill and pinch around edges to seal.

Place in steamer for 20 mins. (oil on steamer tray to stop sticking)