

A Bhutan Journey: February 2010. By Bruce Campbell (Australia/Hong Kong)

Diary 211 “Good morning your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen.” Saturday, February 13th, 2010

“Good morning your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome you aboard Flight KB 123 to Bhutan.” Today we are flying with the king!!! Well, he may only be the king of Bhutan but it is still a first. Maybe it also explains why this is the only flight that has left exactly on time for quite a while. We are flying from Bangkok to Paro on a rather small A319 Airbus and looking forward to a week in a very unusual country where progress is measured in terms of happiness rather than dollars. Our expectations are rather high so I hope we are not disappointed. With luck, Clara will fly in tomorrow from India where she is saving Asian rhinos and spend a week with us so it is an exciting trip.

Bhutan is a small kingdom wedged in between India and Tibet with a population of only 650,000 people. 72% of the country is covered in forest and 26% of the country is made up of National Parks. 70% of the population are subsistence farmers.....you can probably understand why we are expecting things to be quite different.

Bhutan became an hereditary monarchy in 1907 and has since had four kings, including the one who is flying with us today. There was almost no contact with the outside world until the 1950's and 60's. In 1979, the king made his famous statement that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.” Since then, Bhutan has followed a very cautious path towards development. It was decided then that 60% of the country must remain under forests for all time, that contact with the rest of the world would be limited and strictly controlled and that tourism would be strictly limited. The current king has taken decisive steps towards democracy but that is in no way to compromise the Gross National Happiness index. The country is strongly Buddhist and nine indicators have been identified as being essential to GNH:

1. Psychological well-being
2. Health
3. Education
4. Time use and balance
5. Cultural diversity and resilience
6. Good governance
7. Community vitality
8. Ecological diversity and resilience
9. Living standards.

The Bhutanese have devised a 290 question survey that scrutinizes the population to determine the extent of their happiness. As yet, it is apparently too early to judge the results of this approach. The combination of the cultural, religious, environmental and political factors make Bhutan one of the most unique places on the planet. We are looking forward to exploring that uniqueness.

It sounds like the exact opposite of our current home of Hong Kong where the only God is money. I wonder how different it will be? As I am writing this, the pilot just announced that Mt

Everest is clearly visible out to the left and it is. We are surrounded by snow-capped peaks even though we are flying at 8000metres...time to stop typing!

Diary 212 “Roll out the red carpet.” February 14th, 2010

What a flight! The last 20 minutes of our flight into Paro this morning were breathtaking. They began with clear views of the rugged slopes of Mount Everest. We flew beside the Himalayan Mountain ranges before beginning the steepest descent I have ever made in a commercial plane. The pilot just put the nose down and flew between the enclosing mountains. Soon we flew into this narrow valley with occasional farm houses so close on either side you could almost see the expressions on the kids faces. At one point I remember Chris saying, “We are about to touch down,” but we were still descending rapidly and still weaving from side to side. In the last few seconds the plane flattened out and we seemed to fly at full speed onto the runway. I think my knuckles were white. (I later found out that the pilots need to disable all the normal warning systems in the cockpit that tell them they need to pull up because they are too close to the ground while executing maneuvers.)

We rolled to a halt and they rolled out the red carpet. The first class section was clearly blocked off and we could see the local dignitaries lining up beside the carpet. There seemed to be several members of the Royal Family who ran the curtsey and shake hands gauntlet before us plebs were allowed out the back of the plane. I was shocked! There was not even green or blue carpet for us. Just the clearest blue skies you would ever see, a few squat buildings covered with unusual paintings and a ring of mountains, some with snowy peaks. Welcome to Bhutan.

I guess one of the first things you notice is that the men wear dresses. But somehow they look quite different to the guys in dresses I saw in Bangkok. They are bronzed and strong and their legs are muscular and they do not wear make-up. They wear Argyle socks and Chris tells me that they wear normal jocks. It's still not a fashion trend I would like to see introduced into Hong Kong. I would be worried how far those gentle Hong Kong guys would take it.

As it was Saturday afternoon, we visited the open-air vegetable market and walked around the shops before being taken to the local archery competition. Archery is the national sport of Bhutan. Teams of six or eight guys face off against each other. They start the competition in the morning and it runs all day. They have a narrow playing field with two tiny targets set 150 metres apart. I could barely make out the target, much less the concentric rings and bull's eyes painted on each one. They each take turns at shooting their arrows. If someone actually hits the target, he goes and collects a coloured sash which he hangs around the waist of his dress. At the other end, the guys gather in front of the target and do a dance routine and sing a lovely song to commemorate the hit. This goes on all day and alcohol is consumed. The frightening bit is where they all stand...next to the target!!! Such is their faith in the archers that they stand

barely a metre from the target. We hid behind trees at least five metres away to watch. They assured us that no-one had been killed but that was hard to believe. It is also hard to believe that this is the national sport.

We were taken to our hotel, a 19th century palace that also became the home of the first Governor of Bhutan. It is a stunning collection of buildings and we had a room that is much bigger than our Hong Kong apartment with an amazing view over the valley. We were given a guided tour of the main building by the present owner who is a direct descendant of royalty and an important member of the new Government. He showed us his amazingly detailed personal altar room and explained the main concepts of Buddhism. Chris asked him about the Dalai Lama and he took us into another room full of wall hangings and pulled one of them off the wall to reveal some hand prints on the back. He then told us that the Dalai Lama did that for him when he visited and that he had also been mentioned in the Dalai Lama's latest book. We were suitably impressed and it was a wonderful introduction to Bhutan. He seemed to have all the time in the world for us and loved answering our many questions.

Before dinner they asked if we would like a traditional hot stone bath. An hour later we went to this very open room that had five big wooden tubs in it. Each one was divided in two with a smaller area for the stones. A huge fire was burning outside and the tubs were full of water and herbs. This ruddy red-faced guy with a long pair of tongs began dragging glowing red river stones from the fire and dropping them into the baths. When he deemed the water hot enough, we were invited to get our gear off and get in. Well, it was like being boiled alive! The water was so hot you could feel your extremities being burned as you tried to lower yourself in. We finally relaxed and lay back and looked at the stars through the open roof while a chilly wind blew through the curtained doors. He came in and dropped in more hot rocks which made the water bubble and spit. We lasted about half an hour by which time we looked like a couple of overdone lobsters.

A traditional dinner in a huge dining hall with a large pot-bellied stove in the middle capped off an awesome first day in a very unique country.

Diary 213. Meeting up with Clara. Sunday, February 14th, 2010.

This morning we went for a walk through a local village after discovering that , our daughter Clare would be three hours late in arriving from India. Firstly we watched the local lads playing the "starter" version of archery. They had set up two tiny targets about 25 metres apart and were throwing large complex darts at them. Once again, they showed a complete disregard for personal safety but were having a lot of fun. We walked into a small village and our guides asked to see into the first house but the owner was not about so they went to the next one where we were graciously shown in by the old grandma. Today is Bhutan's New Year's Day. Could you imagine someone turning up at your house unannounced on New Year's Day and asking to show a couple of foreigners through??

It was a typical subsistence farmhouse. The animals were living on the bottom floor. We climbed a ladder to the second floor which housed the main living area. There was an open fire smoldering with a huge soup pot bubbling away. There was a kitchen and preparation area but no dining area. Once each meal was prepared, they just sat around in a circle on the floor. I asked grandma where they kept dairy products cold and she proudly opened a big walk in pantry that had dried meat and pork hanging from the ceiling and a few odd chilies drying around the walls. She triumphantly pulled the lid off a twenty litre plastic fertilizer bucket that held the daily supply of milk. Of course there was no refrigeration. There were two large wooden vats that held daily red rice and special visitor quality rice. There was no other food. I presume the vegetables were picked just before each meal. 45% of Bhutan's population are still subsistence farmers. They virtually live without money. This house was typical for at least half of the population. There was quite a large bedroom with two beds (one was for grandma) and several mats. Everyone slept together in the room. Chris called me into an adjoining room where a 20 year old girl sat on the cold floor creating a beautiful piece of silk and cotton cloth on an old loom. Apparently she did this for three to four hours every day and took about a month to create enough cloth for one garment. Once again, we were humbled by the simplistic life led by so many people in the world.

Clare arrived safely with her knuckles still white from the hair-raising landing. We watched the landing with our mouths wide open. We then drove to a high mountain pass for a late lunch and a view of the Himalayas that was mostly obscured by a few clouds before finishing our day at another beautiful hotel set on a cliff in farmland near Punakha.

Diary 214 “What a phallus!” Monday, February 15th, 2010.

Today we really got a feel for this unique country. We began with a long uphill hike to the Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Temple which was only built recently and was full of statues and paintings designed to protect the Bhutanese against invaders. It became so apparent to us during the day that every aspect of Bhutanese life is controlled by Buddhism. They have their own form of Buddhism which is shaped by stories which we would regard as wild fantasies. For them, they are totally real and captured for all time in colourful paintings on temple walls throughout the country. Once we suspend our Western cynicism, it all makes sense and it is difficult not to get caught up in the spirituality.

Our second stop today was the imposing Punakha Dzong (monastery/fort) which was first constructed in 1637. Punakha was the capital of Bhutan for many years and many important ceremonies are still held in the giant fort. All of the buildings are lavishly painted and our wonderful guide, Phup, spent an hour explaining the life of Buddha while using the graphic paintings. It was a memorable and educational experience. At times there are six hundred monks in residence at the fort but today we so much enjoyed watching the adolescent boys in their red robes playing silly games in the sacred rooms. Despite being monks, they were still boys first and foremost. We came across a group of them down by the river with their robes hoisted up and splashing each other and throwing stones at each other. Reality will hit home

when they have finished their 12 years of training and then have to go high up into the mountains and remain alone for more than three years while they meditate and pray if they want to become a true monk.

After lunch we hiked to the Chimi Lhakhang Temple which was constructed in 1499. It was receiving plenty of visits from Bhutanese couples anxious to ward off evil spirits or to have their babies named. The experience we had there was so special I cannot do it justice. Our guide explained all the rituals then we simply became part of them. At one stage a young monk tapped each of us on the head with two large wooden phalluses and an iron bow and arrow. It is a ritual to chase away evil spirits and protect us in the future and I hope it works well. I so much wanted to take out my camera and record the “clunk” as the wooden bits hit Chris and Clare on the head. Other couples were rolling old dice to find out the fortunes of their children. Some pregnant ladies came and had the monks assign names to their unborn children (they don't have family names) and others just made offerings of things like beer, coke and biscuits. Some of the young women were so affected by the experience that they had tears running down their faces.

Many Bhutanese believe so strongly in the power of the phallus to fight off evil spirits that they paint giant ones on their new houses. Its stems from the “Divine Madman,” Lama Drukpa Kunley(1455-1529) who is one of Bhutan's favourite saints. He travelled around the country provoking people to discard their preconceptions by using outrageous obscene and sexual antics. The flying phalluses painted on the houses are his. Sometimes they hang them over their doors and they often appear in the temples. Here is the official reason from a Bhutanese guide book:

“The Bhutanese reverence for the phallus is recognition that earthly sensibilities can open doors to the quintessential profundities of a thriving spiritual ethos.....ancient and primal, the fire-engine-red symbol of Bhutanese manhood sweeps across the landscape and spiritual consciousness of Bhutan. We find it gracing our idyllic homes, standing proudly above our fields of buckwheat or maize, generously painted on our temple walls.” The practice is not as widespread as I had been led to believe but in a country where the people are so clean-living and modest, it is quite strange to come across a farmhouse with a ten foot high willy painted on the side.

Apparently, they are also a part of many rituals. There are sometimes five hung up in the interior of some homes where they are meant to ward off evil spirits. They form a major part of the erection (sorry) of many new houses. Baskets of them are carried around the house three times and then become part of mock ceremonies before the house is declared livable. Even the farmers erect them (ok, enough already!!) over their fields to protect their crops. In Central Bhutan, wooden willies are dipped in cups to chase away any ill will before drinks are served to esteemed guests. So where do women fit into this? I came across this delightful quote: “Look at the erect penis deeply. It points to the heart of Bhutan.” I will let you work it out.

I just realized. This country truly is the opposite of Hong Kong where willies remain firmly (or not so firmly, I suspect) hidden. Ah...the joys of travel as a source of education.

Diary 215 “One of those days.” Tuesday, February 16th, 2010.

Today was one of those travelling days that are just so special, that I have no idea where to start. We had trekked up to a special place behind Thimpu called the Wangditshe Temple which had been built in 1750 and basically was unchanged since then. We were shown these footprints, at least a quarter of an inch deep, etched into the floor and facing the huge Buddha statue. It turns out that a guy came into pray each day and stood there before kneeling thousands of times on each visit and he had worn the footprints into the floor. We stared in disbelief. Our guide, Phub, was deep in conversation with the monk at the temple who then invited us into his humble one-roomed hut for a cup of tea. There was a wizened old lady sitting on the floor going through her rosary beads. It turns out that she was 87 years old. When she was 75, she came to the temple from a small village near Paro to pray for her soul after she died and for her family's well-being. She has been sitting there praying every day for 12 years!! Her daughter came to look after her and feed her. The daughter made us tea and gave us this traditional dish of dried rice and herbs. I started asking the old lady questions, using Phup for translations. We had this wonderful hour in her presence. She was really sharp and told us so much about her early life in Bhutan. Her stories about her mothering under the harsh conditions so long ago were quite amazing. Then Poop discovered that he was from the same small village and that they were closely related. At the end of our conversation, she gave Phup strict instructions to look after us carefully with his heart and mind because we had some special quality that he should respect. She said she had no idea where Australia was but somehow she thought we were unique and she gave us her blessings. It was a special moment in life I will never forget.

Earlier in the morning we had visited Changgangkha Temple which had been built in the 1100's and still had many features from that time. It is a very sacred temple and people bring their babies there to be named and blessed. It was so spiritual to be part of their rituals. We were given holy water and hit on the head with some ancient relics and were welcomed by everyone with wide smiles. Then one of the princesses turned up with her beautiful new baby and went through the rituals as well.

Our driver, Tshering Wang Chuk, took us to his nearby apartment where we met his wife and relatives and had a lovely home-made morning tea together. It was another of those very special times, full of laughter and sharing, that make you realize how much the same we are no matter where we are from and what we believe. How privileged we are to have been invited to his home.

After our long hike, we did some shopping before visiting the amazing Trashi Chhoe Dzong (fortress/monastery) that was first constructed in 1216. It is a huge and almost impenetrable complex that now houses the King's Office and the home of the chief monk of the country. The main worship room is simply breathtaking. There are little cupboards with 1000 Buddha statues inside and another 1000 Buddha painting around the walls as well as intricate carvings and statues on every wall. Directly opposite it are the impressive houses of parliament. In a small, modest house in the gardens between the two buildings lives the current King. They all know him as a true “man of the people.” He quite often just walks out of his office and takes one of his friends for a stroll through the town. He goes into shops and

businesses and asks about their happiness. If they are going through hardship, he will give them money. He also drives his car to remote locations and takes off on the paths into the forest on his own for days on end. He calls at farmhouses and remote schools. If there is a problem, he fixes it or sends the army in to rebuild a house burnt down in a fire or lost in a landslide. He gives money to the poor, helps in classrooms, comforts the sick and generally behaves like a saint. How inspiring is that? How can we not help but be humbled by people like that?

I think this diary is a probably a jumbled mess but it can't be helped. We have met so many people today who are selfless in what they give back to the society in which they live. We never have to even think about our personal safety. We just go from experience to experience, even more convinced than ever that Buddhism has such a positive influence on people's lives.