

# Travel Log – Bhutan

**September 30**

We have just arrived in Bhutan and are settled in a posh resort built in traditional Bhutanese architecture and decor but with all the amenities of a 5 star hotel. We are going to spend 6 days here and we were totally ambivalent as we knew absolutely nothing about this place. It turns out that we are not alone. In the 8 KM drive to the hotel which took almost an hour as (there are no paved roads to speak of) we learned that Bhutan sits on the border between China and India; Bhutan was not open to the outside world until 1974 when 200 tourists arrived. There are only 700,000 people. National sport (are you listening Zach) Archery. 95% are Mahayana (universal) Buddhist. Lots of water (Himalayan snow melt) therefore hydro power main export to India. Most people wear traditional attire looking like Shakespearian characters in a play. From what we've seen and heard we'll be exploring wonderful landscapes which we didn't really get to see ('cause it ain't there) in Tibet and Nepal . They have close ties with the University of New Brunswick as they do not have Master programs in Bhutan. Until 2008 it was a kingdom but the benevolent king decided to create a parliamentary democracy similar to the UK, Australia and Canada. The prime minister here has an Oxford education and ministers have Harvard, Penn State education. In their recent election the opposition party toppled the ruling party winning 33 out of the 45 seat parliament. They have a sense of humour in that they call themselves the land of the GNH for Gross National Happiness. We are now fascinated by what we heard and looking forward to explore this unique place. BTW not by law but by policy they are trying to limit the number of tourists to 65,000 a year even though the demand is much greater. They do not want to expand and commercialize too fast. Their national airline has 4 planes and they have very few hotels and dirt roads they plan to pave. Welcome to Bhutan.





### October 1

This morning we drove from Paro to Thimbu the capital city. It took 2 hours to fall in love with the country and the people and the landscape. We came to Bhutan on a blind date and like in the fairy tales it became love at first site. We now understand why the itinerary includes 6 days in Bhutan. The mountainous terrain, the powerful gushing rivers, the rice patties terraces in the valleys up the river. The unique and beautiful legislated traditional architectural standards and finally the total absence of Western (American) influence or even presence (no McDonalds or Coca Cola or KFC which we saw in Tibet and Nepal) make this country so authentic and exotic. This is the first country we've seen that has not been touched by the ugly paws of multi nationals and globalization. In fact sitting between two giants (China and India) it's only defence is to maintain their tradition culture and identity at the expense of increasing their standard of living. We wonder how long they can hold out. Our hotel in Thimbu is like a palace and our suite with the balcony overlooking the gorgeous landscaping.







Our welcome ceremony including a private blessing ritual by a Buddhist monk was overwhelming and the service attitude here is unparalleled. The hotel staff is not only pleased to take care of your every need, they anticipate your need and offer their service with pride and gratitude. No tips allowed. It's like we're dreaming and our actual trip hasn't yet began. Where does it go from here? Today I am the most popular tourist in Bhutan as I am wearing my Barca shirt and the people here are soccer crazy with Barca and Manchester United (really?) their favourite teams. Lots of European and EPL soccer on TV here. What more can you ask for?





Breaking: Mom actually liked and went for seconds at an authentic Bhutanese restaurant in Thimphu. On the menu: red rice, buck wheat dumplings filled with spinach, sautéed beef to pour on the red rice, excellent. This afternoon we were taken on a classical tourist checklist: textile museum, paper making factory, Bhutan's "Pioneer Village" showing a typical rural family home that is 400 years old and even a sort of zoo to see Bhutan's unique national animal the Tankin, a sheep head and a cow body. Interesting but we couldn't take our eyes off the landscape. We're now back in the hotel where an Archery competition is about to start, followed by a folklore show.





## October 2

The day is shaping up like a filler day. There are x attractions in Thimphu and you can't see them all in one day so today is the day. It's OK that's what tourists do. We are making a run to the hotel now (pun intended) for mom who still struggles with her stomach. This is one of the many invaluable benefit of being the group. I would like to make a vow that I will not take photos of the Chinese temple on Bayview and John or the Sikh temple near Canada Wonderland. I have enough to last me a life time. We are both a bit down and tired today. We saw Blue on Skype perched on Alex` locks and listen to Jaime recite poetry as it should be done with feelings and gestures and intonation. Mom would like to have a copy of Alex book ``How to shit in the woods`` in preparation for our 3 hour drive to Puntakha tomorrow. To continue the theme we feel a bit crappy today but now that I said it, honestly we're having the time of our lives.

The children monastery was a real highlight. 6-7-8 year old kids playing games like shootsies. The kids always get me they are the same pure and innocent everywhere until their society "corrupts" them.





### October 3

The love affair continues. This morning we are driving from Thimphu at 4000 feet through a dense forest climbing to about 11,000 feet at the peak where we had a panoramic 360 view of the Himalayan range somewhat obscured by white clouds.



From here we are descending to Punakha at about 3000 feet. The forest reminds us of Uganda, dense, deep with a huge variety of trees, maple, spruce, oak etc. On our descent we had a chance to see the rural agricultural area and the way of life of the farmers. Students walk to school 8 KM in each direction. The drive



reminds us so much of the road to Hana in Maui, windy, bumpy with beautiful vistas on each side. The more we learn about Bhutan the more we are impressed with the values and the role of the government in facilitating the commitment to preservation and yet progressive and developing with the cooperation of the private sector. e.g., if a Tiger kills a cow you don't kill the tiger, or snow leopard, the farmer makes a claim and is compensated for the loss. There seems to be another form of capitalism that can be practiced effectively albeit in a small country other than the Western model where the return on the buck reigns supreme. Our private conversations with Tandin our guide comparing and contrasting experiences, life styles, customs and norms add a unique and likely as important as the sites and venues themselves. Tandin is very knowledgeable, informed and up-to-date on everything West including Israel and the Middle East.











We have now arrived at Penis Valley (no kidding) Long story we'll tell you later. The legacy of the Divine Madman is all about the power of the Penis in fighting evil spirits and evangelizing Buddhism. We hiked for about an hour to the temple of the Divine Madman. The story of the divine madman is what my mother used to call Bobe Meises. Bhutanese or Buddhists in general are very superstitious and are scared shitless of demons and evil spirits. Just for my own sake in case you want to hear the story here are some bullet points to tweak my memory. High Lama Tibet womanizer arrow to Bhutan house young bride half-brother built Chimi. Foul mouth teachings, old man, 7th baby, water from a finger hole. The houses in the Valley all have paintings of penises as decorations and the Chinese tourists are laughing their heads off. What a story.





Before I forget ask me when we come back about the relationship between the Bhutanes state and MGOSPA. We now arrived at our hotel for the next 2 nights







#### October 4

If climbing the Boutalla in Lhasa, Tibet was a 10K (although considering the thin air it easily qualifies as a marathon) hiking the trail up the mountain to see the Temple built by the Queen Mother for her son the present King only in 1990 was a marathon on steroids considering the steepness and the height. Long and short - we made it huffing and puffing. Mom again demonstrated will and determination. I had a slight hick up half way up becoming light headed but it disappeared after a few minutes. The view from the top is worth the trip. But this is all incremental training sessions preparing for the Iron Man climb to see the Tiger Nest. At this time the bookies are not taking bets that we could make it or for that matter that we would even try. Stay tuned.





This afternoon we saw the Crown Jewel of Bhutan - the Zhong. It is a massive structure originally built as a fort to defend against invading Tibetan. The campus now holds all of the nation state administration such as Governor`s office, judiciary, assembly etc. all above a huge courtyard that is used for entertainment during national festival. The other half is the holiest of holly - the religious shrine where all the relics are located and is the Buddha worship place. We enter a huge assembly hall where thousands of Monks gather, where royal weddings, the crowning of a new King and where the constitution was signed. The temple is most impressive and the wall frescos tell the story of Buddhism from A to Z. It was sort of an executive summary of the entire philosophy and religion in pictures. For us it brought together all the bits and pieces that we heard and saw but that we couldn't quite put together. Now we can probably barely get a passing mark if the question was: What is Buddhism?

That said and with all due respect we have a hunch that the originators of Buddhism were smoking some heavy duty stuff including LSD. Their stories are so intricate and convoluted that it`s hard to believe that they believe in it. Coming to think of it our Torah has many stories that let's face it... But our elders probably only drank Manishewich





**October 5**

This morning, we're headed back to Paro the same way: up the mountain down the mountain. Before hand, we stop at the colorful town Bazar.





The Himalayans are totally fogged out. On the way we learned in great detail about the GNH. When we arrived at the airport in Paro and saw the poster promoting GNH we dismissed it as an tourist advertising gimmick. Now we know better. GNH defines Bhutan through its cultural, spiritual, social and environmental value system. I recorded the lecture word for word and anybody who is interested in understanding national development should listen to it. The amazing thing is that as you will hear, Bhutan has specific measurements and indices to actually quantify the level of Happiness in the country. It is fascinating if for no other reason that it is real and practiced as a way of life. In a strange way it reminds us of the early days of the development of the state of Israel. Strong values, principles and commitment. This drive is very popular maybe the only one, so when we see tourist buses coming across we are reminded how lucky we are to have enjoyed literally a private tour.

Our Buddhist education terminated at a 7th Century temple the oldest in the country and a "twin" to the Jokara temple we visited in Tibet. On our way back we are debating as to where to find the worst roads: Bhutan, Costa Rica or Uganda. We're going to have to call it a tie.

### October 6

When, you say Bhutan I say stairway to heaven. It seems that all the important points of interest are close to heaven but wait, once you get there, there are more stairs to climb. Today it was Tiger Nest. We were warned that this is one of the most difficult to reach, attraction in the World. This is a steep climb of over 3500 feet on a dirt and rock path literally in a jungle, to this holly place built into a rock side with a straight drop of about a Kilometre. The view is out of this world but the walk is incredibly difficult particularly because of the altitude. Mom set a goal to make it to the Tea House (two thirds on the way up) and she did. I needed to demonstrate my manhood prowess and continued with the guide all the way to the shrine. From the Tea House to the next



rest point it is a shorter distance but much steeper which in hindsight could have killed mom if she tried to climb it. But wait. Once you get to this point there are 700 stairs to the shrine half are down and half are up and another 50 once inside. Seeing that you have to go back ( you don't have to but...) it makes no difference. This is by far the most challenging physical feat we ever tried. With that we are saying good bye to Bhutan. It's been a fascinating week in a fascinating little country and one that far exceeded our expectations. We learned a ton about the country and its people. You have to come here to believe it.





