

Over-View of Bhutan

History of Bhutan

Much of Bhutan's history is obscure, but it can be broadly summarized into three important eras: the advent of Buddhism, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel's unification of the country and the institution of monarchy in 1907.

Before Buddhism arrived in the country, Bhutan is said to have been in a dark age with rampant evil, cannibalism and bon practice. Guru Padmasambhava who visited Bhutan on several occasions introduced Buddhism in the country.

In one occasion, guru Padmasambhava visited eastern Bhutan in pursuit of an evil spirit who fled from Tibet escaping the Guru's wrath. Guru Padmasambhava subdued the evil spirit and blessed the site. Today it is an important pilgrimage site for every Bhutanese.

Bhutan's ancient history abounds in Guru Rinpoche's literature.

Until seventeenth century, Bhutan was divided among numerous warlords and rival factions. There were no laws and the country remained in anarchy.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel who visited Bhutan from Tibet is said to have unified the country together under a uniform law.

He also introduced the dual system of governance, the spiritual and the secular that is still in existence today. He was also responsible for warding off several Tibetan invasions.

After the death of Zhabdrung, which remained secret for a long time, the country once again plunged into fighting, rivalry and lawlessness. It continued until Ugyen Wangchuck, the first king of Bhutan, united the country once again.

Ugyen Wangchuck was officially declared the first king of Bhutan in 1907. The coronation of the fifth king of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck took place in Thimphu in 2008.

In the same year, the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck transferred power to the people by instituting democracy. Today, Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy with a ruling party, the opposition, and the national council, an independent house of review. The monarchy is the head of state.

National Symbols

One of the national symbols of the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Bhutanese national flag was officially adopted in 1969. The flag of Bhutan is diagonally separated in two halves: the upper left half is orange/yellow and the lower right half is orange. In the middle of the flag is an emblem of a white dragon facing to the right. The dragon is seen holding jewels in its claws and these signify the nation's wealth. The snarling mouth of the dragon represents the strength of the people protecting the country. The orange color represents the Drukpa's monasteries and Buddhist religion, and the orange/ yellow symbolizes the secular authority of the King. The white color stands for purity and loyalty.

The national flag of Bhutan is one of the national symbols of Bhutan. The flag is based upon the tradition of the Drukpa Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and features Druk, the Thunder Dragon of Bhutanese mythology. The basic design of the flag by Mayum Choying Wangmo Dorji dates to 1947. A version was displayed in 1949 at the signing of the Indo-Bhutan Treaty. A second version was introduced in 1956 for the visit of Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuk to eastern Bhutan; it was based upon photos of its 1949 predecessor and featured a white Druk in place of the green original.

Dress

Comfortable clothing and sturdy, soft-soled shoes are essential for travel in Bhutan. Warm clothing is recommended; and except for summer months, down jackets and woolen sweaters are suggested. In summer, heavy cottons and lightweight woolens will be acceptable. Altitudinal differences account for a wide range of temperatures from day to night the year round. It is, therefore, suggested that clothing be layered so that you can adapt to the changing conditions.

While visiting temples and other religious institutions, dress modestly and respectfully. Slacks are more appropriate for men; and longer – length skirts are more appropriate for women. Shoulders must also be covered when inside religious buildings. Also refrain from smoking while on the premises. Please keep in mind that shoes must be removed when entering temples. It is, therefore, suggested that you carry a pair of socks to wear inside religious buildings.

Currency

Bhutanese currency is Ngultrum (Nu.) and is officially pegged to the Indian Rupee. Also Indian Rupee is acceptable all over Bhutan except Rs500 and Rs1000 currency notes. Credit Cards have limited acceptability and payment through credit card is accepted mainly by Deluxe hotels and few selected Handicrafts establishments only.

Cash and Travelers Cheques exchange facility is available for most of the main currencies including the US dollar, Euro, Indian Rupee, Japanese Yen, Thai Baht, Pound Sterling, Swiss Franc, Hong Kong dollar, Canadian dollar, Australian dollar, Singapore dollar, Danish kroner, Norwegian kroner, and Swedish kroner. Exchange rates vary.

It is also possible to have funds wired with the services of Western Union but funds cannot be accessed in all locations, and are limited in amounts and days of availability.

Health

No vaccination is currently required for entry into Bhutan. However if you are arriving from an area infected with yellow fever, you are required to have a yellow fever vaccination.

If you are arriving from Cholera infected area then officials may ask for evidence of Cholera vaccination. Anti –malarial medication is recommended for all travelers to Bhutan who are visiting rural areas in the districts that border India.

It is suggested that you assemble a traveler's medical kit appropriate to destination, length of trip and general health. On a tour in Bhutan, there are long drives, and roads are winding so medication for motion sickness is strongly suggested. You should also pack an adequate supply of any prescribed medications you may require while traveling.

Travelers who plan to visit Bhutan should consult a physician about high-altitude travel. After a brief period of acclimatization, most people do not suffer from altitude sickness; but elderly travelers or those with high blood pressure or heart conditions need to exercise caution at high altitudes.

Food

Bhutanese food is generally good. Set meals for travelers tend to be on the bland side, because local food is heavily seasoned with red chilies and can be quite hot. However, more adventurous can try the local delicacies like the tasty and fiery the national dish of Bhutan, Emma Datshi which is made with chilies and Local Bhutanese cheese. Most hotels provide meals buffet-style. There are usually continental, Indian, Chinese and Bhutanese dishes. The food in hotels is often the best in town, but in main towns now there are few restaurants increasingly becoming popular. All tourist hotels have good selection of international and Bhutanese beverages.

Buddhist Heritage

Bhutanese in general are deeply religious people. The basic Buddhist belief of compassion and interdependence has allowed a society where people live in respect of his environment that constitute not only other people, but also all other living beings.

Buddhism came to Bhutan around the eighth century when Guru Padmasambhava, the great tantric Buddhist master visited Bhutan to subdue evil spirit and liberate human beings from demons.

Guru Padmasambhava, who had earned the peoples' faith by vanquishing evil spirits, taught Buddhism in Bhutan. Today, many important temples and monasteries in the country are dedicated to the life and work of Guru Padmasambhava.

Buddhism had however, already become popular in India when a royal prince, Siddhartha achieved enlightenment by meditating on human life, suffering, disease, old age and death.

Siddhartha abandoned his wife and son, wealth and princely luxury and set upon the task to lift the curse of sickness, old age and death by meditating more than six years. When he had found the answers, Siddhartha is said to have achieved enlightenment.

Siddhartha's teaching has since then evolved into Buddhism, crafted and molded by many of his followers and disciples. Siddhartha, who later came to be called Lord Buddha is said to have taught anyone who came to him.

His teachings constituted compassion, emptiness, interdependence, impermanence and the abstinence of desire, which he had identified as the root cause of suffering.

Today Buddhism is recognized as the state religion, while allowing a secular system for people to practice other religions too. The chief abbot, the Je Khenpo overlooks the spiritual aspect of the country.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel instituted the dual system of governance, which include the secular and the spiritual in the 17th century. The secular looked after civil administration and politics while the spiritual handled religious affairs of the country.

Culture

Culture in Bhutan, while being deeply entwined with religion, manifests itself in a vast interweave of traditional arts, architecture, festivals and religious ceremonies.

Bhutan's culture remains vibrant amidst modernization attracting tourists from all over the world. The Thimphu tshechu (festival of mask dances) alone has been attracting thousands of visitors.

Tshechus are the most important festival where both culture and religion come alive. It is observed in all the districts and villages across Bhutan. Festivals and religious ceremonies can be an important place to understand Bhutan's culture as it sees people from all walks of life dressed in traditional attire.

During tshechus, monks and laymen perform mask dances and women sing wearing traditional hand woven brocades.

Bhutanese arts, paintings and architecture take inspiration from nature and the Himalayan landscape. Mountains and valleys are witnessed in almost all forms of Bhutanese paintings. Traditional songs trace the meandering rivers and the ups and lows of mountains and valleys.

Traditional culture and etiquette remain important in the Bhutanese lifestyle. Every office goer wears the traditional dress, while *Driglam Namzha*, the code for good discipline and etiquette guides every individual.

The traditional dress for Bhutanese men is the gho, which is a wraparound skirt tied at the waist with a belt while women wear kira which are ankle length skirts.

Culture in Bhutan can also be witnessed in the several Dzongs or fortresses, monasteries and stupas that dot the country. Bhutanese hoist prayer flags on hilltops and bridges. It is believed the wind will carry the mantras imprinted on the prayer flags across the universe and benefit all sentient beings.

Culture is also central to the government's policy and many efforts are made to preserve and promote Bhutan's unique culture. It constitutes an important pillar of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan's most important development philosophy.

GNH

The concept of Gross National Happiness is a Development philosophy in Bhutan. The Late Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck expressed his view on the goal of development as making "the people prosperous and happy". The importance of "prosperity and happiness" was highlighted in the King's address on the occasion of Bhutan's admission to the United Nations in 1971. This vision was further elaborated by the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck who declared in the first years of his reign that "our country's policy is to consolidate our sovereignty to achieve economic self-reliance, prosperity and happiness for our country and people".

While the emphasis is placed on both, prosperity and happiness, the latter is considered of more significance. The Fourth Druk Gyalpo emphasized that for Bhutan "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product" and this is now being fleshed out by a wide range of professionals, scholars and agencies across the world.

Concerned about the problems afflicting countries that focused only on economic growth, Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck decided to make the nation's priority not its G.D.P. but its G.N.H. (Gross National Happiness). He suggested that the progress of nations be measured by "Gross National Happiness" for the rich are not always happy while the happy generally consider themselves rich. While conventional development models stress economic growth as the ultimate objective, the concept of GNH claims to be based on the premise that true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other with Directive Principle of State Policy to give Fundamental Right to the people.

Gross National Happiness consists of four pillars:

- Fair socio-economic development (better education and health)
- Conservation and promotion of a vibrant culture
- Conservation of environment and
- Good governance.

Guided by Gross National Happiness Bhutan has tread the trail of economic development but not to the detriment of the Happiness of her people. This development philosophy has made the lives of the Bhutanese comfortable by embracing the Middle Path. Bhutan has savored immense stride of economic progress that had complemented in the preservation and promotion of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness. Thus, Bhutan extols its forest cover and diversity of flora and fauna when elsewhere many

species are disappearing and are on the verge of extinction. GNH is a unique approach to national and global development.

Climate Conditions

Bhutan has four seasons. Bhutan's climate ranges from tropical in the south to temperate in the upper regions of the country, too cold in the north and like much of your adventure in the Himalayas it will be quite unpredictable. The weather can vary dramatically from valley to valley, from day to day or within same day. For example: in the Thimphu and Paro valleys, the winter daytime temperature averages 60 degrees Fahrenheit during winter days but drops well below freezing point during the night.

The fluctuations are not quite so great during the summer and daytime temperature often rises to the mid 80 Fahrenheit. Punakha, Wangduephodrang and central valleys are lower than valleys in Western region and tend to be always warmer. The higher peaks will be snow-covered all year. Light snow will often blanket Thimphu and Paro valleys in winter. The higher passes, particularly, Thrumshing La between Bumthang and Mongar can be treacherous during the winter as snow falls frequent and ices up the road.

The summer monsoon from the Bay of Bengal affects Bhutan from late May to later September. Views over the Himalayas from the higher passes are usually obscured from June to August. There are notable advantages to visiting Bhutan during the wet season including the spectacular rhododendron blossom from March through June and the deep green valleys. Many species of wild orchids are in full bloom during spring to late summer season.

The spring season in Bhutan can only be compared to a master artist's palette, truly a spectacular time. The autumn season, late September through November, is usually very mild and clear. The fall colors surround and embrace your senses. The sky is usually at its clearest, affording magnificent views of the Himalaya range. The spring and Fall seasons are traditionally the most popular times to visit the country.

Flora and Fauna

Bhutan is one of the last remaining biodiversity hot spots in the world; forest cover has now increased to over 72% of the country, with 60% of the country under protection. Bhutan has received international acclaim for its commitment to maintaining biodiversity- keeping at least sixty percent of the country under forest cover and designating more than twenty-five percent as national parks, reserves and protected areas. Bhutan's flora includes the national flower-the blue poppy, and 360 species of orchids, 46 species of rhododendrons, junipers, magnolia, edelweiss, gentians, primulas, artemisia, daphne, carnivorous plants, high-altitude plants, 5,400 vascular plants and over 500 species of medicinal plants. Bhutan also has a great variety of bird species. It is recognized as an area of high biological diversity and is known as the East Himalayan 'hot spot' situated as it is at the hub of 221 global endemic bird areas. The

recorded number of bird species is over 670 and there are chances that this number could still go up. A botanist's paradise!!

Forest types in Bhutan are Fir Forests, Mixed Conifer Forest, Blue Pine Forest, and Chirpine Forest, Broadleaf mixed with Conifer, Upland Hardwood Forest, Lowland Hardwood Forest, and Tropical Lowland Forests. Almost 60% of the plant species that is found in the eastern Himalayan region can be found in Bhutan as well.

Bhutan is also home to about 16 bird species that are endangered worldwide. These include the White bellied heron, Pallas Fish eagle, Blyth's King fisher to name a few. Phobjikha valley in Wangduephodrang and Bomdeling in Trashiyangtse are also two important places in Bhutan that is visited by the endangered Black Necked Crane. Bhutan is one of the ten global hotspots in the world. Bhutan is all set to preserve and protect the rich environment through environmental organizations.

Geography

Bhutan - Landlocked country is situated in the eastern Himalayas with pristine environment. It is bordered for 470 kilometers by Tibet region of China to the north and northwest for 605 kilometers by India's states of Sikkim to the west, West Bengal to the southwest, Assam to the south and southeast, and Arunachal Pradesh to the east. Sikkim divides Bhutan from Nepal.

Bhutan stretches 300 kms in length and 170 kms in breadth thus forming a total of 46,500 square kilometers. About 70 percent of Bhutan is covered with forests; 10 percent covered with perpetual snow and glaciers. This leaves 9 percent for human habitation. The rest for pastures, meadows, barren rocky areas or scrubland.

Early British visitors to Bhutan reported the high mountains lost in the clouds altogether a scene of extraordinary magnificence and sublimity. Bhutan has the most rugged mountain terrains in the world with elevations ranging from 160m in the south to 7,000m in the north. Bhutan's highest peak at 7,554m is Kulha Gangri bordering China; Jumo Lhari overlooking the Chumbi Valley is 7,314m; nineteen other peaks exceed 7,000m.

The snowcapped Great Himalayan Range over 7,500m runs along the Bhutan-China border. The northern region consists of glaciated mountain peaks with arctic climate at the highest elevations. Watered by snow-fed rivers, alpine valleys in this region provide pasturage for livestock tended by a sparse population of migratory nomads.

The Inner Himalayas are southward spurs of the Greater Himalayan Range. The Black Mountains, in central Bhutan, form a watershed between two major river systems, the Mo Chhu and the Drangme Chhu

(River). Peaks in the Black Mountains range between 1,500m to 2,700m, and the fast-flowing rivers have carved out spectacular gorges in the lower mountain valleys. The woodlands of the central region provide most of Bhutan's valuable forest production.

In the south, foothills descending into the subtropical Duars in India are covered with dense deciduous forest, alluvial lowland river valleys, and mountains that reach to around 1,500m. The Duars abuts the Himalayan foothills, has rugged, sloping terrain and dry porous soil with dense vegetation and abundant wildlife. Rice and other crops are grown on the plains and mountainsides up to 1,200m.