

Himalayan High Life in Paro, Bhutan

By Fredric Hamber

Paro Valley. Photo
courtesy Uma Paro
by COMO Resorts

We have no stoplights here. The cows are our traffic control," my guide says as we wait in the car for a mother and her calves to cross the road. They're in no hurry.

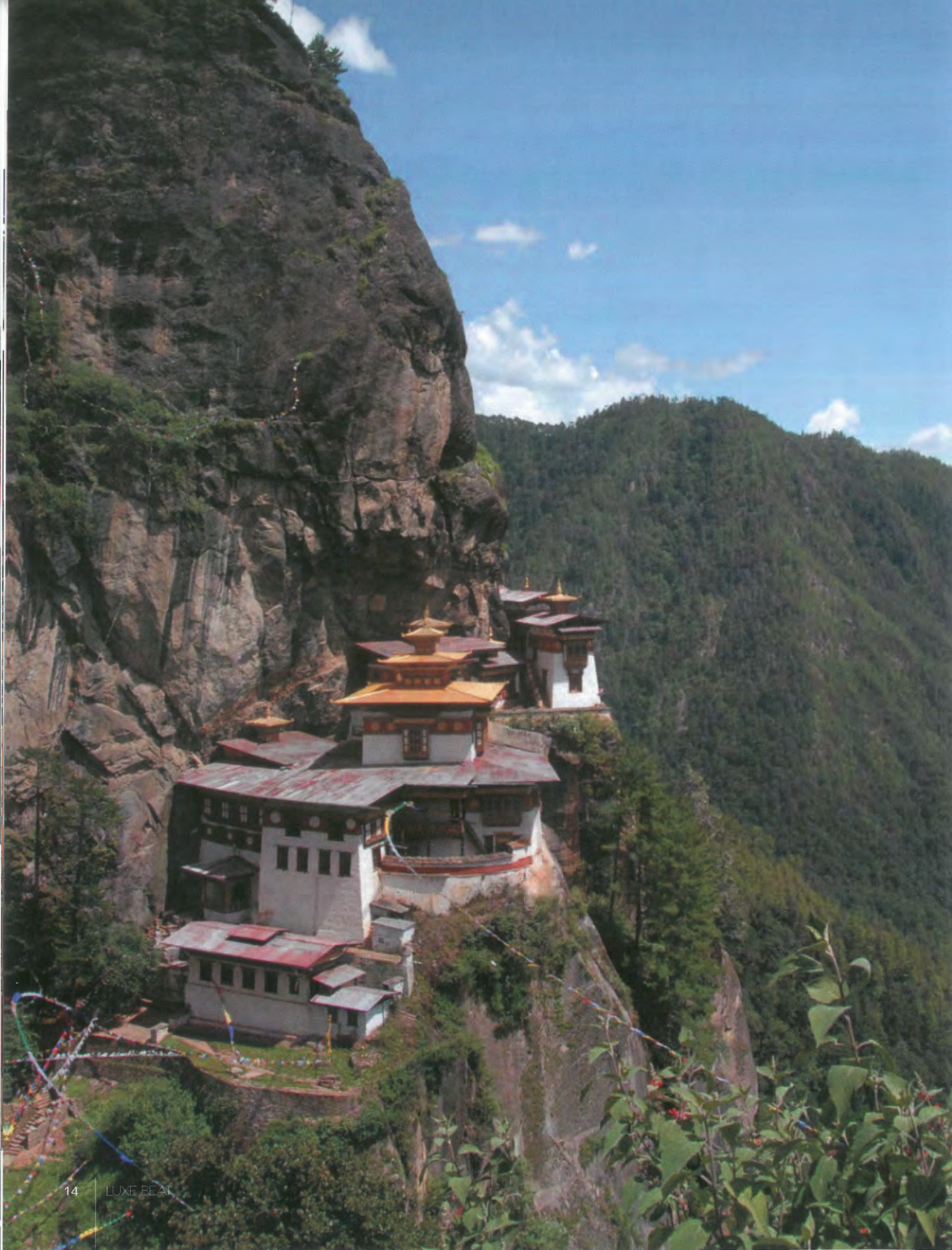
Neither am I. It has taken some doing to get to Paro, Bhutan, and I'm glad to have made it. To begin with there was the visa business. While the country is open to tourism it is not open to everyone. The government has made a decision to cultivate affluent travelers by limiting visas to those who meet a minimum spend requirement. "We don't want backpackers," I was told by several sources during my visit. Travelers are expected to be accompanied by licensed guides.

Then there was the Airbus 319 flight through windy Himalayan passes aboard the national carrier Druk Airlines. The final descent into Paro was the most turbulent I've ever experienced, though nothing I hadn't been warned about, starting with the thorough five-page pre-trip information packet COMO Resorts sent me. But after the pilot came over the system with a reminder about seatbelts a few minutes before the excitement began, I knew I was in professional hands, like being with an expert whitewater guide through river rapids, and I happily cast my fate to the wind. On the ground I was met by a

representative of Uma Paro lodge and given a long white shawl, a traditional Bhutanese welcome. The shawl was made of sheer fabric and would come in handy over the next few days to cover my lower face when the wind picked up dust during my hikes.

It was a ten-minute drive to the lodge (okay, fifteen minutes including the cows). Uma Paro overlooks the valley of the Paro





River, which flows down from Jomolhari, the country's second highest peak. Uma is run by COMO Resorts who also run a second Bhutanese lodge in the valley of Punakha; most guests split their time between the two hotels, keeping the same guide the entire week. My visit was in December, considered low season but a delightful time to be in the mountains. A fireplace inside Uma's lobby was burning the native hardwood that locals call zhishing, its scent deeply comforting.

A short drive down the hill, "downtown" Paro village is compact and walkable. With plentiful sources of local lumber, houses are built large to accommodate multiple generations of a family. Houses

are generally inherited by a daughter rather than a son, and a successful man will then move into his wife's home.

Bunches of red peppers hang on strings outside windows to dry in the sun against the walls of buildings. Peppers are an export commodity as well as an ingredient in ema datschi, a favorite national dish of chili peppers and yak cheese. In a shop I bought several bundles of thick stinky incense containing Himalayan cypress. Also for sale in many shops is the woven woolen fabric used for the national dress, the kera for women and gho for men, which looks a bit like a bathrobe.

By lucky timing, a competition was taking place at the centrally located





archery grounds. Two teams took turns, first standing at one end of the long field and aiming for the target, then going to the other end and aiming back. Although traditional bows are still made from soft bamboo in Punakha, competitive archers use modern American manufactured bows.

That evening the guest speaker at Uma's cultural program was Kenpo Tashi, director of Bhutan's National Museum and a lifelong Buddhist scholar. Happiness is the subject of his talk, as Bhutan's is known for its "gross national happiness" index, a gimmicky idea dreamed up by the country's monarch in 1972 and assessed annually by the government.

The following morning, my guide, a young woman named Sonam, and I embarked on an uphill hike through pine forests to visit two local dzongs, the traditional fortress buildings which also serve as religious centers. Although Uma offers a plentiful Western breakfast menu, I decided to start my day with a healthy bowl of crushed nuts and seeds with almond milk, topped with

shavings of the freshest sweetest apple. The fruit is an export of Bhutan, with over a half million apple trees in the country.

Along the hillside path were a few nooks in the mountain where someone had placed dozens of miniature stupas. Sonam explained that these rounded objects with pointed tops were part of a mourning tradition, molded from clay mixed with cremation ash.

Within the hour we arrived at Ta Dzong, the historic watchtower that served a strategic role in defending the country from successive waves of Tibetan invaders in the 17th century. This history is what has made archery and darts national sports and pastimes in Bhutan.

Ta Dzong is undergoing renovations following two recent earthquakes and will reopen to visitors in December 2016. In the meantime the museum's collections are on display in an adjacent building. Among the highlights are masks from the ceremonial Mask Dance of the Drums, each of the twelve masks representing a different animal and

by extension, a different vice or virtue. This bit of centuries-old culture is currently the focus of preservation efforts by UNESCO. The country's natural history is also explained with displays about the snow leopard and the national blue poppy flower, which blooms during the spring monsoons.

Before my hike Sonam had given me a preparatory talk in which she was also determining any fear of heights I might have. This mountain walk was a warm-up of sorts for the next day's climb to Paro Taktsang, the "Tigers Nest" monastery. Originally built in the 17th century, the iconic cliff-hugging architecture is the



Light-filled mountain room at Uma Paro by COMO

spot where, according to local belief, an 8th century guru brought Buddhism from Tibet to Bhutan, arriving on the back of a flying tigress.

We set out early for the daylong trek in order to return before the afternoon winds became oppressive. Five-colored prayer flags are a continual sight along the way. The monastery is 3,000 feet above the valley floor. One walks along a well-trod path, but although the landmark is visible much of the way, the route is not. I was climbing the mountain while seeing Tigers Nest on an adjacent mountain but it wasn't clear until nearly the end of the hike how we would navigate the horizontal distance across the ravine. It turns out there were short bridges over a waterfall that joined the gap. That cascade was also the only spot where I saw a few patches of snow.

The word monastery might make one assume Tigers Nest is home to a community of monks, but in fact just three caretakers live there at present. The interiors are a series of shrines and temples. Among the paraphernalia in each is the traditional offering of seven bowls of water. At one point Sonam opened up a trap door (I don't know what

else to call it) in the floor and I gazed directly down at three thousand feet of mountain and air. It was my only vertiginous moment of the day.

It was upon beginning the descent and seeing the haggard faces of several tired hikers still on their way up that I felt smug in a way that perhaps only a physically fit middle-aged man can feel. I felt it again back in the comfort of the lodge when chatting with a twenty-something fellow hiker who confessed he was exhaustedly looking forward to his hot stone massage treatment at COMO's Shambala spa.

I headed instead to a table at Uma's Bukhari restaurant where Executive Chef Dewa Wijaya nightly prepares Indian, Bhutanese and Western menus. After my day's efforts, charcoal-grilled Australian lamb loin with crispy polenta, Italian ratatouille, olive tapenade and rosemary jus called to me, washed down with a Jacob's Creek Shiraz. Kenpo Tashi has his ideas about happiness and I have mine.

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Shambala Spa. Courtesy of Uma by COMO

