

Distinctly Bhutanese

A trek through northern Bhutan reveals a country where fact blends with fiction, modernity with the medieval and a national park for Yeti's. Kari Lundgre

Image courtesy of leadventure.com

The howling began a little after midnight. First one dog, then another, their barks and cries cutting through the stillness and echoing across the small river that separated our flimsy, orange tents from the village of Chebisa in the mountains of Bhutan.

This wasn't the typical chorus you might hear from the village mutts on a moonlit night. Something had whipped them into a frenzy and their voices had an edge

that left my fellow trekkers and me shifting uneasily in our sleeping bags. In the morning we all sauntered, bleary-eyed, towards the breakfast tent, exchanging jokes and theories on the uncanny ability of Bhutanese dogs to sustain six hours of uninterrupted barking.

Over breakfast we were told that it had been a bear that had caused the commotion. A bear had wandered into the village and attacked one of the local ponies that

had been left tied to a fence for the night. The dogs had started out as noisy spectators and stayed on as baying scavengers.

Half an hour later, as we walked through Chebisa, we saw little. Some blood was smeared across the cobblestones and had pooled in the mud. A slight, tangy smell of iron staining the morning air, but otherwise nature had been thorough and the dogs ravenous.

As we climbed the hill behind

Chebisa we speculated on what might have happened. Why would a bear come into a village to kill a pony when ponies and yaks were scattered all over the hills and paddocks around the village? Could it have been the dogs alone? They looked thin and hungry enough. Maybe one of them was rabid.

'I think,' said Tshering, our Bhutanese guide, 'it was the Yeti.' He paused briefly before buckling over in laughter at his own joke.

If so, I thought, it had strayed far from its designated home 120 miles to the east. In Bhutan, there is a reserve for the Migoi (Yeti or 'strong man') in the Trashigang Province, the Sakten Wildlife Sanctuary, with a total of 253 square-miles set aside for the mythical creature.

But then this is typical of Bhutan, a country where fact blends with fiction, modernity with the medieval, and even the international rules of politics and commerce have a

distinctly Bhutanese flavor.

Months before, as I sat tucked safely behind a cubicle wall in Washington, D.C., Bhutan had seemed as distant and surreal as Atlantis or Timbuktu. So when I received an e-mail about a fourteen-day trek in the north of the country, organized by a U.S. based climbing group called International Mountain Guides (IMG), I had to dig around for a map to figure out exactly where Bhutan was: north of India, east of

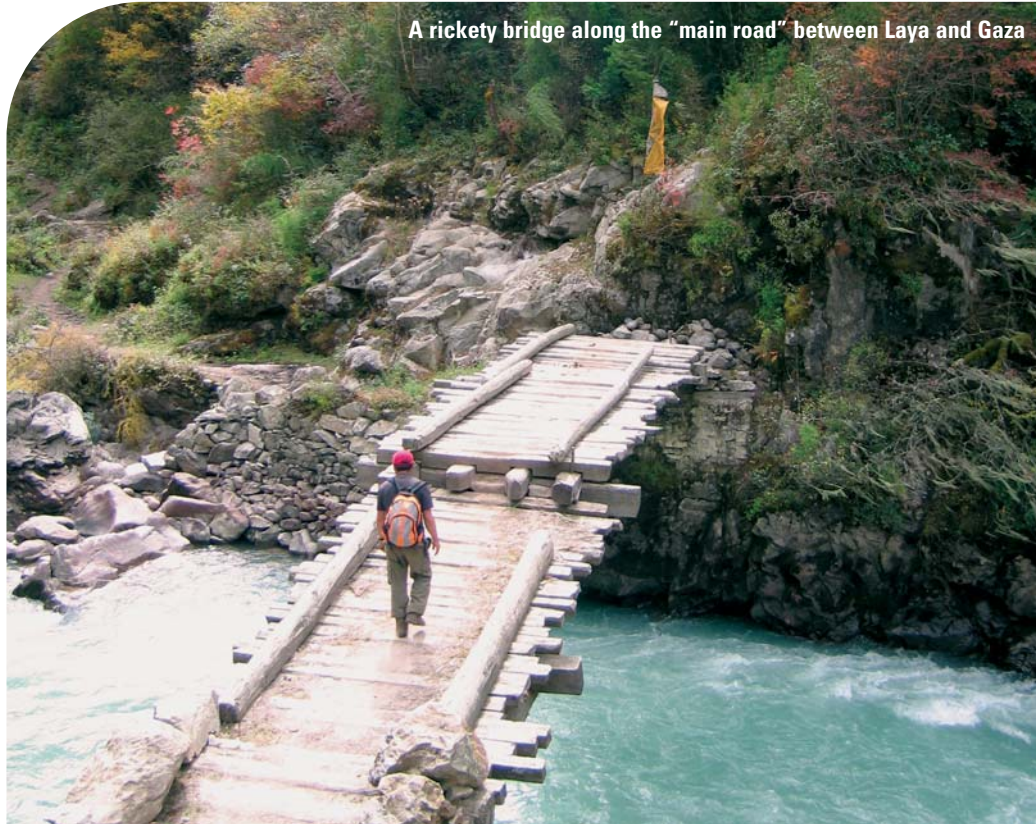
Nepal, and south of Tibet.

With a bit more research I learned that it is a constitutional monarchy, red rice is the staple food, the Bhutanese are fond of archery, and national progress is measured in Gross National Happiness rather than Gross Domestic Product. I also discovered that only a select number of tourists are allowed in each year (the official target is 7,000, though as many as 9,000 tourists visited in 2004) and that there is a daily per-

person charge of \$200. In addition, all visitors are required to hire a Bhutanese tour group and have a pre-set itinerary in order to get an entry visa. So much for spontaneity.

And yet, looking east to Nepal, with its raging political and environmental problems, it's hard to begrudge the Bhutanese their elitist regulatory policies. Cocooned inside the natural barricade of the Himalayas, the Bhutanese are cheerfully cherry-picking their way

A rickety bridge along the "main road" between Laya and Gaza



into the 21st century. Tourists and television: yes (as of 1974 and 1998, respectively). Smoking and traffic lights: no. The ban on smoking went into effect in January and the first traffic light, located in the capital Thimpu, was removed after two months of service.

In the mountains, the favored beers are the Indian Tiger beer and the quintessentially American brew Pabst Blue Ribbon, brewed in China. And while King Jigme Singye Wangchuk may be eager to embrace modernity by molding his country into a democracy and tourist Mecca ('The last Shangri-La'), western moral codes haven't stopped him from marrying four sisters from the same family.

Trekking, by far the most popular tourist activity available in Bhutan, is still done in the old style with

porters, guides, ponies, and morning tea served in one's tent. Our trek was no different. In addition to Tshering and a IMG guide, we had two cooks, several men for odd jobs, and an ever-changing collection of yak and pony herders handling our gear. We, the spongy, wheezing westerners (mostly American), were left to concentrate on breathing, which can be difficult at first due to the high altitude and the need to dodge pack ponies.

By the time we reached Chebisa, we had been walking for seven days and had seven more to go. Ahead of us loomed the 16,407-foot pass of Sinche La and behind us over 60 miles of trail. The swagger in our step that had been there when we left Paro was gone, our energy drained after a grueling second day when the rain had turned the trail

into a swampy creek. A 7-hour hike had become a 10-hour scramble as we doggedly waded our way through the lush forests, umbrellas in hand, barely noticing the graceful drapes of Spanish moss on the oak trees or the roaring Paro Chhu.

But we were rewarded for our determination. On the third day the sun rose and the clouds cleared. For lunch that day we spread out on rocks in a plateau far above the Paro Chhu, which was still running high but whose waters had turned from a dirty brown to a creamy, glacial blue. The valley, so narrow and steep for the past two days, had opened up and on the treeless slopes above we could see our first yaks and soe (a yak-cow cross).

The sharp peaks and deep crevasses of the Himalayas surrounded us on all sides and the

'I think,' said Tshering, our Bhutanese guide, 'it was the Yeti.'

narrow trail underfoot had been pounded smooth by the hooves of countless yaks and ponies. You could hear their bells and sometimes see their bright, red headdresses in the distance as they moved sure-footedly along. Edelweiss, Rhododendrons, and tiny, blue Devil's Trumpets covered the hills. It was a scene straight from the pages of an 18th century romantic poem. Though for Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats it was the Alps that had been their inspiration.

Above us, the sky was eggshell blue with a few clouds caught on the jagged summit of Jhomolhari, Bhutan's second highest peak. The 23,996-foot Jhomolhari (or Chomo Lhari) has only been summited twice (in 1937 and 1973) and may never be again. In 1994, climbing the peak was banned out of respect for local superstitions. The world's highest un-climbed mountain (Gangkhar Puensum) is also in Bhutan and lies just to the northeast. For now at least, Bhutan's highest peaks are for the gods alone.

Turning our back to Jhomolhari, we continued north, making our way up a long glacial valley (the first of many) filled with butterball marmots fat and glossy from a summer of gorging. Above us, dotting the steep slopes, I caught glimpses of the rare blue sheep, their blue-grey coats flashing in the sun. Reaching the Nyile La pass, our first pass of the

Need caption



Need caption



A welcome break for picnic lunch



Need caption

trek, we collapsed on our packs, relieved and pleased with ourselves. A stone Chorten, a kind of Buddhist reliquary, marked the route and was covered in prayer flags, both old and new, the oldest torn to ragged, translucent strips by the wind.

Prayer flags are everywhere in Bhutan, gracing any point that is touched by the wind. In the villages there are patches of land filled with dozens of flagpoles and in the mountains the most impossible ledges are decorated with red, blue, yellow, and green, each string representing a unique petition: a request for health and longevity, protection for a newlywed couple or perhaps simply an appeal for good fortune. To hang a flag off the Chorten at Nyile La would require at least half a day's hard walking. Still hot and sweaty from the climb, I wondered what prayers were important enough to demand such an effort.

Our ponies were close behind us and continued down the steep slope

on the other side, jumping and skidding through the snow, the kitchenware shifting noisily in their packs.

'But where are the yaks?' said Tshering, throwing a careless snowball and looking studiously unconcerned – the yaks had the bulk of our gear.

They were still just outside Jangtohang (our previous camp) it turned out. After a summer of grazing, they were unenthusiastic porters and had spent the morning trying to off-load our gear. When they finally did arrive at our next campsite, half an hour before sunset, they ignored the huddle of shivering tourists and put on a full rodeo, a spectacle we might have appreciated more if the bags they were carrying had belonged to another group.

A yak flew past me, a small Bhutanese man clinging to its tail and my tent-mate's bag hanging precariously from its back. In a battle of 2000 pounds versus 120



A team of yaks graze peacefully at the Jangtohang base camp

pounds the odds lay in favor of the yak, but I had to give the herder credit for tenacity.

Too soon, we were in Laya, our northernmost destination and a signal that we would soon be back in the real world. By mountain standards Laya is an affluent town, made rich from the steady stream of trekkers who pay to camp in the villagers' fields as well as a regular, though surreptitious, trade with Nepal. Of course, Tshering told me with a wink, if you ask a Layan, they'll claim to be poor. He pointed at one of the village's highly decorated homes, whose white paint and ornate black trim most closely resembles that of a Swiss chalet.

'It only has two floors,' he explained, 'they could have three.'

But in Bhutan, the unspoken custom is that only rich men have three floors – the first for the animals, the second to live in, and the third for storage – so Layans build sideways rather than up and surreptitiously fill their homes with

lacquered cabinets, colorful blankets, and expensive modern items such as a radio or a solar panel.

Much as Eskimo or Lap culture is unique in North America and Scandinavia, the Layan language, music, and clothes are distinctive from the rest of Bhutan. Men, women, and children all wear the traditional Bhutanese Goa and Kira – a dress code that is mandatory across the country in government buildings and schools – but decorate themselves with thick bands of Nepalese silver. The women add to this by wearing petite, conical hats balanced high on their heads and kept in place by strands of blue, red, and white beads.

Sitting around a bonfire that night, we watched and listened to a handful of Layan women and girls sing their traditional melodies. They danced in a tight circle around the fire, their steps simple and seemingly unvaried: two steps forward, a step back, and an occasional turn. Similarly, the

Need caption



In a battle of 2000 pounds versus 120 pounds the odds lay in favor of the yak, but I had to give the herder credit for tenacity.

Climbing the last ridge before Chebisa



harmonies and songs were hard to distinguish at first. But slowly, as their voices grew more relaxed and our ears became more sensitive to the changes in tone and rhythm, we began to make out the different songs and movements.

I felt a nudge against my elbow and turned to find Ershler, the American guide who had organized the trip, grinning at me over his tea mug. 'Hey miss reporter, tell me how the hell you're going to describe this?' he asked, waving his arm to indicate the dancing, the music, the mountains and everything beyond.

Long after we disappeared into our tents, the Layan women, their husbands and our guides, continued

singing. The sound of their throaty voices floating across the village, up the valley and towards the mountaintops silhouetted against the night sky.

Several days later, clinging desperately to my car seat, I tried to ignore the seemingly suicidal dips and veers performed by our driver and focus on the luxury of moving at 40-miles per hour. As we rocketed to the side of the road to avoid a colorful 'Public Mover' truck with 'Honk Horn' painted in flashy colors across the back, I found myself thinking back seven days about that morning in Chebisa.

I recalled the cluster of grey, stone houses, their narrow windows, the grass drying under the roof overhangs, and the long, dark hours filled with the snarling voices of the dogs. It had been so eerie and otherworldly and altogether too wild for our modern sensibilities. And yet, however gruesome, the episode was also a stark and somehow beautiful reminder of just how gloriously, unabashedly and distinctively untamed Bhutan really is.

*How divine,
The liberty, for frail, for mortal, man
To roam at large among
unpeopled glens
And mountainous retirements.*

Yes, I decided, Wordsworth would have liked Bhutan. ■

Who's Writing?

A lifelong traveller, with roots in both Norway and the United States, I have done extensive trekking in Scandinavia, the Pacific Northwest of the United States, South America, Tasmania and have climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. I began my reporting career as a political reporter in Washington, D.C., before deciding to take my chances as a travel writer and general assignment reporter in Sri Lanka before attending graduate school in London in October 2006. When I'm not writing or walking, I do triathlons, scuba dive, surf and horseback ride.

LET'S GO...



The Lowdown

The wild and undeveloped character of Bhutan makes for excellent trekking all across the country. Some of the most famous walks however, are in the country's northeast where the pristine peaks of the Himalayas provide a dramatic backdrop and travellers may follow paths that mark the ancient trading routes to Tibet. There are a variety of treks to choose from: comfortable two to three-day walks, moderate week long expeditions or, for the truly ambitious, the 25-day Snowman trek.

Perhaps the most popular route links Paro to the northern village of Laya (3850 m) before turning south to finish at the Gasa hot springs: a total of 14 days and 200 km. The walk includes a visit to the picturesque Chomolhari Base camp (4040m) considered by many to be one of the most beautiful camps in the Himalayas.

Porters and guides are a prerequisite of hiking in Bhutan and trekkers will only need to carry a light daypack. In spite of this luxury, the hiking and altitude can be difficult. Walkers should arrive moderately fit and carry altitude medication, as well as an emergency dose of antibiotics.

When to Go

The peak season to visit Bhutan is in the fall -- October and November -- when the hills are covered in Edelweiss and the weather is clear and dry. Snow and rain are still possible

however, and it is important for trekkers to arrive with sturdy raingear and waterproof hiking boots. The Bhutanese are fond of hiking with umbrellas and are likely to kit you out with a colorful, old-fashioned example early on in your trip. Set aside any squeamishness you may have about hiking with an umbrella, you will arrive dryer and warmer for having had one in hand.

Trekking in the spring -- April and May -- is also feasible, if wet. This is the best time to see the mountains dotted with the cream, pink and red blossoms of flowering Rhododendrons. Whatever the season, Bhutan is still off-the-beaten track; trails and campsites are generally quiet (dogs aside) and trekking groups few and far between.

Getting There

The only airline that flies into Bhutan is the national carrier Druk Air (www.drukair.com.bt), which links Paro (the only airport in Bhutan) to Bangkok, Delhi, Calcutta and Katmandhu. Roundtrip flights on Druk Air from Calcutta to Paro begin at £130. Flying from Bangkok begins at £260 and takes about 3 hours. BA flies direct from Heathrow to Bangkok and Delhi for around £500. A less expensive option is to fly with Air India direct from Heathrow to Calcutta for around £200. Air India also flies to Bangkok for

approximately £260. Air France flights from Heathrow to Delhi begin at £370.

Getting Around & Red Tape

All visitors to Bhutan must travel on a pre-planned, prepaid, guided tour, as independent travel is not permitted. This may seem both tiresome and expensive but most Bhutanese tour guides prove to be enthusiastic sources of information and are worth the money. In addition, your guide will take care of all logistical details including hotels and transportation (usually by jeep or van) -- from the airport, hotel and to the trailheads.

Tourist visas cost £10 and must be approved prior to entry. There is a government mandated daily surcharge of £114 during the high season (March, April, May, September, October and November). Individual travellers and groups of two will also be required to pay an additional daily surcharge of £22 and £17 respectively. During the off-season (January, February, June, July, August and December) the surcharge drops to £95 per day (additional singles/couples surcharges remain the same).

The best one-stop source of information on visas, tour operators and itinerary suggestions (for trekking and cultural tours) is the government sponsored:
www.kingdomofbhutan.com

Health Hazards

Most treks in Bhutan are not technically challenging but trekkers should be moderately fit. The terrain is mountainous, with regular ascents and descents of over 500 m, and trekkers will walk between five and nine hours every day. Even during the dry season, there can be days of pouring rain and some passes will be snow-covered.

Perhaps the most pervasive health issue experienced by trekkers in Bhutan is altitude sickness. Walkers must keep in mind that much of the walk is over 4000m and so it is important to acclimatize and be aware of the additional physical stress that comes from being at such high

altitude. Rest days, hydration and steady breathing are all simple but critical ways to staying healthy. Trekkers who are prone to having problems with altitude, or who have never hiked at high altitudes before, should consider taking medication.

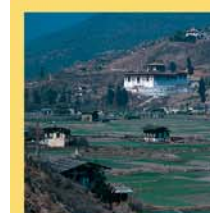
In addition, trekkers should carry a basic First Aid kit and be aware of the problems that may occur from exposure to heat or cold, poor hygiene, accidents, water infection or lack of preparation. All water should be boiled and filtered and the use of a waterless hand sanitizer gel is a good way to avoid stomach problems. If anything truly serious happens, it is possible to be flown out with a helicopter to Thimpu (Bhutan's capitol).

What to carry & money

Given the mandatory, pre-planned system of trekking in Bhutan, much of your trip -- including hotel, transport, food and trekking gear -- will be paid for in advance. Nevertheless, here are few tips to make you more comfortable: bring your own sleeping bag and mat, take more warm clothing than you think you will ever need, bring plenty of sunscreen and hand cleanser and don't forget to tuck in a stash of your favorite on-trail snack. For additional information, pick up a copy of the Lonely Planet's guidebook on Bhutan, which features an entire section on trekking with excellent descriptions of various trekking itineraries. It is a nice thing to have on hand in order to get a clear sense of distances and altitudes completed and coming up.

Overall, shops in the mountains of Bhutan are few and far between and offer little more than gumboots and beer. You may want to do a little trinket shopping in Paro or Thimpu and prices in general are fairly low (depending on what you buy). Be prepared to barter. Finally, you will (hopefully) want to tip your guide(s). Try to get a sense of what is expected and also be aware that there is a hierarchy - you may have preferred a friendly porter to your actual guide but tipping the porter more than the guide is likely to cause problems.

Bhutan...a mysterious land, isolated & untouched. Sandwiched between Tibet & India; few tourists visit this hidden kingdom high in the Eastern Himalaya.



Isolated hamlets...
Terraced fields of rice & cereal crops...
High altitude valleys...



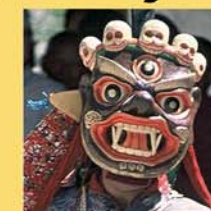
Centuries old traditions...
Ancient architecture...
Tibetan Buddhism...

Herders tents, woven from yak-hair...
Wild, rugged & largely unexplored mountains...



Classic Journeys

Welcomes you to 'Druk Yul'...
Land of the Dragon



Energetic masked dances & traditional music...



Colourful Paro, Thimpu & Bumthang festivals celebrating heroes, demons animals & gods...



Preserved Dzongkha language...



Druk Path Trek
Combines the cultural highlights with the best short trek in Bhutan

Bhutan Odyssey
This tour discovers the cultural highlights of this secluded land.

www.classicjourneys.co.uk

Classic Journeys Adventure Travel

Your Window To The World



www.classicjourneys.co.uk
(01773) 873497

Nepal - Tibet - Bhutan - India - Sri Lanka - Tanzania - Kenya - Morocco - Peru - Ecuador - Greece