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– his thoughts on
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sailing on the
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China: every
mile a memory**

**Bhutan: Tranquility
on floating clouds**

*Pu Chi Fa:
Golden sunrise in
a sea of mist*

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CONTENTS

FEATURE

- 8 Canadian Ambassador
- 18 Swiss Ambassador
- 24 Japanese Ambassador

EDUCATION

- 30 Dr. Teerakiat Jareonsettasin – his thoughts on COVID-19
- 34 Post pandemic education
- 38 Pandemic crisis: the impact on independent schools in Britain

EXPAT LIFE

- 44 So near so far
- 64 Pondicherry... cultivated elegance
- 72 Step back please
- 86 50 years of passion: photography
- 88 English cafe in Bangkok
- 91 All the time in the world
- 92 COVID: the God of Love
- 106 Ownership in the workplace
- 120 A love letter to the hoteliers of Bangkok

TRAVEL

- 46 China: every mile a memory
- 50 Bhutan: Tranquility on floating clouds
- 56 Pu Chi Fa: Golden sunrise in a sea of mist
- 76 Catamaran sailing on the Andaman Sea
- 125 An Australian world traveller
- 126 New Road – Charoen Krung

FINANCE

- 60 ASEAN Mekong integration

FICTION

- 67 Bangkok Madam: Shopping spree

EVENTS

- 82 Cryonics

PROFILE

- 84 Dr. Osama Rajkhan
- 110 Ms. Pissara Umavijani

HEALTH

- 96 7 natural ways to prevent mosquito bites
- 100 Alcohol, fitness and our health
- 102 The future after COVID
- 104 Let's boost and rejuvenate
- 132 How to get happier and healthier despite adversity

HEALTH AND FITNESS

- 108 How willpower helps you be successful with weight loss

GREEN ISSUES

- 116 Thailand's battle with plastic

FASHION

- 128 Fashion with Talar

HISTORY

- 134 It's Deja Vu all over again

EVENTS

- 135 What's been happening: social pictures



Bhutan: Tranquility on floating clouds



by Kamalini Natesan

We start off on a good note – abundant joy. A rhythmic beat to our step and a song in the heart; we are en route to the airport to catch a Druk Air flight to Paro, in the land of mystical mountains, Bhutan. Splendour awaited us, we were told.

Our excitement is palpable and quickly transfers to each member. We are airborne.

As usual, I have done no homework and left it all to destiny. I so firmly subscribe to travelling to a place fresh, unstudied, and ready for the newness of it all. It works sometimes, and occasionally it doesn't. Drukpa Kagyu (Mahayana) Buddhism is the state religion, I have known. As an ism, it has always drawn me, and my philosophies have meandered around karma, Sutras propagated by Lord Buddha, and the allure of timelessness has fascinated me. My noble thoughts are rudely broken as a child prods me hard. I turn and view the snowcapped ranges. I stare at Divinity, my heart pounding. I automatically fish out my mobile. And yes,

I manage a few blurred shots which are good enough to put a spring to my already overworked heart. They pass by all too soon, and I resettle I am a huge sharer – I like sharing it all. Bhutan beckoned.

We land. We emerge from the airport - fresh enough to trek. At the airport we are greeted by Tashi Delek everywhere, hands folded, meaning – may your coming be auspicious to our country – welcome. Quaint! Thereafter greeting us is a burly Bhutanese driver come guide, even as he stands, hands folded, beside a plush car. He is Campchu, attired in his country's costume to boot, it is the Gho, a knee-length robe some sort of a kimono that is tied at the waist by a traditional belt known as Kera. The pouch in front was used to carrying a dagger, and food bowls. Campchu is carrying his wallet and mobile in it now, and some betel nut, Doma, he enjoys chewing it he informs us. We don't conceal our delight, and set off to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. His smiling mien, and an impressive array of Hindi words, the songs he plays on his car stereo – all wrap us up in a genteel manner. Within minutes of our drive, we are gasping at the clouds that chase.

The air is fresh and unsullied. We hold our breath at every turn of a hill, witnessing the magical wispieness. There is absolute quiet within the interiors of our vehicle, a rare occurrence during a car ride en famille.

Once in Thimphu, we are ushered into a simple hotel. The gateway is embellished, like most gates seem to be, we later observe. The ladies at the reception, yet again, are in traditional attire the Kira, a long, ankle-length dress accompanied by a light outer jacket known as a Tego with an inner layer known as a Wonju. This elegance we witness, we wish to own.

Inside the hotel, we are made





Shabalay juma (Bhutanese sausages marinated in spices), and noodles are some favoured snacks. The buttered tea is a great way to wash it all down. We savour their food, again and again, as our taste buds are tickled, teased and taken.

The hillsides, I had observed during our first drive, host a series of fluttering white flags on tall poles, in lots of twenties, even fifties. They flutter wildly, with the winds, almost ceaselessly. Later Campchu explains their meaning – whenever someone dies, these flags are planted on the hillsides as a mark of respect for the

captured in photographs, relics, and reams of written wisdom in calligraphic beauty. You name it, we find it – the Bhutanese culture aesthetically presented in a building that is not very large, much like everything else in this neat country. The size of the museum belies the magnitude of all that it houses. Whatever we actually envision is perhaps a minuscule of what is represented, centuries of trial and error, decade upon decade of sentinels against predators - against the onslaught of mankind itself. The Bhutanese are custodians of what we witness as their happiness in present day. We walk around dazed, taken in, aware that the four of us are separated by our individual fascinations. Once we have scoured the three floors, we come away knowing that Bhutanese Royalty lives well, humbly and enjoys the generosity of the bounty of nature. The people sure know how to respect and preserve it nature, as it was meant to be. We stand quietly and view the royal palace from a hilltop, admiring its ramparts.

In Thimphu all day, we grasp the meaning of Dzong, a word that resounds. There are many Dzongs in every town of Bhutan and the word conjures up the image of a pagoda-like building meant for quietude and prayer. The word literally means "the palace of great happiness or bliss". It means being fully immersed in the present, breathing in every moment and counting each as a blessing. As I look around me, I see a play of harmony, and warmth in their countenance.

Clouds afloat, with the sun, as playmate, in a perpetual game of hide-n-seek.



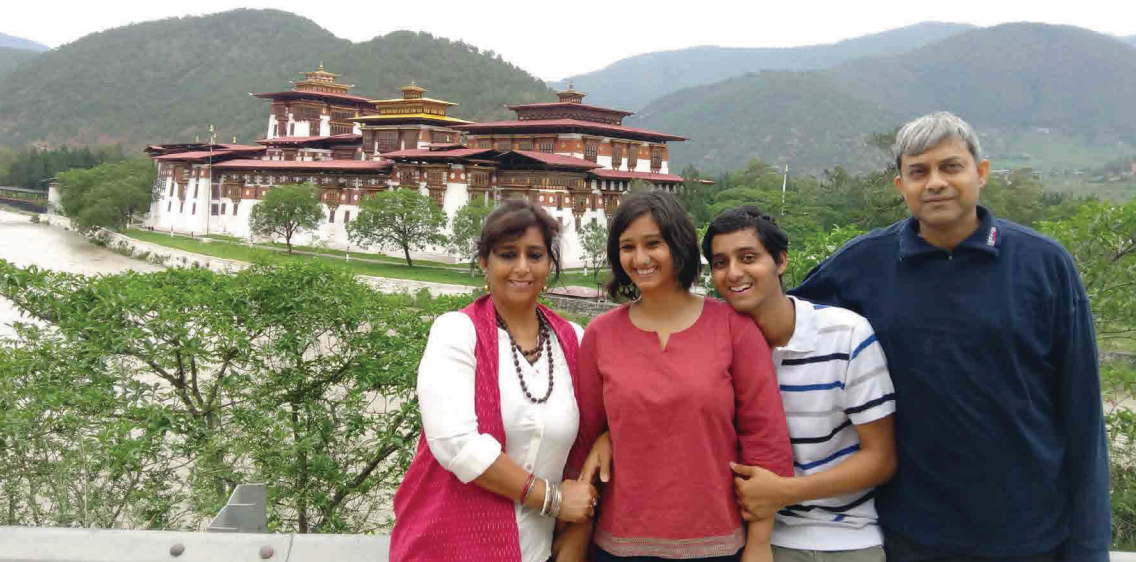
to walk up three flights of stairs, and they are steep. The frivolous play of clouds continues outside the glass windows. Far away an imposing Statue of Buddha, beckons. By dinnertime, we are impatient to sample Bhutanese fare. However the Indian food served in our hotel buffet is severely disappointing.

By the end of our trip though, we are addicted to Bhutanese food – Ema Datshi (chillies and cheese) and many different varieties of the same, momos (very different from those sampled in India) and red rice, often buttered, with a pleasant nutty taste, unlike brown rice. Cheese is made from cow's milk called datshi and is never eaten raw, and infuses the sauces with strong flavours. Zow shungo is a rice dish mixed with leftover vegetables, and a lot of stews are at our disposal. Chicken and pork are favourite meats.

dead, be it man, woman or child. I am humbled. I view them with much reverence. The hills are dotted with many such groupings of fluttering whites.

Our first morning is a lineup of unhurried activities: we are driven to the National Library and Archives of Bhutan, with the Royal family –





To our delight, we are driven to the Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan next. Daughter Ambika and I are completely taken up by the array of displayed looms. We could perhaps have just sat and meditated upon the weaves of silks and cotton threads, intertwined sophisticatedly. We have entered a world of impossible patterns, unique to Bhutan. Our minds plough through a labyrinth of motifs. The Bhutanese display at the museum of

folk art shows off their creative brilliance.

The Bhutanese skies seem to excel at this frolic.

Our next stop at the National Folk Heritage Museum takes us back in time. We hear huntsmen, as we hear the plodding of horses carrying them; we witness women pounding the millet and jowar, just as we observe many wooden mortars and pestles of varying sizes, some massive. The museum itself is maintained for real feel – no embellishments, no fuss over giving it a fancy makeover for tourists.

Our appetites are whetted, and we are ready to go shopping. We want to adorn ourselves with that which was on display. But our chauffeur insists that we await the morrow. He tells us that the township of Paro, and not Punakha town, our next stop, is a far better city, attuned to shoppers.

The narrow and dark staircases, with creaking boards, ensure that you are seized by the past. Garlands of garlic and red chillies adorn the entrance to the museum. We are walking through war zones as well, and see the crude weaponry then employed to slay the enemy. The tapestries are fine and the crafts, even finer. We see how looms were used to their maximum potential because there was in fact nothing else to clothe the tribes. Sheaths of handloom, designed aesthetically, are still loomed by the Bhutanese people. They proudly don their traditional attire handed down the ages, stunning and intricate as they are.

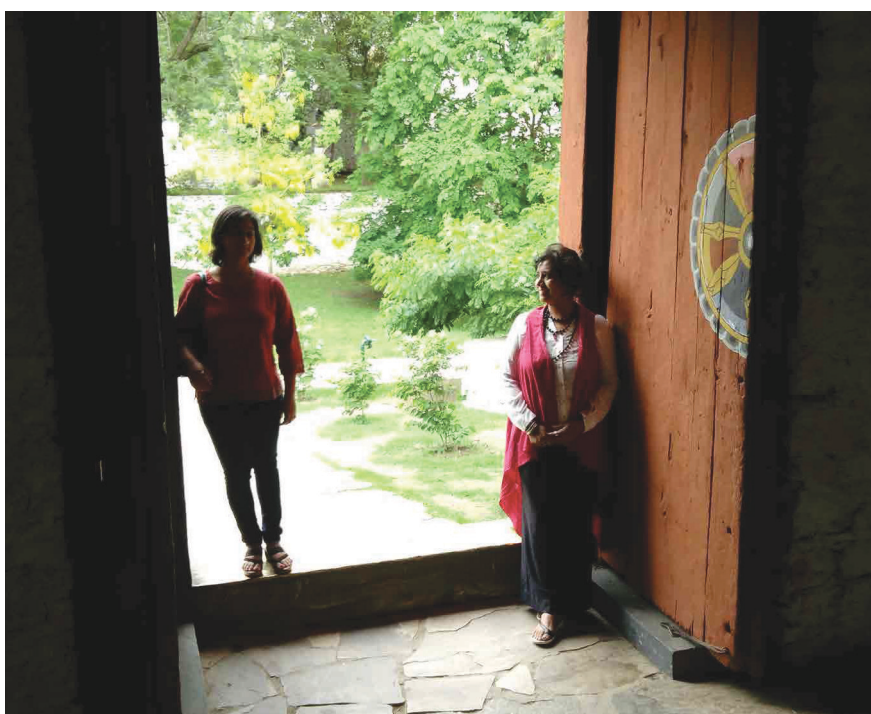
Our drive to Punakha, on the following morning, takes us on a winding path up the mountains – frenzied delights – clouds as travel mates. They are all around us, as we ride the Bhutanese mountains, tasting of pleasures unknown. However, not the entire journey is smooth, since the rains have left their footprints in broken bits. It also continues to rain in fragments. We arrive at the highest point of our journey, and pause to take it in. It is suddenly wintry cold, as biting winds come at us.

We are at Dochula Pass, lined with stupas, in their monastic hierarchy, en route to Punakha town. This little halt gifts us a quaint café, offering cookies with its strong coffee, made in modern coffee grinders, while you are regaled by the lush greens, and resident cloud cover. Mesmerised as we walk up to the Stupas, and look across green heaven, we are dazed into a kind of trance. For a moment time is suspended between heaven and earth. You are still even as the chilly wind blows your hair about your face and threatens to knock the air out of your lungs.

Oh, the magic of it!

En route to the Punakha valley, during our gradual descent, we are encouraged to stop at the botanical gardens by our guide. The dense garden swallows us - we meander around, admiring the flora, getting deeper and deeper, sucked in by the magic of it all. It is luscious and very damp. We sing, and allow ourselves the time to resonate with the spirit of the place. The limitless greens are different from what we've known. Bewitched, we return to our onward journey.

At Punakha, we find ourselves in a homely hotel with a vision of wondrous mountains facing



us from every open window. It drizzles on. We spend a quiet evening on the benches that dot the hotel's garden. Mystical strains of a flute-players magic keep up the magic. The air is drenched with more than the drizzle. We immerse ourselves in the experience.

Punakha is a sweet little valley town where we visit the Punakha Dzong. It is a truly handsome edifice.



Again, we lose ourselves and each other in its entrails. Colours resound and lend to its being a photographer's delight. The bridge that carries us to the Dzong is in itself a well-preserved Bhutanese 'relic'. We are told that this Dzong, where their King was wed, had been restored in 1994. It was the administrative centre and seat of the Government of Bhutan until 1955. We appreciate the information gathered, but prefer silence. The Dzong also houses the sacred relics of the southern Drukpa Lineage of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, a piece of information that excites me. The knowledge that I am so close to so much wisdom, is terribly enthralling.

Later we watch rafters on the

flowing river. The Dzong is located at the confluence of the Pho Chhu (father) and Mo Chhu (mother) rivers in the Punakha–Wangdue valley. The ambience permeates our pores.

Later we feast on momos, fried tomatoes and dried, roasted beans in Bhutanese style. The night is restful.

Next stop on our Bhutanese trail is the town of Paro, and the ride continues to be as exquisite as ever. We have driven there via Thimphu. Paro is where we had landed. Paro is where we will shop, and Paro is where we visit the Rinpung Dzong, a fortress-monastery overlooking the Paro valley. This monastery, built at first by Padma Sambhava at the beginning of the tenth century, conceals a long and hard history.

Paro is also where we make the tenuous climb to Paro Taktsang (also known as Tiger's Nest) a prominent Himalayan Buddhist sacred site and temple complex, located in the cliffside of the upper Paro valley.

Paro is the climax of our sojourn, and a heightened sense of adventure overcomes us.

Again, like Punakha, in this valley town, dotted with Dzongs and such like, our night halt is at a sweet little boutique hotel. The food is a superb blend of western, Indian and Bhutanese fare. An early start is a visit to Paro's National Museum, and as promised, we are dropped off to shop to our heart's content. Like lost cattle, we roam the main shopping street,



and feast our senses. We shop joyously, fingering all objects of Bhutanese origin, then imagining it adorning our home. We willingly empty our purses on Bhutanese fabric, artefacts such as brass teapots, a turtle in golden stone, wooden beads, prayer flags, metal prayer bowls with carved mantras, and embroidered bags. The most befitting memento is a Prayer Wheel in Jade, which is a true prize.

We turn in early since we are told that there is an arduous climb up to the Tiger's Nest very early the following morning.





There is a certain reverence that overcomes a person, when one achieves what one considers the impossible. The air is awash with gratitude. It is crowded, and yet one feels the triumph as one's own. I am alone. The arduousness of the climb bespeaks the tenacity of the monks. What inspires one to abandon 'normal' life and undertake such a life of solitude and hardship, I wonder aloud. We wish to spend the entire day up there, after all we had invested all of ourselves to get up here. The exhilaration of the experience lasts up until one has to take up the descent.

There are many legends that surround this Himalayan monastery, and Clint, a traveller writes, "The temple complex was first built in 1692 around a cave but it dates back to the 8th century as a mediation site. This cave is where it is said Guru Padmasambhava meditated for three years, three months, three weeks, three days and three hours in the 8th century. According to legend, Padmasambhava flew to the cave on the back of a tiger."

We are to begin the trek at 6am in the morning, armed with but our willpower and eager souls. Our guide tells us that it should not take us more than two hours to get up there, and less to climb down. What we find, leaves us speechless.

We start our climb rather merrily, with songs upon our lips. After an hour's climb with great energy, we are breathless. Our guide is losing patience and wants us to speed up I suspect, such as he demonstrates. It is only halfway up, he reminds us. I am scared – will I make it up at all? By this time, we should have at least had a glimpse of the Nest. The children do not complain, but they aren't skirting up either. The weather keeps up and doesn't add to my anxiety. There is no path drawn, and it is rough. I watch people pass me by, some far older, and many on horseback. My pride doesn't permit me to choose a ride. I power on, but with increasing difficulty. We finally arrive at a point whence a meandering staircase reveals itself, as does the monastery, the Tiger's Nest, hanging off a cliffside. It is the most unbelievable sight! It hits my gut, in a momentum that steals my breath away, even as I am forced to breathe harder. The exhaustion vanishes, and I stretch myself toward it, giving it my all. The green mountains behind it, in front of it, around it... they all add to the mystique on display. It is ethereal. Cemented to my spot as I behold the Nest. Heaven! I cannot for the life of me imagine how one would have built it, but that is all logic. This Monastery defies gravity.



After just over one wonderstruck hour we venture to undertake the descent.

We make it down with difficulty. It begins to rain, and the mud beneath our feet glistens unsteadily. We take over three hours to return to our car, where awaits us our sulky driver come guide. One look at my limp and my husband's crackling knees and he is all empathy.

We leave Bhutan with a plethora of experiences, peace and many unanswered questions. Yet when we arrive

at our city dwelling, the questions go up in smoke, leaving a profound sense of harmony in its place. We sense Paro, Thimphu and Punakha embedded within us, and Tiger's Nest, that has made its home within our collective soul.

