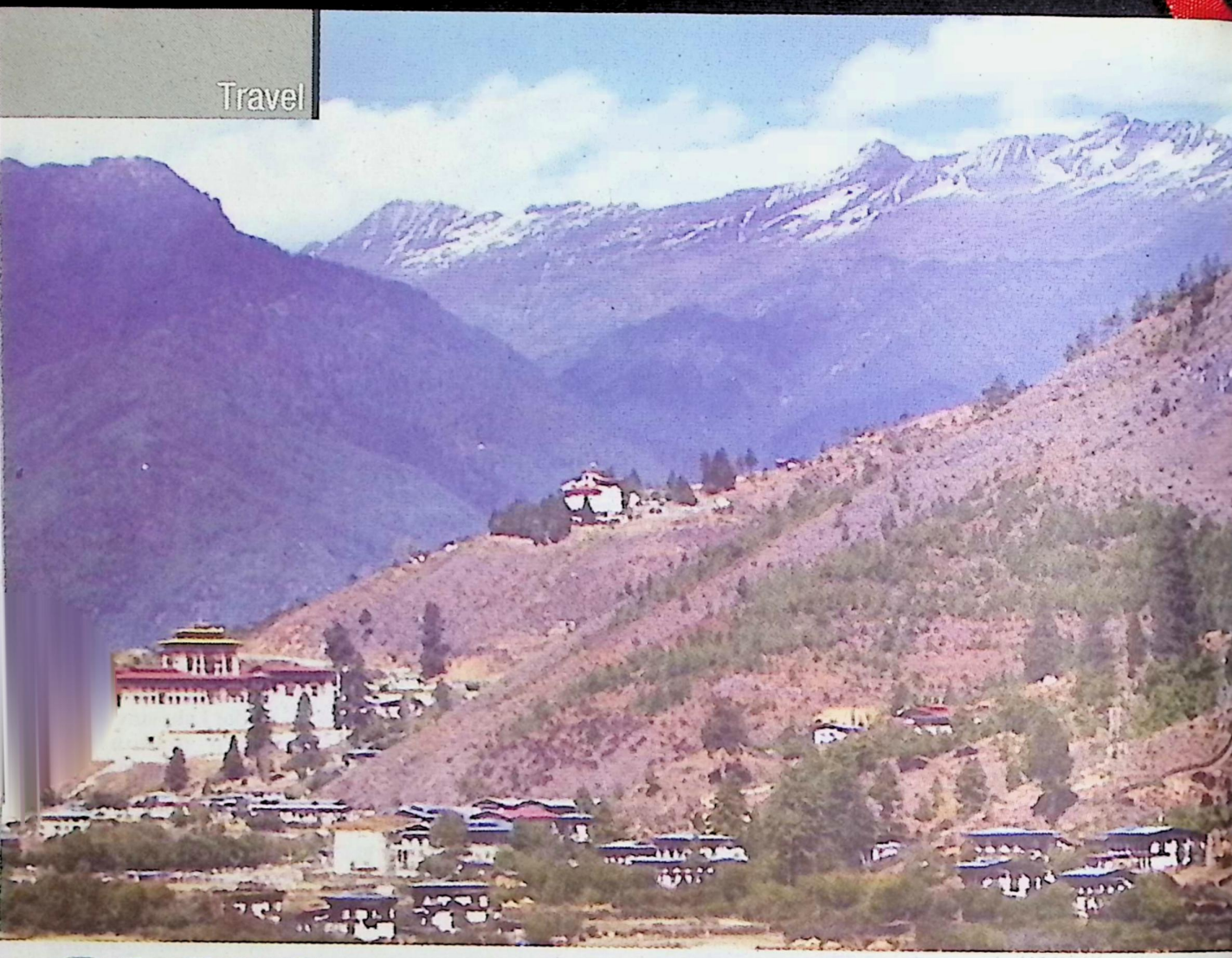


Chilling out in Bhutan

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One of the most unforgettable memories I have of my trip to Bhutan, one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen on God's earth, is speeding down the smooth road that hugs the mountains, surrounded by mist, while Beethoven's Ode to Joy played on my iPod.

Then, after a few minutes in the mist, we turned a bend, and I held my breath. In front of us stretched a gorgeous green expanse, framed by clouds and embraced by green mountains. This was Phobjikha Valley in western Bhutan, an important wildlife preserve and home of the rare black-necked crane that flew in from China in the winter. It was indescribably beautiful, like a postcard from heaven, a sight so breathtaking it moved one of my friends to tears.

The erstwhile kingdom of Bhutan (which recently became a democracy, after the much-loved king Jigme Singye Wangchuck stepped down in favour of his son) is like one slow, endless drink of cool, refreshing water - it's all quiet, dignified monasteries, impossibly green mountains, cool and clean air, gentle people, and calming landscapes as far as the eye can see.

It is such a tranquil place that within a few hours of arrival you find yourself slowing down, smiling more, and moving more deliberately and in less of a frenzy. Even after a challenging three-hour trek to Taktshang Goemba, the Tiger's Nest, one of Bhutan's most famous monasteries sitting some 900m above Paro Valley, we remained quiet and unruffled.

This dream-like state of mind was shattered, however, when I had my first taste of Bhutanese cuisine. No, it wasn't inedible; after the aforementioned three-hour climb, you'll eat pretty much anything. But the fact is, compared to its next door neighbours, India and China, Bhutan has pretty ho-hum food. That is, the flavours are neither rich nor interesting and the food generally