

TRAVELOGUE

IN THE LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

A journey from Dhaka to Paro, by airplane, can sometimes leave you with a few lost heartbeats if you're not the most courageous person in the world. The planes that operate between Bangladesh and Bhutan are pretty small, of the Airbus 319-100 and ATR 42-500 kind, and the landing at the tiny Paro International Airport makes it even more fearsome. But thanks to the expertise of the pilots, the experience ends on a reassuring note with a smooth landing. Well, that is at least how I felt when I travelled to the Himalayan Kingdom for the first time earlier this month along with a group of people.

CAN'T GET ANY MORE PRISTINE THAN THIS-

If you did have fits of acrophobia creeping in through your 50-odd-minute journey, those would have been swept away as soon as you

IS THIS LOVE FOR REAL?

The second thing that you would notice on coming to Bhutan -- this one would follow you through the rest of your journey -- is the amount of respect and love the Bhutanese people show to their king and the queen. During our seven days, we didn't find a hotel or restaurant or a souvenir shop where there wasn't any picture or two of the royal couple. Coming from a country where sycophancy seems to be the thing to have one's way in, it kept bugging me whether this admiration was real or if it was another of those rules that the Bhutanese people had to abide by. So I kept asking this question to the hotel managers and restaurant owners to get a more rounded view. The only thing I got, though, was: "We love our king because he lives like a common man and he always cares about our

a brand of smuggled Indian cigarette can be found at cornershops, no one dares smoke in public. If you absolutely have to smoke, do so in the confines of your hotel room.

SLEEPY TOWNS:

The towns of Thimphu, Paro and Punakha -- the places that we've been to -- are all quite similar in that they are pretty small and quite sleepy. The sun sets pretty early there and the shops and eateries by the side of the main streets in towns close down quite early too. There is hardly any night life to speak of. A few music clubs have sprouted up in Thimphu in recent years, but those too only stay open on weekends, till around 1:00am. But then again, who comes to Bhutan for the nightlife? It's the serenity and the picturesque surroundings that is what one should be looking for in Bhutan.

there is Punakha, the former capital of Bhutan, which is three hours' drive from Thimphu. On a cautionary note, the road to Punakha is quite terrible, so do start early so that you can spend some time inside the Punakha Dzong and indulge in some rafting down the river before you start again for three more hours of the troublesome drive.

Lastly there is the famous Tiger's Nest in Paro which is one of the most sacred Buddhist monasteries in the whole world, located high up on a mountain and it takes about a kilometre's trekking. Unfortunately we didn't take the trek due to consistent rainfall. Perhaps that is something that will egg us to go back to Bhutan for a full-fledged expedition.

TIME TO VISIT:

October is the ideal time to visit Bhutan,



disembarked the plane. With mountains at one side and river flowing down the other, you would be swept off your feet to realise how fresh the air is. The Land of the Thunder Dragon isn't a Carbon Negative country for nothing; its environment has been kept tidy by numerous laws that have been enacted in recent years in the wake of the country opening up to the rest of the world at the turn of the century.

Bhutan has devised a unique 'Gross National Happiness' index, and it takes this index more seriously than its Gross National Product. The recent laws state that the country shall maintain at least 60% of forest cover for all time. There are stringent laws in other areas as well, some of which may seem a bit over-the-top to visitors, but all that is done to make sure the country stays relatively unharmed from the ills of modernisation and excessive tourism.

well-being." One cabbie even informed that a group of them were invited by the king during a festival where they had the privilege of dining with the King. Quite extraordinary, isn't it?

LIVE BY THE LAWS:

Bhutan is perhaps one of the few countries in the world where there is no traffic signal. No honking horns, no overtaking inside the cities; that's how strictly traffic rules are maintained there. As soon as you step onto the zebra crossings, the cars will stop and let you cross the street. Don't ride a cab or get down through the wrong side, because if you do so, your cabbie will have to pay a hefty fine. Some of the cabbies even keep their right doors completely locked so as not to get into trouble with the traffic rules.

Then there is the ban on smoking which travellers should keep in mind. Even though

PLACES/THINGS TO SEE:

Bhutan is not quite the archaeological haven like India or Nepal, yet the traditional Tibetan architectural designs of buildings and the scenic beauty of the mountains lends the cities a unique outlook. The capital Thimphu, in fact, offers quite a few spots, including the Dzongs [fortresses], memorial houses, temples and museums, and specially the Buddha Dordenma -- a massive statue of Buddha perched on a mountain-top inside the city's perimeters. If you travel outside of Thimphu, there is Dochu La Pass -- a 45-minute-drive from the capital where 108 memorial stupas are built on a hilltop to commemorate soldiers who died trying to stave off Assamese rebels. The view from the mountain top could be stunning, provided there is no cloud cover. Then

with the autumn weather one of the best for sightseeing, and also for the fact that quite a few festivals take place around this time of the year. Our visit coincided with the Tshechu -- the largest national religious festival celebrated over three days -- and although spoiled by a bit of rain, we enjoyed it thoroughly. The largest Tshechu in Thimphu is held at the Tashichhoe Dzong, which is situated just the opposite of where the King lives.

Just bear in mind that due to the festivals and holidays, the plane fare and hotel tariff could be a bit higher than other times, but that's not too much compared to what you are offered in some other tourist attractions of South Asia.

By Atique Anam
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