



Winding through the mountains of Bhutan, the air here feels crisp and cold on the face.

explains why Bhutan Airways and Druk Airways are the only commercial planes allowed to fly in and out of the country.

I was being hosted for the night at a friend's place who had organised a guide for me to be shown around Bhutan. A small mistake I made while at immigration was that I told them I was coming to see a friend, which meant that they did not give me the permits I needed. If you are Bangladeshi, Indian or Maldivian coming to visit friends, please be sure to mention that you are a tourist, to ensure that you have the proper permits. The next day, after sorting out my permit (which was free of cost), we headed out to Dochula, one of the highest mountain passes in Bhutan.

As you wind through the mountains, the air feels crisp and cold on the face. Having lived in Kathmandu for almost a year at that point, I had gotten used to the terrible air quality, I did not realise until I got to Bhutan, how absolutely fresh the air was.

Once we got to the top of the mountain pass, we found much of the view blocked in a thick blanket of fog. But after a small breakfast, the guide took me to see the Druk Wangyel Chortens, which are mon-

has a very interesting story. It was built in honour of a "divine mad man"—he used very unorthodox, bizarre and sometimes downright outrageous methods, many of which had sexual undertones, to invoke people's interest in Buddhism.

From this monastery, we made a small pit stop for lunch at a beautiful restaurant serving delicious food and boasting an incredible view. After lunch, it was time for Punakha Dzong. On the way to Punakha Dzong, we stopped at a small town before resuming our journey again.

As the winding road came to a halt, my eyes fell upon the Punakha Dzong, a breath-taking sight on its own. The entire structure is fascinating and beautiful. It used to be the administrative centre and the seat of the Bhutanese Government till 1955 and still functions as an administrative centre for the Punakha district. The Dzong itself is majestic but with a backdrop of emerald mountains, it looks even more so.

The inner chambers of the Dzong are dimly lit, but still manage to feel spacious. The paintings that adorn the walls are a burst of colours, all depicting stories of Buddhism.

Some paintings depict the entire circle of life. With no use of words, the paintings narrate the story of life in the six realms of life and how our karma carries on as we reincarnate.

I believe that every mythical tale or story that has been passed down for centuries contains valuable lessons for us to learn. And on the drive back, the only thing that I could think of was the fact that someone hundreds of years ago decided that these stories are important enough to pass down from generation after generation.

They found these stories so important that they painted them on the walls in great detail. It made me a little bit more

Of Dragons and Dynasties: Bhutan Uncovered

MALIHA FAIROOZ

Often during holidays, I am torn between my desire to travel far and wide and go back to the comforts of my home and family in Bangladesh. I often end up choosing the former, mostly because I have been bitten by the travel bug. And that is how, I found myself in Bhutan in the summer of June 2017.

Added to that, is the relative ease with which I, as a Bangladeshi passport holder, can travel to Bhutan. With the Bangladeshi passport, citizens are allowed visa-free entry into only 38 countries.

Bhutan is a landlocked country and is cradled on one side by the mighty snow-capped Himalayan peaks. The country is also one of the only carbon-negative countries in the world. This is due to their 'environment first' philosophy. Bhutan also has a very well thought out tourism practice which focuses on the welfare of the people of the country. In fact, a percentage of the earnings from tourism is dedicated to providing free health care and education that all Bhutanese citizens get access to.

Enough about the background. Now to arriving in the Shangri La itself! I got to Bhutan on a plane full of angry tourists, all of whom were ticked off by the flight delay. But all of that anger vanished as soon as the sometimes rolling, sometimes jagged peaks of the mountain nation came to view. The plane touched down on the Paro runway with a soft thud—a difficult landing—one that would be impossible if the pilot was not specifically trained for this exact runway. Which probably



The entire structure of the Punakha Dzong is breathtakingly beautiful.



Bhutan is famous for its Dzongs, temples and monasteries.

uments.

From Dochula, we headed to Chimmi Lakhang—a monastery that is particularly famous for helping couples to have children. While trekking through the village up to the monastery, I saw an array of wooden phalluses on shop windows that look like medieval sex toys, paintings of phalluses all over the houses and actual souvenirs of phalluses in small shops and kitchen sills.

Inside the monastery, I immediately felt a sense of peace, essentially ethereal and other worldly. I sat down on a bench and decided to meditate. The monastery



Some paintings depict the entire circle of life.

conscious about my actions and their consequences and reminded me to be kinder, on myself and everyone and everything I come across. That is the effect Bhutan has on people: one that makes you reflect and feel zen.

Maliha Fairooz is a 27-year-old Bangladeshi solo traveller, who has travelled to 77 countries, on a Bangladeshi passport. Through her blog www.wherereyoufrom.com, she shares her experience of travelling as a brown, Muslim, Bangladeshi woman while simultaneously encouraging a culture of travel amongst Bangladeshi youth.