

*Living
in the moment
in the happiest
place on earth*

A hike to the Taktsang Goemba, also known as Tiger's Nest Monastery, rewards visitors with stunning views and a glimpse into the daily life of monks studying in Bhutan's monasteries.



Trekking in Bhutan is tough on the bod but easy on the spirit – once you learn to just let go

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JUANITA METZGER

It was the third time that day a hiker in our group had asked, “How much farther are we hiking? How long will it take us?” Our guide, Chunjur, replied with his characteristic sly smile and measured words: “Not too much farther. We’ll be there ... soon.”

It was a variation of the same round-about answer he gave every time someone asked this question.

“So, maybe one hour, two hours more?” another brave member asked, laughing but half serious. After all, we’d been climbing and descending over rocky terrain for four hours already, most of it in the rain. It was the fourth day of a six-day trek in the Himalaya Mountains of Bhutan, and everyone was keenly aware that a hot shower and dry shoes were just two days away.

“We Bhutanese aren’t very concerned with how long a hike will take,” Chunjur replied. “We just focus on the climb in front of us, then the next pass, then the next descent after that. We just put one foot in front of the other until we arrive to camp at the end of the day.”

We received this as the gentle reminder it was meant to be: let go of your North American obsession with time, Fitbit stats and goal accomplishments. Just let yourself be in this moment.

Indeed, living in the moment was why we were there in the first place. My husband, Trent Bauman, had chosen to celebrate his 50th birthday in the only country on Earth that promotes Gross National Happiness.



Where better to mark a momentous life occasion than in a deeply Buddhist place that emphasizes non-economic aspects of well-being such as good health, personal time use, community vitality and living standards?

In the months leading up to his 50th birthday, Trent had scoured travel websites for hours on end looking for just the right kind of travel experience. His initial long list was whittled down to a prestigious “experience of a lifetime” short list with one common denominator: each destination involved climbing a mountain.

Bhutan has plenty of mountains to satisfy the intrepid hiker. Located within the Himalaya Mountains, the tiny Kingdom of Bhutan is bordered by Tibet to the north and India to the south. Once known as a hermit kingdom and protectively closed to much of the outside world, this small country of 700,000 inhabitants has slowly opened its doors to international travellers over the past decades.

Bhutan’s tourism policy restricts entry to 150,000 visitors a year, and international visitors pay a daily package fee of US\$200



TOP: As part of a six-day trek, the hiking group crosses one of the many watery and soggy high plateaus at over 3,700 metres.

ABOVE: Paro is the primary entrance and exit for visitors to Bhutan because it’s the only valley wide and long enough to accommodate international flights.

FACING PAGE: Rain and mist add to the mystery of the Tiger’s Nest Monastery as visitors approach on a 1½-hour hike from Paro in Bhutan.

to \$250 for all accommodations, meals, in-country transportation and a guide. A visitor cannot travel independently in the country and a visa is obtained once you have booked a trip with an accredited Bhutanese travel company.

Bhutan's travel policy has not been developed out of fear. It is designed to preserve the natural environment and cultural lifestyle while maintaining the balance of socio-economic realities for its citizens. Bhutan recognizes that it still lacks some tourism infrastructure if tourism numbers were to increase rapidly – enough hotel rooms, reliable roads and communication networks, for example. Almost one-third of the set daily rate charged to visitors is funnelled into development projects that build additional tourism infrastructure and support health and education within the country. The rest of the fee covers the actual travel costs.

Bhutan's commitment to maintaining its natural environment is evident as soon as you step onto one of its many trekking trails. Under current environmental policy, which has a long-term view of sustainability, 65 per cent of the country will remain forested, providing vast areas of nature in which to introduce visitors to the rugged beauty of the Himalayas.

We chose the Druk Path Trek, one of the most popular treks, because of its diverse scenery, the challenging terrain and the appeal of six days of trekking and camping. In other words, six days away from urban civilization, the distractions of media, schedules and amped up busy-ness.

The Druk Path, as with many trekking paths in Bhutan, follows a well-worn ancient route. The trekking paths are largely unmarked, making guides indispensable. Except for rock cairns in the near distance, there are no blazes, trail signs or directional arrows.

Before heading out on the Druk Path, our tour group completed a short warmup hike, designed to prepare us for the experience of trekking at high altitudes. Our destination was the famous Taktsang Goemba, or Tiger's Nest Monastery, near Paro, the city of entrance and exit for most visitors. Perched on the side of a sheer cliff, 900 metres above the Paro Valley, the Tiger's Nest is the most famous of Bhutan's monasteries.

Bhutan is a land of many stories, and legend says that Guru Rinpoche flew to this site in the seventh century on the back of a tigress in order to subdue a local demon.

The 1½-hour hike was a steep climb and the pounding in our lungs and heart sent a very clear message that we were hiking with decreased oxygen levels. Instructions from our guide floated like a mantra: Walk slowly, focus on your breathing. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth.

In other words, focus on the moment.

On a sunny day, the white walls of the Tiger's Nest gleam radiantly in contrast with the black cliff and the bright blue sky. But we were travelling at the end of the rainy season (June to September) and were prepared for the fact that we might not get all the stunning Himalayan views we had seen in magazines and guidebooks. As we stopped for our morning tea break, the foggy mist shrouding the monastery parted to reveal our first view of the impossible-looking monastery. Alas, the sun was temporary and we ended our hike in the rain, which became indicative of our trekking days ahead.

Our real trek began the following day when we met the support crew consisting of 16 small horses, two horsemen, two cooks and three guiding trainees who joined our principal guide, Chunjur. Suddenly our little trekking group of

eight seemed more robust. The horse train carried all supplies needed for the next six days: cook tent, dining tent, sleeping tents, camping mats, gas cylinders, food for 15 people, and a limit of one carry-all bag per person. We were relieved to see the box of eggs carefully strapped to the back of one of the training guides.

Starting out at 2,500 metres, our first day seemed idyllic as we climbed steadily along a wide road. A morning sun made the uphill climb seem hot, a heat we would come to long for by the next day. The road narrowed and became a path as we passed the last of the farms and traditional houses with their exposed timber frames, white-washed walls and metal roofs held down with heavy stones to prevent them from lifting during high winds.

Munching on apples given to us by a woman working in her garden, we climbed past prayer wheels and strings of prayer

flags flapping in the wind.

As we neared 3,000 metres, the dense forest became more lush and droplets of dew were visible on tendrils of moss hanging from the blue pine trees. Rather than being parasitic, the moss is a good indication of a healthy ecosystem and actually adds more oxygen to the air at these higher altitudes. Marginally more, but the thought was enough for me to breathe deeper.

The rain that began that first afternoon wasn't enough to dampen the excitement of arriving at our first campsite located in a pasture below the soaring Jili Dzong, another monastery on a cliff side.

The next five days played out with much the same routine as the first. We woke early with the grey light of dawn and hot tea delivered to our tent at 7 a.m. We washed our faces and necks with water heated in the cook tent. Over breakfast of porridge or eggs and toast, we commiserated about the

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RIGHT: Students study and recite sacred Buddhist texts at the Phajoding Monastery in the mountains above Thimphu.



BELOW: One of the camp cooks makes delectable "momos" on the second-last day of the trek. Momos are a South Asian-style steamed dumpling with vegetable or chicken filling.

challenge of sleeping at high altitude – it's amazing how loud and fast your heart beats during a long silent night. Well, actually, the night was not silent. The horses grazed all night in the pasture surrounding our tents and one of the horses wore a clanking bell.

We would walk throughout the morning until hot tea and a snack arrived with the one horse that would walk separate from the rest of its pack. We savoured this moment each day, often in the rain.

Each time the rain started, we all stopped to retrieve rain jackets and pants even

though we might take them off again in 20 minutes. The trails became small creeks with the ever-present rainwater. Even with heads down, focused on every step, it was easy to tell whether we were climbing or descending by which way the water was flowing around our soggy boots, which were long past their waterproof claims.

Each day, there were a hundred sights, sounds and moments to keep us grounded and rooted in the here and now. Sometimes those sights were only in

our imagination. On our second day of trekking, for example, we stopped mid-morning at a spot along the trail. Where normally the hiker would stand enchanted with a view of Mount Jomolhari, one of Bhutan's unclimbed mountain peaks, rising over 7,000 metres, we saw only fog and mist.

Instead, we paid more attention to what was around us: a cicada chorus so loud you had to raise your voice to be heard in conversation; the heavily scented pine, juniper and cypress forests; alpine wildflowers so impossibly delicate and intricate; and the sound of your own breathing struggling to adapt to the thinning oxygen levels at 4,000 metres above sea level.

After five days of hiking and seeing no one but our trekking companions and support team, we suddenly realized there were people approaching us on the trail ahead. Over a rise in the path, monks in red robes, down jackets and sneakers emerged from the mist. Two, then four, then eventually nine monks gathered in front of us to chat with our guide.

The scent of incense and campfire was fresh on their robes, and we learned that their small group, from the eastern part of the country, was on a pilgrimage to bless the sacred lakes in the area. Only one kilometre later, we came across the remains of their camp from the night before. Smoke curled out from under a rock ledge, and we could see where they had slept on the rocky ground, unprotected from the night chill. They had no horse caravan, which made our simple travels seem luxurious in comparison.

As we eased into the rhythm of our own version of a simple journey, the smallest comforts brought immense pleasure: the

feeling of dry wool socks; a hot lunch carried by the trusty horse greeting us at midday; simply prepared evening dinners that tasted like the finest gourmet food.

Even Chunjur would sometimes indulge our need for small accomplishments by revealing the peak elevation for the day on his smartphone altitude app.

However, celebrating that we'd made it to 3,900 metres and knowing we had five kilometres still to go didn't change the fact we had to trek two more ascents before our summit at 4,220 metres, cross a river, then pick our way down a rock-strewn path streaming with rainwater before getting to our tents and camp for the night.

Yet somehow, we tricked our minds into believing that knowing exactly "how much farther" would allow us to be more prepared and in control of whatever was around the next curve in the path. Prepared for what, I'm not sure.

Trekking in Bhutan brought our need to count steps, mark accomplishments and mentally prepare for the unknown into sharp comparison in the light of this serene Buddhist culture of living in the moment.

For a few days, we were able to practise a different art: paying attention and staying focused in the here and now instead of getting hung up on the past or obsessing about the future, over which we have no control anyway. 

IF YOU GO

Recommended reading:

- "Bhutan" by Françoise Pommaret
- "Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey into Bhutan" by Jamie Zeppa (Canadian)
- "Radio Shangri La: What I Discovered on My Accidental Journey to the Happiest Kingdom on Earth" by Lisa Napoli

For specific travel information, check out:

- **The Tourism Council of Bhutan:** www.tourism.gov.bt/
- **G Adventures:** www.gadventures.com/trips/bhutan-trekking-the-druk-path/508/

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