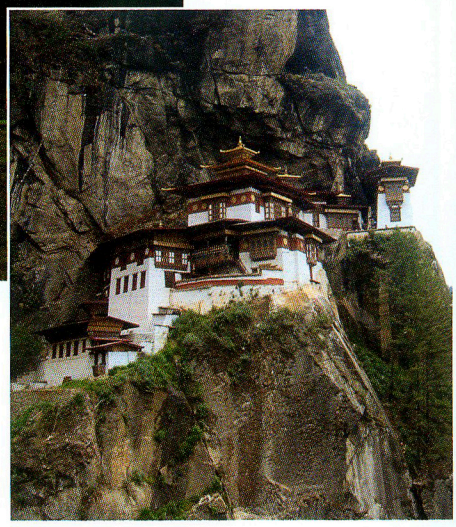

Breathtakingly beautiful terrain welcomes travelers to the fabled country of Bhuton (left and below)

"Huffing and Puffing in the Himalayas"

Land of the Thunder Dragon!

TEXT BY HELEN VARRI

Looking out of my plane window on the flight from Calcutta to Paro, Bhutan, I can see Mount Everest – majestic! The main Himalaya, with its origin less than 25 million years ago, stretches for 1900 miles and varies in width from 50 to nearly 200 miles. The mountain range is usually associated with Tibet, Nepal and, also, Bhutan which was my destination on this trip. Simply awe inspiring!

No, I would not be trekking and staying in Spartan tents, but rather hiking; and I would be staying in comfortable, even luxurious Aman Resorts with welcoming warm rooms, good food and the opportunity to take care of aching muscles at the spa.

I had always wanted to visit this remote country wedged in between giant China and goliath India with a population of approximately 700,000 which only opened its doors to tourists in 1974. Virtually all of the country is mountainous and forested with one deeply- ravined valley after another. It reminded me of my home country, Switzerland, but very sparsely populated.

We boarded Drukair, the National airline in Bangkok, made a short stop in Calcutta and landed in Paro, the only airport set between mountain ranges.

The drive to the small, charming capital of Thimphu was breathtaking.

Only in recent years has a West to East national highway construction program begun, with four lanes hopefully completed in 2008. This should be ready in time for new parliamentary elections scheduled to coincide with the king passing the monarchy reins to his handsome crown prince son.

It is a mystical journey, with drives over mountain passes as high as 10,300 feet, rice paddies with families toiling as they have for hundreds of years; Buddhist monasteries built to last for centuries with the monks turning the prayer wheels. Impressive "Dzongs" (temples or fortresses) which accommodate both civil officials and quarters for Buddhist monastic authorities dot the country side.

Every morning our choice was either a drive over switchback roads to dizzying heights, or a challenging hike. I especially loved Gangtey, a quaint rural settlement, only populated by farmers in the summer. In the winter, it is the home of the endangered black-necked cranes finding their way from Tibet. There is no electricity or internet access to preserve the environment except for the generator of the beautiful Amankora resort.

Sustain your energy for the the hike to the Takstang Monastery known as "Tiger's Nest" standing at 3000 feet above the Paro Valley with only the muted sounds of wind and water. At this high altitude, the uphill climb was quite challenging, but well worth the photo opportunity with the temples clinging to the cliff along with the many fluttering prayer flags.

What I will always remember about Bhutan!

Culturally, it is a land blissfully stuck in a time-warp with activities done as they were 1,000 years ago. Despite the hard life, the government is promoting the concept of "GNH" (Gross National Happiness) to create an environment of collective well-being not conditioned by material circumstances alone.

Men wear a colorful long robe called a "Gho" which is supported by a woven sash at the waist providing a pocket to store their belongings. The women's ankle-length dress, known as "Kira," is made of bright fine woven fabric.

The National sport of Archery is taken very seriously, and there are nearly daily contests in many villages.

One of the Aman resorts gave us a delightful little book entitled "Dawa", the story of a stray dog in Bhutan which amply describes the lives of homeless dogs roaming freely in this Buddhist culture in which all living beings are held sacred and dear. Beware of staying in a hotel in town – you might be kept awake by the constant barking of dogs!

As always when traveling, you will remember the people: kind, considerate and friendly – the child monks washing their colorful robes, the old people praying at the temples and spinning prayer wheels, the young children waving at you and greeting you with a "Hi" in English! And you will not forget the scenic beauty unspoiled at its natural best, with white prayer flags dotting the mountain sides.

As for myself, Bhutan was a prelude to my May, 2007 trip to Tibet – time to build up my stamina once more.

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