



Watch the dusk fall (and feel the temperature drop with it!) by the bonfire at the lounge

THE AMANKORA JOURNEY

LUXURY MEETS RAW NATURE IN WHAT COULD VERY WELL BE THE CLOSEST THING TO SHANGRI-LA ON EARTH—**BHUTAN**

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY CECILY Q. MABASA

My **Bhutan** adventure sprang from my childhood fantasies of finding Shangri-La, a mythical paradise on Earth depicted in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*. It is said that it offers unending happiness and complete isolation from the urban world. In the modern realm, finding such a place is impossible, especially with the bustling cityscape we are accustomed to. Settled in the Himalayan mountain ranges, Bhutan is idyllically pristine and continues to hold ancient traditions that make it seem as if you've stepped back in time.

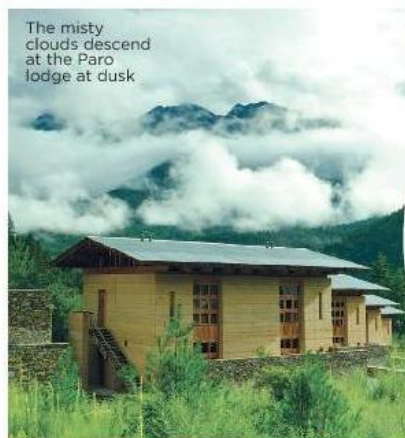
Arriving in Bhutan is an entirely amazing experience on its own as the plane makes its way through a valley before landing in Paro Airport, which is the only way to enter Bhutan. After a short walk through the forest, you will see the luxury lodges of **Amankora Paro** sitting in the clearing just beyond a small brook. It was like being transported to an older world where high-tech gadgets were mere figments of the imagination. The only sign of modernity, and probably an act of practicality, was the set of desktop computers in the Amankora Paro's back office, in case anyone desperately needs to send out emails. Clearly, this was just for emergency purposes as the rest of the place spelled peace and tranquility.

The service at Amankora Paro is impeccable and very personal. My personal guides Nidup and Chonglo made my stay very memorable and comfortable. We visited a *dzong* on our first day, a fortress built to govern and protect a region in Bhutan. Each one served as the residence of the regional governor.

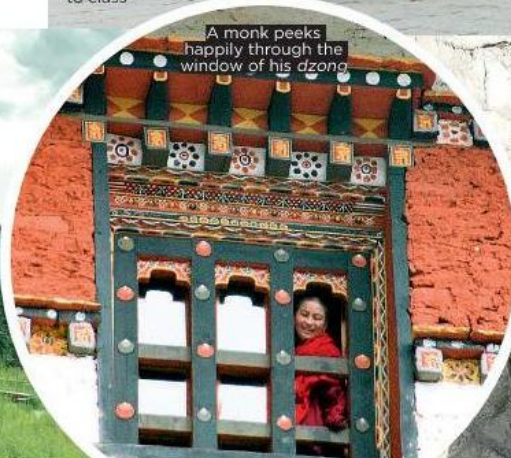
A *dzong* is usually divided into two parts—a secular administrative section, and a religious monastic section. Traditionally, *dzongs* are built with no architectural plans or drawings; the builders simply rely on a mental image of what they need to build. They are also said to be constructed without using any nails. We were honored with prayer beads upon our entry. These beads are somehow similar to the rosary since the beads are used to count the number of times a mantra is said. Prayer wheels, which are believed to bring good fortune, lined the walls. Inside, there were locals kneeling on mats and praying while other prayer ceremonies were simultaneously ongoing. Monks in red robes could also be seen in the prayer room. It truly was food for the soul to see monks balance praying and playing in their monastery training.



Monks-in-training on their way to class



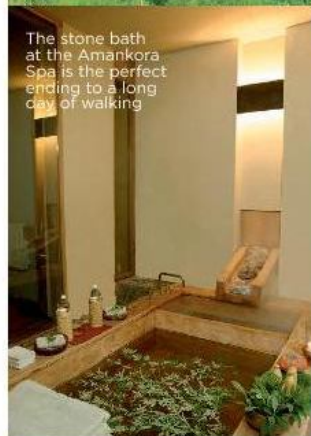
The misty clouds descend at the Paro lodge at dusk



A monk peeks happily through the window of his *dzong*



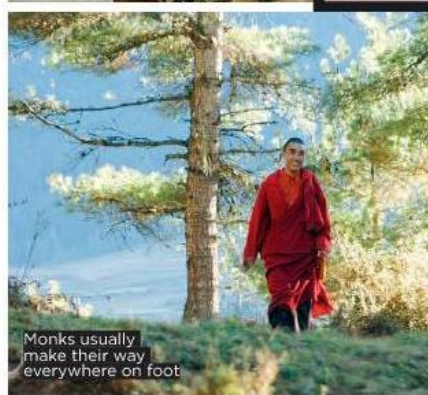
Bhutanese boys don't need fancy toys when playing outdoors



The stone bath at the Amankora Spa is the perfect ending to a long day of walking



Amankora offers all-suite rooms



Monks usually make their way everywhere on foot

Journeying through Bhutan requires lots of walking, but Amankora provided our own personal 4x4 ride, which was well-stocked with warm blankets and pillows, as well as our favorite drinks and snacks. To further prove that their service is excellent, Nidup added a full jar of brownies each day in the car after finding out that I adored the moist treat. Not wanting to miss out on the most popular spot in Bhutan, we woke up bright and early to trek to **Tiger's Nest**.

You really can't leave the country without visiting this sacred national treasure. At the start of the trek, we passed a *chorten*—a beautifully crafted wooden Tibetan *stupa*, which is one of the oldest forms of Buddhist monuments. The word

chorten actually means “the basis of offering.” The gentle ding, ding, ding of the prayer wheel in motion powered by water from a stream nearby reminded me it was no ordinary mountain hike.

The trail wound through pine trees and rhododendrons, and my guide explained that newly-arrived tourists should walk slowly, because the altitude can pose quite a challenge. Tiger's Nest is a monastery built in honor of Guru Rinpoche—a historical figure believed to have had miraculous powers and regarded as the second Buddha who brought the religion to Bhutan. The place where the monastery was built is said to be where Guru Rinpoche meditated for three months after battling a demon.

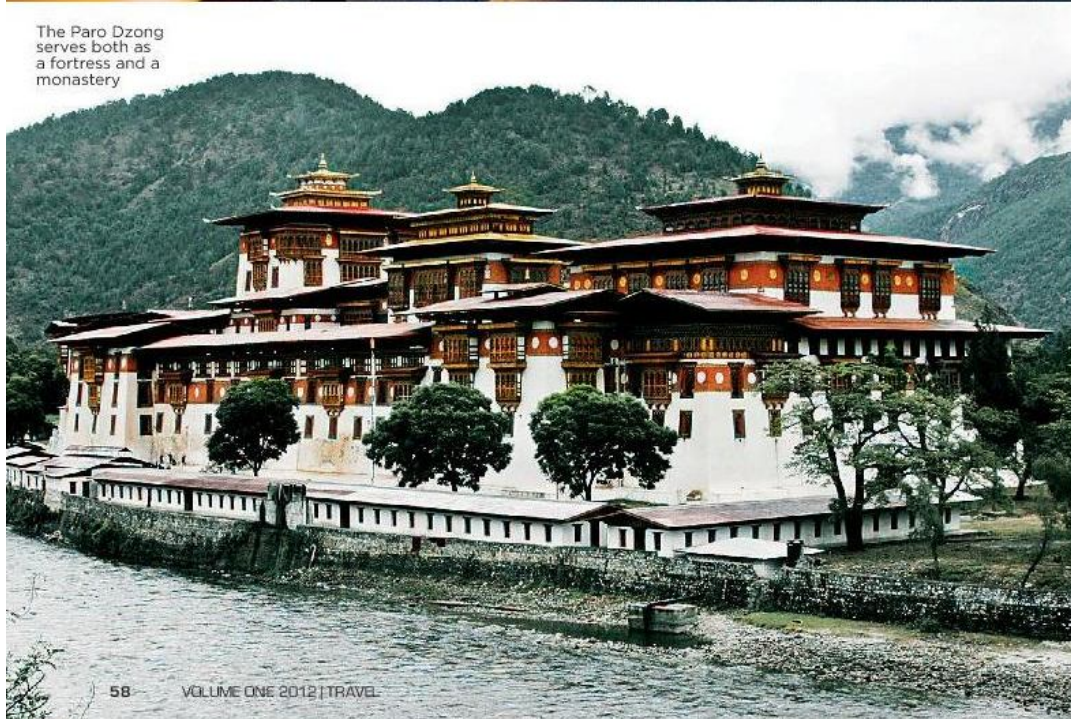


The gentle ding, ding,
ding of the prayer wheel
in motion powered by
water from a stream nearby
reminded me it was no
ordinary mountain hike.

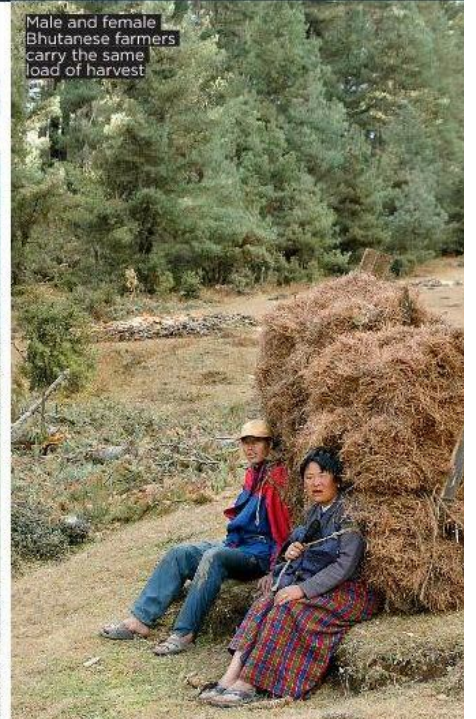


Nights are bright and romantic at the lodge

The Paro Dzong serves both as a fortress and a monastery



Male and female Bhutanese farmers carry the same load of harvest

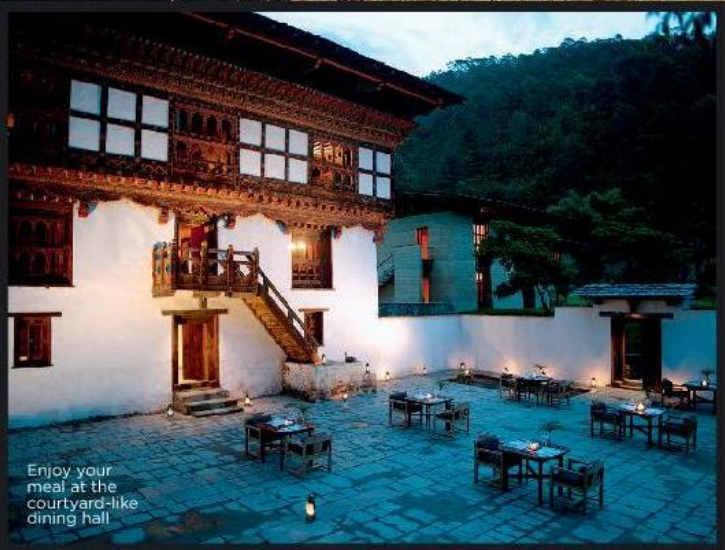




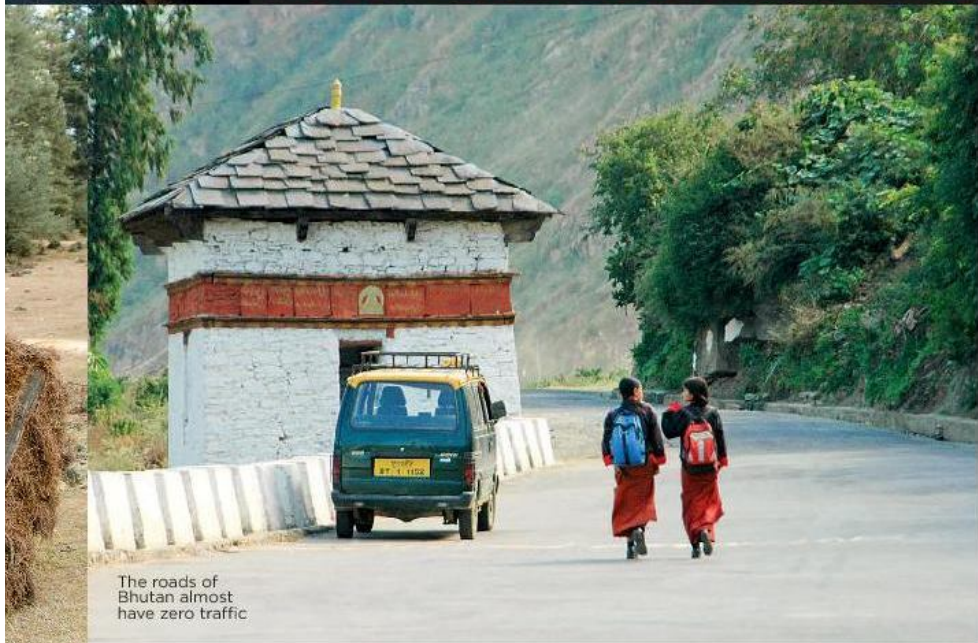
Sorting and gauging the quality of harvest is hard work



Just sitting on a good spot is welcome break from working on the fields



Enjoy your meal at the courtyard-like dining hall



The roads of Bhutan almost have zero traffic

The rest of the trip was filled with dramatic drives up the mountains to different sights, like the first fortress monastery in the country and Amankora Paro's sister village in **Punakha Dzong**—the country's capital for over 300 years before it was damaged by flood in the early 90s. Yet it remains to be one of the most beautiful parts of Bhutan. I was enthralled by the peace and serenity of the eight-suite village seated amidst fruit plantations, and this is where we stayed for the next two nights.

An Amankora Punakha guest should want to get closer to nature and let go of the need to be connected to the modern world. The daily tours around the town included a hike across a footbridge with rice terraces serving as a backdrop and a visit to the village temples within a forest filled with bamboos.

On the last day of the journey, I found myself experiencing a different Bhutan even though we were back in the city of Paro. Dark clouds crowned the valley and rain was pouring hard. We were mostly in the car for a scenic long drive up the **Haa Valley**, which was just recently opened to tourists. The roads of Haa were filled with old-world villages and intricately designed farmhouses, with a panoramic view of the Himalayas. By today's standards, Bhutan would definitely be the closest thing to utopia, where luxury meets the best of what unspoiled nature has to offer. ■

Sea to Summit Explorations, a luxury adventure group, offers a 10-day exploration of Bhutan. Visit seatosummitadv.net or phone (+63 2) 815 8233 or (+63 917) 868 7971.

TEMPERATURE PATROL

The dry autumn and winter months (from September to mid-March) offer warm days with temperatures ranging from approximately 16 to 18°C (60 to 64°F) when the sun is out. Evenings and early mornings are quite cold, with the temperature dropping to 0°. The spring season (mid-March to June) offers warmer temperatures of around 27 to 29°C (81 to 84°F) during the day. When the night comes, it falls at approximately 18°C (64°F). During summer (June to September), days are clear and warm with temperatures of around 23°C (73°F). Afternoon showers dispel some of the heat and temperatures fall to around 15°C (59°F) at night.