



## Bhutan – Land of the Thunder Dragon

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**B**hutan is a small country bordered by Tibet to the north and Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India to the west, south and east respectively. It was almost forgotten by the rest of the world until it finally opened its doors to welcome the first batch of tourists in 1974 in conjunction with the coronation of its fourth king. Since then, the number of tourists visiting this mysterious landlocked country has steadily increased until it reached an all-time high of 14,000 last year.

However, Bhutan is in no hurry to take in more tourists. Although tourism is Bhutan's second largest foreign exchange earner after hydroelectricity (sold mainly to India), its 'high value, low impact' policy ensures that it only welcomes foreigners who are genuinely interested to learn more about Bhutanese culture and appreciate the country's natural beauty, and therefore, willing to pay the high price that is arbitrarily set by the government.

Bhutan's first motorable roads were constructed in the 1960s. Being a very mountainous country, the roads are very winding and narrow, mostly one lane only. Traffic is not heavy though. The maximum average speed attainable rarely exceeds

30km/hr and it takes about two hours to travel from the capital Thimphu to Paro just 65km away where the country's only airport is located.

Constructed in the 1980s, Paro Airport services only Bhutan's national carrier, Druk Air, which owns a fleet of two Airbus A319 and flies to six cities, namely, Delhi, Kolkata and Gaya of India, Kathmandu of Nepal, Dhaka of Bangladesh, and Bangkok of Thailand.

The Bhutanese call their country Druk-Yul, which means Land of the Thunder Dragon. This year, 2008, is a very auspicious year for the Bhutanese. They are celebrating their first centenary of monarchy (which actually fell on 17 December 2007) and the coronation of their fifth king.

In addition, the Bhutanese just witnessed a major event in their history that they have every reason to be extremely proud of, i.e. they had their first ever general election on 24 March 2008 where 47 representatives were voted into the National Assembly and the first elected government was formed.

In 2006, Bhutan's fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who had reigned from 1972 at the tender age of 19 when his father passed

away due to cancer, did two unprecedented, remarkable things: voluntarily giving up the absolute authority of the throne to make way for democracy, and abdicating from the throne in favour of his son. His Majesty was then only 53 years old.

Bhutan is also unique in the sense that, in addition to the usual Gross National Product (GNP), it also has GNH or Gross National Happiness, which is measured based on the performance of four sectors: economic self-reliance, environmental conservation, promotion of culture and good governance.

My wife and I had the fortune of visiting Bhutan recently with four friends, and we enjoyed our 8-day trip thoroughly. We visited many places of interest, including the Punakha Dzong (shown in the accompanying photo), and got to know the friendly Bhutanese people and their culture much better.

Dzongs are monastic fortresses found everywhere in Bhutan which house government offices in one part and a monastery in another. A vast majority of Bhutan's population of 800,000 people practise Vajrayana Buddhism and religion is very much a part of their life. ■

