

Rainbow Photo Tours of Bhutan
<http://www.rainbowphototours.com>

Sept. 20 - Oct. 5, 2014

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Bhutan Cross Country Cultural and Festivals Itinerary

Day 1— Saturday, September 20

Departure to Bhutan from Bangkok

Meet-up at 0445 for 0645 departure to Bhutan, Robin will have your visa and e-tickets and will have also sent them to you in advance. Arrive Paro 1000 via brief stop in Bagdora. (Gain one hour.) After clearing customs and immigration we will be greeted by Rainbow Tours & Treks representatives, guides and drivers. We then go to downtown Paro for our first Bhutanese meal. After lunch our first excursion will be to the National Museum, once the watchtower for the Rinpung Dzong, located high on a promontory overlooking the Paro Valley. First constructed in 1645, the Rinpung Watchtower was converted to the National Museum in 1968. While photography within the museum is not allowed, there are numerous photo ops of the exterior and the valley below. This first outing is meant to familiarize you with the history of this amazing kingdom in the clouds, and a visit to the National Museum is the very best way to quickly learn the culture and natural history since it houses everything that is Bhutanese in a very different museum style that will delight you.

From this point on and throughout the tour the daily itinerary becomes very flexible. Since we are in cars we don't all have to go to these places at the same time. Our 16 guides and drivers are familiar with this concept and stay in touch with each other to notify everyone of any special events in the area, like "You should go to Kichu Temple because there are a lot of pilgrims there," etc. So as you read down through this itinerary keep this important concept in mind—"...you are the captain of your ship." We can walk or drive down to Paro Town and a walk along the Paro Chu (River) to take pictures of the Paro Dzong and the watchtower above. Here we will have photo ops of the covered foot bridge over the river, the huge wooden gate leading to the bridge, and the interior of the dzong. Built in 1645, this massive building now houses the District Administration Office and the Monk Body. A flagstone path leads to the dzong, rising gradually from the bridge that is abutted by two guard houses. The central tower, called the "Utse" of the Dzong, is clad in superb woodwork and is considered to be the nation's most beautiful tower.

Dinner and overnight at Nak Sel Resort, a new five-star resort owned by our Bhutanese partner, Ms. Sonam Ongmo, also the owner of Rainbow Tours and Treks of Bhutan. Sonam has arranged for many of the special items on our itinerary, such as placing our own prayer flags, two special "mini festivals" performed just for our group, and all the many other wonderful events and sights that you will enjoy during your tour. Her hospitality and bubbling personality ensure a very special evening for us. A multi-

million-dollar property, Nak Sel is situated at the edge of a quiet forest on property that was once an apple orchard—the original farmhouse and many of the trees still exist. It has some of the best traditional hot stone baths in Bhutan so after dinner those who wish to relax in Bhutan’s version of the hot tub may do so. The one-person tubs are long and made of wood—they have four of them, side by side in a semi-enclosed bath house. A board with holes at one end separates the bather from the hot stones. With long steel tongs the attendant picks red-hot rocks from the bonfire and drops them into this chamber causing a cauldron of boiling water. The heated water then courses through the holes in the board at your feet and the water around your body heats up until you tell the attendant, “No More Rocks!” You will also enjoy the fragrant herbs that are dropped into the tub, including mint and marijuana—yes, it grows wild in Bhutan and is normally used for pig food.

Day 2 — Sunday, September 21

Tiger’s Nest and Paro

We get an early start to Tiger’s Nest to avoid the hot sun and any other tourists that may be there. The morning is spent hiking (or riding horses part way--you decide) up a forested path to Taktsang Monastery, also known as Tiger’s Nest, Bhutan’s most famous and scenic icon. (Robin wrote a story on Tiger’s Nest for Tashi Delek Magazine, which is posted on the Rainbow Photo Tours web site.) The climb is steep and takes about 2 hours to ascend comfortably, but those who want to can ride a Himalayan “bony pony” up (but not down) and we will have our guides to carry our photography gear and urge us on. An important place of pilgrimage and refuge for more than 1200 years, Taktsang Monastery clings to sheer cliffs two- thousand feet above Paro Valley, and from the most popular vantage points on a rocky ledges directly across a chasm from it we will still need a 200 mm lens and a steady tripod to get tight photographs. As of 2004, after the rebuilding from a fire, foreigners have permission to hike all the way to Tiger’s Nest, visit some of the altar rooms and maybe get a grand tour from Lam Renzin, the lama stationed there. We have become friends with Lam Renzin, bringing him photographs from previous visits and other gifts such as a Swiss Army multi-tool. In 2007 he requested we bring him a pair of binoculars to see who is coming to visit Tiger’s Nest--Robin delivered them in 2008 so he might be watching our ascent.

This sacred place got its name when Guru Rimpoche rode there on the back of a flying tiger and meditated in a cave behind the present-day monastery. Sadly, in 1998, the central temple was destroyed by fire, leaving the country in mourning for their holiest of spiritual places. But religious leaders and the King quickly developed a plan to rebuild Taktsang and donations poured in from Buddhist centers all over the world. Today, the magnificent temple is completely rebuilt to its original glory. Tiger’s Nest is once again the subject of cloud-shrouded posters that say, “Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon.”

Picnic lunch in the forest halfway down the mountain. After lunch we descend to the base of Taktsang where our cars will take us back to Nak Sel by way of any place around Paro that you might have missed earlier. Tonight would be a good night to luxuriate yourself with a hot stone bath and massage and then walk down through the authentic Bhutanese cluster village just beneath the resort, visiting farm houses for photo ops. Dinner and overnight: Nak-Sel Resort

Day 3 — Monday, September 22

Drive to Thimphu via CheleLa Pass

Rise early, pack up and drive about one hour to Chele La (/la /means pass) for one of Bhutan’s best views of the Himalayas. Boxed breakfast will be served at the pass. On a clear day you can see panoramic views of the western Himalayan mountain ranges. Then we drive two hours to Thimphu where your guide and driver will be available to take you anywhere you desire. On past tours we found that participants had their own ideas about what is interesting in Thimphu so we include here a list of current events and places to see and leave this decision up to you.

Overnight: Hotel Kisa

List of things to see and do in Thimphu: (* = Robin’s favorites.)

1. Textile Museum
2. *Paper factory for handmade paper—great for printing photos of Bhutan
3. National Institute of Traditional Medicine
4. Post Office for Bhutanese collector stamps.
5. Two good book stores for books on Bhutan
6. Paradise Temple (Only if there are pilgrims there.)
7. Check out the archery field for competition and practice
8. We recommend the Choki Arts and Handicraft store for souvenirs
9. We recommend coffee and sweets at the Arts Cafe next to the Swiss Bakery.
10. Takin refuge—Bhutan’s national animal
11. *School of Traditional Arts and Crafts
12. “Children’s Temple” – an antique temple where parents bring their children for blessings.

...or just roam Thimphu’s main street and it’s many small shops. All of these “factories” and shops are very small with only a few employees.

Day 4 — Tuesday, September 23

Thimphu to Punakha to Wangdi

Arise at 0700 (if you wish) and go to the Memorial Chorten, built in 1974 in memory of the third king, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who died in 1972. Local residents flock here in the morning to chant their daily prayers as they walk clockwise around the chorten (temple), spinning prayer wheels as they pass fragrant columns of smoke from smoldering juniper branches that carry a stream of prayers to the mountain deities. Bring a tripod and shoot high ISO because sunlight doesn’t hit here ‘til late morning.

Breakfast at 8 a.m., then pack and meet your guide and driver in front of the hotel at 9 a.m. We then begin our journey to the East, en route stopping at 10,500 ft. DochuLa pass for tea and biscuits and enjoy our first view of the eastern Himalayan mountains. Here we can spend some time photographing the Druk Wangyal Chortens. Built in 2004 to “...celebrate the stability and progress that His Majesty has brought to the nation,” this hill of 108 religious buildings in the middle of the pass reflect Bhutan’s spiritual and artistic traditions. Then it’s on to Wangduephodrang—shortened to Wangdi by the locals—where the most prominent feature is the Wangdi Dzong sitting on a mountain spur commanding an archer’s view of two rivers. But on the way, after lunch at a roadside restaurant overlooking the Divine Madman’s Temple, we visit Punakha Dzong where we can photograph the colorful exterior, new covered foot bridge, and interior courtyards with colorful and intricately painted doorways and temple exteriors. Built in 1637 between the confluence of the Po Chu (male river) and Mo Chu (female river,) this fortress monastery is the winter residence of Bhutan’s spiritual leader, the Je Khenpo or Head Abbot, and the central Monk Body—350 monks in total.

Beyond Punakha and Wangdi, both at 4,260 ft., we check in at Kichu Resort on the edge of the rapids of the Dangchu River. We always get a good night’s sleep there, listening to the water tumble over boulders the size of Volkswagens. Kichu is a private resort and there is the slight chance we would be bumped by their own guests, but if that happens the alternative hotel is Dragon’s Nest, a classy place overlooking the wide and calm river at Wangdi. Overnight: Kichu Resort

Day 5 — Wednesday, September 24

Wangdi to Phobjekha

After breakfast we leave for a leisurely drive to Phobjekha, the valley mostly known for being the winter roosting grounds of the legendary black neck cranes that fly in from Tibet and Siberia. The cranes will have already left the valley but it is a beautiful and authentic place with a new very comfortable hotel, a quaint village with farmhouses to visit and an ancient temple, Gangtey Gumpa. The drive follows the national highway to Nobding and just before PeleLa Pass we will turn onto a “farm road” and drive another 13-km to Phobjekha, crossing over Gangtey Pass at 3140 m, (10300 ft.) before dropping into the Phobjekha Valley. There

is the likelihood that we will see yaks and their herders as they work their way to lower winter pasture. The valley is a national conservation area and lies on the northern boundary of the Jowo Durshing mountain range. People sometimes refer to the entire region as Gangtey after the name of the Gangtey Gompa (temple) that is situated on a ridge overlooking the Phobjekha valley. We arrive here in late morning so we have most of the day to visit the Black Neck Crane Information Center, take the nature hike and end up at a farmhouse for lunch, and visit a small ancient temple for a special puja (ceremony) to bless our tour. All of these things are at your personal discretion, nothing is highly organized—you are the captain of your ship so go directly to the hotel if you like.

Phobjekha Nature Hike: Start below Gangtey Gompa, first part of the walk is downhill for about 30 minutes to the Khewa Chu stream that meanders through Phobjekha valley. From Khewa village the trail leads through open meadows to the Khewa Lhakhang built in 13th century by the decedents of Saint Khuenkhen Longchen Rabjampa. This temple houses about 30 young monks in a small monastery that Rainbow supports with finances for food. While at the temple we will meet the Kenpo (head lama) and attend a special puja (ceremony) to bless our tour. We can take pictures inside this temple.

Overnight: Dewachen Hotel

Day 6 — Thursday, September 25

Nuns at Bayzur Nunnery sing while they construct a dormitory using ancient construction techniques—pounding layer after layer of mud into a wooden form. Sue from Malta, a traveler on the 2006 tour, climbs the ladder and joins in.

Phobjekha To Trongsa

After breakfast we leave for the very scenic drive to Trongsa. We're not in any hurry so we play a game of leapfrog, passing our fellow travelers, stopping for photographs and meeting at the final destination, the posh Yangkil Resort overlooking Trongsa Dzong. We will also make numerous stops to photograph yaks and their herders, alpine flowers, lovely picturesque villages, and other roadside and panoramic scenes. After we go through PeleLa Pass (10,825 ft.) we get our first glimpse of the Black Mountains. This drive between Phobjekha and Trongsa is one of the most scenic and exciting legs of our journey into the clouds, crossing rivers and streams, passing farmlands and villages as well as primordial forests that have never been inhabited because deities are believed to reside there.

An hour away from Trongsa we make our first sighting of the crimson-roofed Trongsa Dzong, with the Mangdechu river cascading in one continuous waterfall down through the valley beneath. You will want to photograph this scene then take another picture from Trongsa looking back at the road you were just on--the road at the lookout point is carved out of the solid stone mountain. Just above Trongsa we will check into the first-class Yangkhil Resort where you can stand on your private balcony and enjoy the majestic view of Trongsa Dzong across the valley. Trongsa Dzong represents Bhutan's link with its historical monarchy since it is the ancestral home of the first king of Bhutan, Ugyen Wangchuk. This is also the investiture site for future kings ascending the Golden Throne of Bhutan. (The Fifth King of Bhutan was handed The Raven Crown by his father and ascended the throne in November 2008.) We will photograph its remarkable succession of street-like corridors, wide stone stairs and beautiful stone courtyards. Trongsa Dzong represents the very best opportunity to capture the true essence of Bhutanese monastic and parliamentary architecture. Here, 25 lhakhangs (small temples, among which is the oldest lhakhang in Bhutan—the Chorten Lhakhang, built by Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk in 1543) house sacred images and religious relics. Intricate wood carvings and beautiful frescos are emblazoned on the walls and pillars. With a little patience, monks will walk in and out of your frame as you photograph these remarkable and rare structures.

Overnight: Yangkhil Resort.

Day 7 — Friday, September 26

Trongsa to Bhumtang

This morning we leave for a leisurely four-hour drive to Jakar Village in Bhumthang. Along the way there will be ample time to stop at a moment's notice as your photographic eye spots every sort of cultural scene that can be imagined. The route crosses YotongLa pass (10,800 ft.) which is marked by a chorten and an array of prayer flags. This marks the boundary between western and central Bhutan as well as the western border of Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park. Beyond Pele La is Longte Valley where people raise sheep and yaks. We will pass through the village of Rukubji Valley with its big secondary school and Gomba. The houses here are clustered amid extensive fields of mustard, potatoes, barley, and wheat.

As we descent the pass we drive down through rhododendrons and ferns and reach Chendebji village. This was a night halt for mule caravans traveling from Trongsa during the reign of the 2nd King of Bhutan. Just below Chendebji village is the Chendebji chorten, a large white structure beside a stream. This chorten is modeled after Swayambhunath in Kathmandu and was built in the 19th century. Lunch at Chendebji Chorten Cafeteria.

Continue on to Jakar, the central town of the Bhumthang district. As you enter the Chhume Valley (the first of the four valleys that comprise the Bhumthang Valley) you will visit a center of Yathra weaving. Yathra is the name for the locally produced hand-woven woolen cloth. Distinctive patterns and bright earthy colors enliven the fabric which is used for a wide variety of purposes and sought after throughout Bhutan. We have been asked many times, "Where is the best place to buy authentic Bhutanese handicrafts?" This is that place! They have a huge assortment of hand-woven cloth, jackets, bags and clothing as well as a few authentic antiques and rugs woven by Tibetan refugees.

When we reach Jakar we will check into and have lunch at Yu Gharling Resort. Then it's off for an afternoon of exploring the Bhumthang valley. We will discuss options at lunch and everyone will undoubtedly head off in different directions then meet back at Yu Gharling Resort for dinner. Two suggestions that are a must-see are the Swiss cheese/Red Panda Beer factory and the ancient and revered Tamshing Temple, known to the locals as the Temple of Good Messages. Built in 1501 by Pema Lingpa with "...the help of celestial beings," this temple is the most important Nyingmapa temple in the kingdom. The temple houses an ancient chainmail jacket that is said to wash away sins of the people who are able to wear it over the shoulders while circumambulating the temple three times.

Overnight: Overnight: Yu Gharling Resort. (Leave laundry here for pickup in two days.)

Day 8— Saturday, September 27

Bhumtang to Ugen Choling

After breakfast we will depart for our first destination in the remote eastern side of Bhutan, the Tang valley and the village of Ugen Choling. Our journey is 20 miles, 13 miles of which is on an unpaved road. We stop at a roadside temple and a nunnery at Bapzor village then drive to the end of the road at the village of Kesum. After a roadside picnic lunch by noon we should be at the end of the road where those who want to can take a one-hour hike over a suspension footbridge, through farm fields and cluster villages and up a "hill" to the mystical Ugen Choling Palace where we will spend two nights in the owner's guesthouse. The road and bridge over the river were recently completed so those who want to can ride all the way to Ugen Choling. (Robin wrote a story on Ugen Choling for Tashi Delek magazine, available on the Rainbow web site.)

Ugen Choling is a national treasure, privately owned by the same family for hundreds of years. It's remote location makes it one of the less frequently visited historical sites in Bhutan, hosting fewer than two hundred guests per year. One of the owners wrote a book on Bhutanese folk tales of the Yeti and her brother is the property's caretaker. The best part of the Palace is the quaint museum housing permanent exhibits on three floors in the main building and the Utse, the central tower. Traditional living quarters are recreated to capture the realistic ambiance of the ancient lifestyles and conditions of the households. Everyday kitchen and weaving utensils, war weapons—including gun powder made from petrified yak dung—hand tools and farming implements are the main part of the exhibits.

Overnight: Ugencholing Guest House

Day 9 — Sunday, September 28

Ugen Choling Cluster Village

After breakfast we each raise a personal prayer flag in the grassy terrace with a panoramic view of the Tang Valley. You can write the names of loved ones on your flag prior to hoisting it around the small chorten that is there. A local gomchen (lay monk) will conduct a ritual and read prayers for good health, remembrance and prosperity, a traditional Bhutanese ceremony that is enacted thousands of times each day across the country.

Then it's on to a day of much celebration and frivolity as our guides and drivers have a formal archery match in the center of the village and a formal lawn dart match next to the Palace—you are invited to attend and participate at whatever level you feel up to. It's an all-day event that the villagers look forward to every year, with lots of laughter and singing, dancing and revelry. We pack in things that are not available to them including beer, sodas, prizes and archery equipment and after dinner meet for the awards ceremony in the village hall.

The cluster village of Ugen Choling rarely gets visitors who meld into their lifestyle like we do and they truly enjoy our interaction. They have even started calling Robin, Dasho Robin. (Dasho means /the important one /and is normally reserved for those who hold high government posts.) You might also want to explore the village of Ugyen Choling and the surrounding countryside. Just take a guide to carry your gear and strike out from the guesthouse in any direction—all paths lead to photo ops. Beyond the village are farmhouses and fields for cultural exchanges, mountains and meadows for landscape photography. You can leisurely stroll through the village and observe the daily life of the Bhutanese. You will feel very welcomed to enter any farmhouse as the Bhutanese see it as an honor that you would want to see how they live their lives.

Shortly before lunch the monks from Jakar Dzong will arrive for our private festival. These are the same monks that perform ancient Buddhist dances in the Jakar Festival and look forward to our festival as a way to earn personal pocket money, something they don't usually get back at Jakar Dzong. Since we sponsor this event we are allowed special access to the temple and dressing room for close-up photos. The courtyard there is quite intimate so you can also take close-ups of the dancers while they perform. Local villagers, especially pre-school children and elders, hear the noise and come to watch. You will enjoy serving them KoolAid from a bucket, ladeling into their tea cups that they pull from their ghos and kiras. Overnight: Ugencholing Guest House

Day 10 — Monday, September 29

Ugen Choling to Jakar

After breakfast and farewells we hike back down to the suspension bridge to meet our cars and drive back to Jakar—we will arrive at Yu Gharling Resort for lunch. After lunch and a hot shower we spend our second afternoon to take in all the sights of the Bumthang Valley, including touring Jakar Dzong, numerous temples and monasteries, and the beer/cheese factory.

Overnight: Yu Gharling Resort.

*Throughout Bhutan, in high mountain passes and lowland fields, prayer flags flutter in the wind to send a steady stream of mantras to the deities. These woodblock prints are prayers for peace and harmony, long life and good fortune for the person who erects the flags. As the wind passes over the surface of the flags the air is sweetened and purified to benefit all sentient beings in the area. Roadside painted rock used in filming of Bhutanese movie, **Travelers and Magicians**. Photo by Robin Smillie.*

Background photo: Shot by Robin Smillie

Day 11 — Tuesday, September 30

Bumthang to Mongar

After an early breakfast we gear up for a thrill-ride 127 mile all day drive from Jaker to Mongar on the National Highway. This is the longest drive on the tour. Each car will carry a picnic lunch, with tea/coffee breaks along the way, usually in the high passes. Along the leisurely route there will be plenty of time to make frequent stops for photo ops and we should make it to Mongar in time to roam the streets and interact with locals. The journey takes us through mist-covered ThumshingLa Pass, which at 13,500 feet is the highest motorable pass in Bhutan. On the eastern side of the pass the three-hour drive plunges down through a sunless forest almost 10,000 feet! to the village of Sengor. Then after a few miles of level road we plunge again through what is considered by many to be the most “white knuckle” 12 miles of national highway in the country. Here the road was blasted out of sheer cliffs with a guard-railed edge that drops clear out of sight.

After crossing the bridge over the Kuru River, 15 miles further on the climbing twisting road, we come to the ancient trade route stop of Mongar. Since the area is very mountainous with few valleys, Mongar is built on the side of a mountain. The true homeland of the Eastern People, the Sharchogpas, begins from Mongar. We will explore the 19-century Mongar Dzong and overnight in the Hotel Wangchuck, the classiest place in the entire district. Overnight Hotel Wangchuck for two nights

Day 12 — Wednesday, October 1

Day Excursion Around Mongar

Today we halt for the day and enjoy the sights in and around Mongar. At breakfast we will discuss options and you can each decide what to do with your time. We will divide into small groups, still in cars, so we don't end up at the same places all at the same time. The offerings are numerous--visit schools, a Tibetan monastery, a temple with elderly women turning huge prayer wheels in a dimly lit room. This temple serves as an adult day care center and they all know our tour as we have provided lots of food over the years for their special pujas, reading glasses and watches and a clock so they can tell when to end the day or take breaks. Also, since the hotel is at the edge of town you have time to casually wander the two main streets of Mongar where they rarely see foreigners.

At the teacher's invitation economist and past participant Mark Elder sits in on a lesson in economics at the Mongar secondary school. Tourists usually need a special permit to visit schools, one that takes months to pass through proper channels, but because of relationships developed over the years we have a standing invitation by the principals in Mongar.”

Day 13 — Thursday, October 2

Mongar to Trashigang

This morning we make the sixty mile, three-hour drive from Mongar to Trashigang. We will cross at the 8,000 ft. KoriLa pass and stop for tea and cookies as we have all along the way whenever crossing a pass. Beyond the pass, driving through corn fields and patches of banana trees, we come to the village of Yadi where we will stop at a farm house and photograph weavers making natural dyes from native plants. After Yadi the road zigs and zags in what seems like never ending switchbacks descending to SheriChu village at the Sheri River. After SheriChu we come across roadside sheds where oil is extracted from lemon grass. After crossing two more rivers the road climbs up to Trashigang town at 3,775 ft.

In the afternoon we visit Trashigang Dzong and roam the streets of Bhutan's second largest “city.” The Dzong precariously hugs a huge long spur, jutting out over the GamriChu river and commands a remarkable view of the surrounding countryside. Built in 1659 A.D. it is practically impregnable, protected on three sides by the river and ravines and from behind by the mountains. Today it serves as the administrative seat of the district and houses a Drukpa monastic community.

Overnight at the new and posh Deothjung Resort. We will spend two nights here.

Community tourism at its best—we are invited into farmhouses for tea and get the grand tour. This lady is the grandmother of the house—three generations ago her ancestors built the house when they immigrated from Tibet.

Day 14 — Friday, October 3

Exclusive! Brokpa Cultural Program

On day 14 you will meet these yak herders, the Brokpa people from Sakten and Merak, when the tour sponsors a special festival in the far eastern side of Bhutan. You will be the only foreign visitors there and after the festival dances you will be asked to help serve lunch to over 100 local villagers.

Today is a very auspicious day for us as we rise early and drive eastward through Rangjung and Radi to Phongmey village. Sonam is a Brokpa by birthright--her father was the hereditary lama there and she is treated like royalty whenever she visits. Sonam and her company, Rainbow Tours and Treks of Bhutan, have organized a special cultural program by the Brokpa people of Merak and Sakten, that our group hosts in the ancient temple courtyard at Phongmey. A group of fourteen Brokpas will make the two-day walk from Merak and Sakten, a district that foreigners were not allowed to visit until 2010. They will bring by horseback all of their cultural trappings as well as festival objects and costumes. Local villagers hear the noise and turn out for the free food and festivities--we usually feed 150 people. We bring a large portion of pork, sacks of rice, chilies and vegetables and cook it all up over an open fire in huge black cauldrons in a typical Bhutanese style. (We eat Western food brought from the hotel.)

As in Ugen Choling, we will seek the services of a local lama to ensure that the sanctity of anything religious is protected by prayer and ritual. The Brokpas are yak herders from this remote region and have a language, culture and lifestyle that is unique even in Bhutan. An example of cultural uniqueness is the burial process--the body of the deceased is hacked to pieces and allowed to float down the river to be eaten by scavengers. Also, the dating process is something that young suitors call "night hunting"--we'll try to get to the bottom of that when we meet them in Phongmey.

Of this unique and exclusive event, Sonam writes:

They will perform the Yak Dance, the Achi Lhamo in honor of Goddess Penden Lhamo and Lady Jomo, folk dances by Maidens, other dance with songs by Maidens, and other cultural items to be discussed with the Brokpas. The dances and singing are not done as in a stage but what they normally do in their village during festivals. It will be a recreation of the festival on a smaller scale the events will not be timed as such but can roll on the whole day with breaks for rest, festive drinking and eating, and posing for photographs. Your tour group will not be seeing the event merely as spectators but participating actively in the festivities – dancing, singing and drinking, etc. The idea is for guests not only to see the cultural performances as such but to experience a crash course in a part of Brokpa culture.

The temple serves as a dressing room for the dancers and we are allowed to take pictures there.

We will have the distinct honor of being some of the first Westerners to witness Brokpa folk dances, including the famous Yak Dance which narrates the story of how the Brokpas first arrived from Tibet led by Lady Jomo, revered as one of the most powerful deities of the region. Included too is the Achi Lhamo, a lion dance performed in honor of Goddess Penden Lhamo and Lady Jomo. Brokpa maidens will also sing and dance as they do during festivals in their highland home.

The Sakten and Merak region remains mostly unexplored by tourists—only about 50 trekkers made the journey in 2010 when the region was first opened to foreigners. Sakten and Merak were previously closed to foreigners in an effort to stall modernization of one of the world's last remaining "living cultural museums." Sonam has tried for years to get the government to open her ancestral home as she feels her people should not be denied the modernization that has come to the rest of their countrymen in the form of electricity, roads, schools, and hospitals. Now that the constitutional government is in place she feels strongly that the political representatives of her region will soon convince the government to build the road that is so important to modernization. One can only imagine that Westernization that will take place once the road and electricity are in place.

Overnight Doethjung Resort.

The blue poppy is the national flower of Bhutan. Photo by past participant Joe Breen, five-time visitor to Bhutan.

