



Hand-made paper

survives technical onslaught

Bhutanese paper makers of today trace their ancestry to the artisans in Buddhist monasteries, where monks and lamas made paper for religious woodblock manuscripts and elaborately painted *thangkas*. One can see such manuscripts in the National Library, Thimphu. Before the introduction of paper, hundreds perhaps thousands of years ago, animal skin known as *velum*, metal and parchment were used for writing. Exactly when





paper manufacturing began in Bhutan is a subject of much discussion among historians, but one thing is clear - its techniques and raw materials have remained more or less the same. The monk who made first sheet of paper boiled and pounded tree bark, then sieved the pulp and dried it. That was the first sheet of paper.

Today's traveller to Bhutan can find beautiful hand crafted books, art paper, envelopes, greeting cards, photo albums, photo frames, bags, postcards and stationery, all meticulously made by age-old method and raw materials from high mountain forests. There is no environmental damage as no chemicals are used

in the making of hand-made paper. In fact, the whole process is natural. The fibres swirl and dance with a slight iridescence and the most beautiful sheets are festooned with colourful flower petals, leaves and seeds.

The most common plant used for paper-making is the Daphne tree, a relative of mulberry. The high altitude plant is found in abundance in the dense mountainous regions of the country. A cut is made in the bark and its outer layer is peeled off and discarded. The inner bark is boiled, pounded, sieved and dried to make paper.

Paper-making is a small cottage industry in Bhutan and only a few





manufacturers could afford the high cost of fuel, which is essential for the production of paper. Tourists are encouraged to visit these paper units to familiarise themselves of the indigenous ancient art. For lack of patronage, it may become extinct or succumb to modern techniques. Thimphu, Trashigang, Punakha, Bumthang, Mongar and Gedu are famous for hand-made paper. Finished products are available in the shops. You can get printed your party invitation card, graduation announcement or greeting cards on this hand-made paper which will be unique and exclusive.

On my most recent tour to Bhutan, I purchased several large sheets of white paper and printed photographs of Bhutan on them. My photo printer managed the paper just fine and the inks penetrated quite well. This crisp paper can withstand multiple block printing so I would not hesitate to recommend it to photographers and artists.

Just stop by the hardware shop in Thimphu and buy a small piece of PVC plastic pipe, one that will fit inside your suitcase. Then role the paper and insert it in the pipe. 🌈

Robin Smillie

The author is president of www.rainbowphototours.com

