



*Looking up through the wispy green willow trees that line the road in Paro valley, one can see a tiny spec of a white building clinging to a black rock cliff at nearly 10,000 ft above sea level. The path to the edifice cannot be seen from the road, so it is difficult to believe that one reaches the inner chambers of Taktsang temple after two hours of heart-pounding hiking through a dense forest of oak and rhododendron, climbing staircase carved out of granite. Known as Tiger's Nest, Taktsang Temple is Bhutan's most recognisable cultural icon, which has been restored after the mysterious fire destroyed it in April 1998.*

# Taktsang temple

*the cultural icon rises from the ashes*

Text and Photographs: Robin Smillie





An important place of pilgrimage and refuge for more than 1,200 years, Tiger's Nest temple got its name when in the eighth century, Guru Rimpoche rode there on the back of a flying tigress, a manifestation of one of his consorts, and meditated for three months in the cave behind the present-day temple. He then converted the Paro valley to a new form of Buddhism i.e. Mahayana.

Sadly, in 1998, the central temple that dated back to 1692 was destroyed by fire, leaving the country in mourning for its holiest of spiritual places. Religious leaders and the King quickly developed a plan to rebuilt Taktsang using photographs of the ancient architecture, paintings and statues. Donations poured in from Buddhist centres 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'.

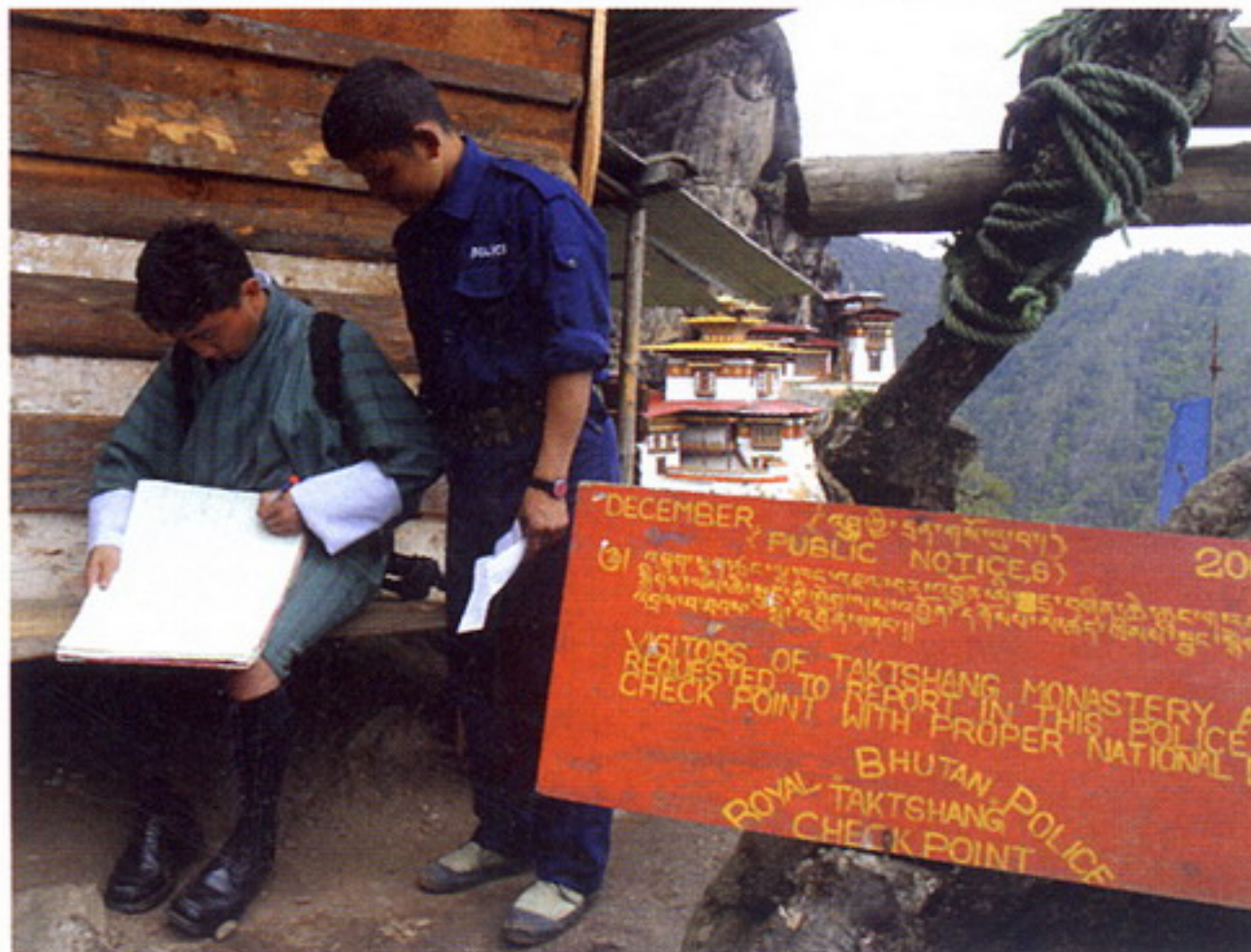
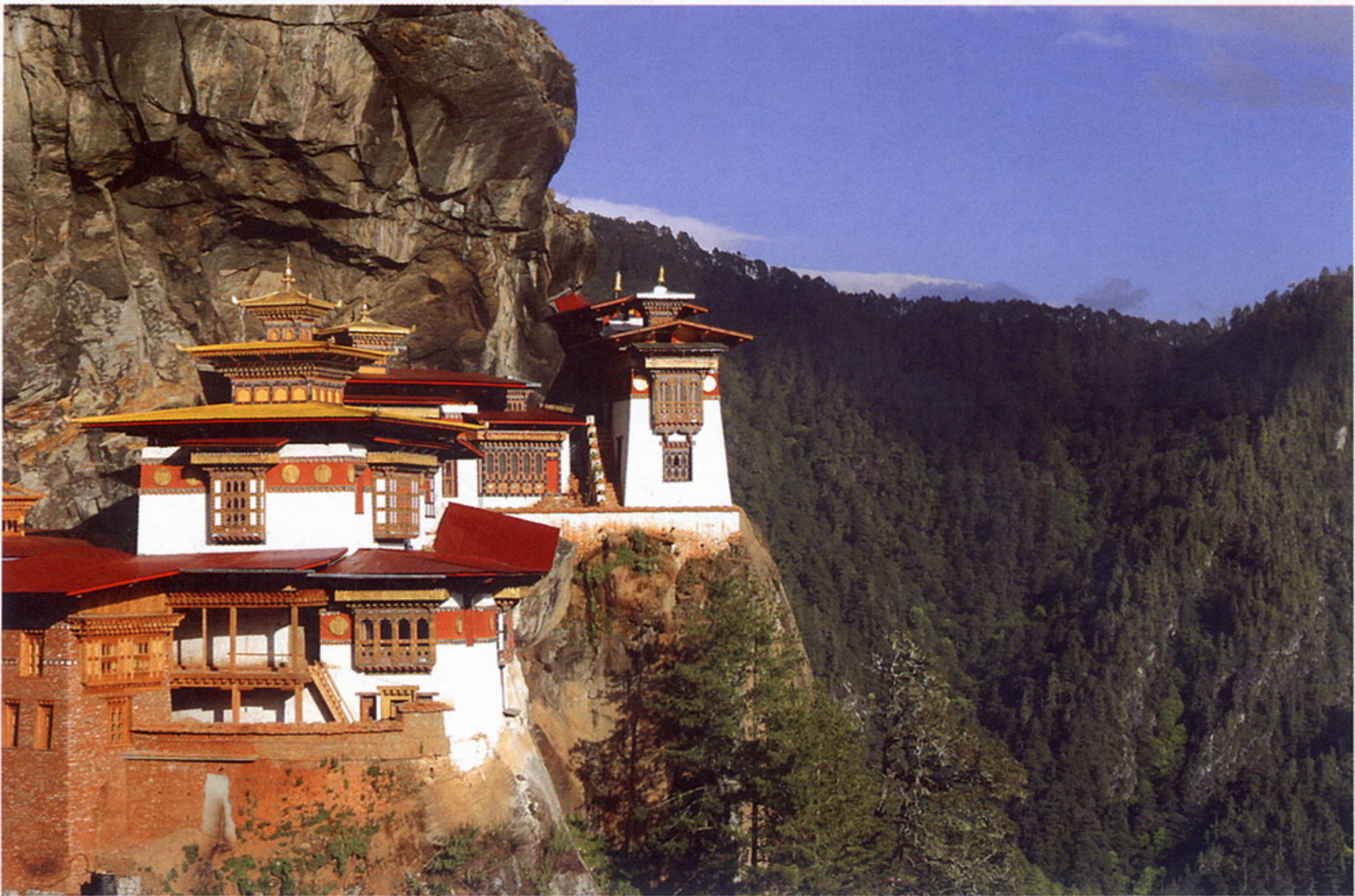
The climb is steep and takes about four hours round trip from the gravel road head at the foot of the mountain. Until the renovation began, the hike was of six hours and started from the paved road at a footbridge over the Paro Chu. But realising that they needed to get construction materials as close as possible to the newly installed cable bucket that lifted supplies to the ridge above Taktsang, engineers cut a gravel road to the base of the mountain. That road makes the hike a little easier for those unaccustomed to the altitude or not as physically fit as some of the thousands of trekkers who come to Bhutan. Adding to the accessibility is the availability of a sure-footed Himalayan Bony Pony that can be chartered from local horsemen.

I have been to Taktsang on five prior occasions, leading photographers on cross-country cultural tours. It was on our tour in April 2004 that we were allowed to enter the actual temple for the first time. Before that, we had to be satisfied with an access to the cafeteria, a log structure ringed with large windows that give a commanding view of Takstang across a cavernous gorge.

The cafeteria is an attraction in itself. If your tour arrives at mealtime, you can relish hot and wholesome Bhutanese food and the cool soft drinks or beer – more welcomed by thirsty trekkers. The tourist items displayed for sale are







sometimes laced with items not made for trade but used in everyday life, like old woven saddle blankets and knives made from truck springs.

Above the cafeteria the trail takes a steep turn and only vigorous hikers will want to leave the comforts of the cafeteria to complete the last forty-five minutes of the climb. Eventually, just as the sweat begins to build, the trail levels off and you encounter a police checkpoint where papers are examined to ensure that only visitors approved by the proper authorities have access to Taktsang. Then the trail takes a welcomed turn down, crossing a small stream on a footbridge. Much of the trail at this point is carved from the rock and paved with large stones set in place with mortar. Then, a long stone staircase leads the breathless visitor up to the temple and hallowed ground.

Some of the finest artisans and journeymen of the country spent six years rebuilding Taktsang. Most of them were paid workers but some volunteered to earn merit or donate a good deed to build favourable karma for deceased relatives. They used only traditional woodworking techniques. Temple doors are rimmed with magnificently carved and painted jams and window frames are painted with bright native pigments. The temple is vibrant and alive, shining like a jewel against the black stone cliff that supports it.

The actual cave, where Guru Rimpoche is said to have landed, is behind a plain wooden door at the back of the temple. When the door is opened, the wind howls up through the orifice, indicating another opening further down the rock face. You will want to spend at least an hour at the Temple, meandering through the narrow inner courtyards. The Temple's main altar





room is off limits to casual tourists, open only to religious pilgrims with the proper documents.

Those who stay behind do not go unrewarded – just lean back in a comfortable chair on the open patio, put your feet up on a rail and sip a cool drink. The view across the gorge can be taken in for hours as the background music of chirping birds and rustling prayer flags calms the soul. A fun thing to do is to watch your companions arrive at Taktsang through binoculars. Shouting does nothing to attract attention as it is too far to be heard through the thin Himalayan air.

While at the cafeteria, don't hesitate to ask the caretaker to show his prowess at archery, shooting 130 yards at a target the size of a dinner plate across the canyon behind the cafeteria. His

handmade bow, quiver and arrows are in themselves a scene worth photographing.

The walk down is exhilarating and the view of the valley below is breathtaking. One of my travelling companions showed me a technique he learned over years of trekking and backpacking that will keep you from jarring your joints: instead of long steps, take very fast baby steps, leaning your body towards the valley and letting the momentum carry you forward.

Whether you are on a spiritual quest or an interested tourist, the 2,000 foot climb to Taktsang is well worth the effort now that the rebuilding is complete. 🏔️

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