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Tashi Delek



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Tashi Delek

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Tashi Delek is an auspicious and versatile Bhutanese expression. It encompassing a number of meanings such as: wishing you well, good wishes, congratulations, cheers, good luck, and so on.

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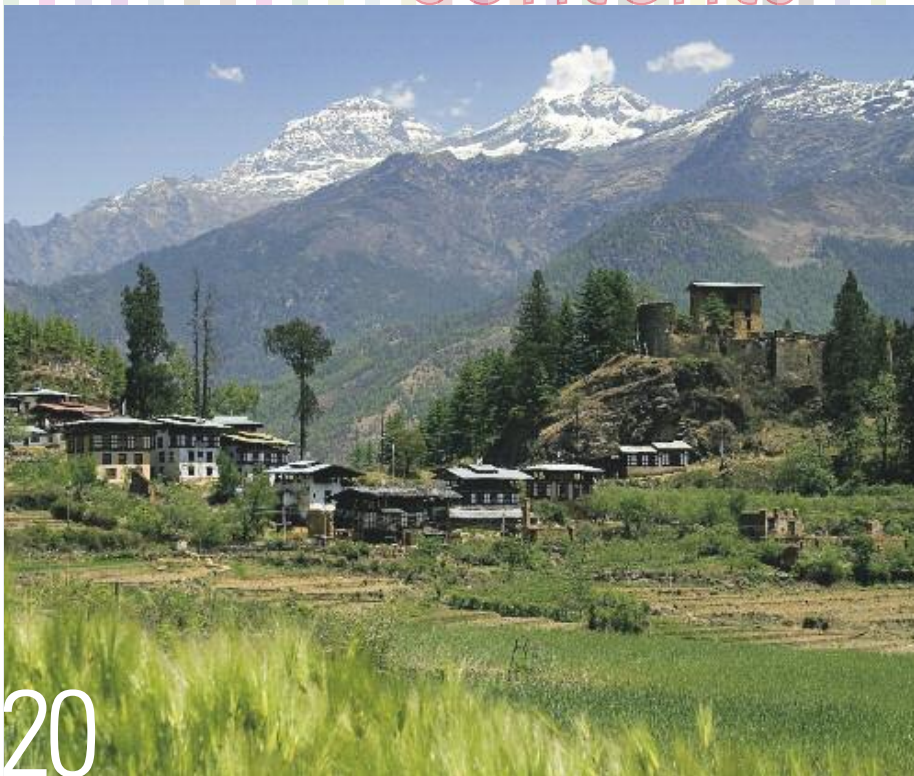
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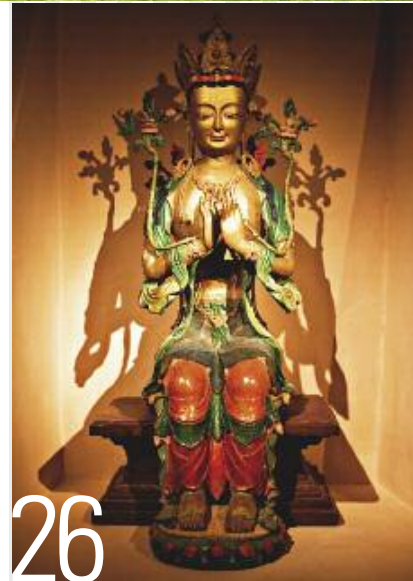
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The Trongsa Ta Dzong Museum

In a tribute to the monarchs of Bhutan, a historical monument once teetering on collapse is transformed into a state-of-the-art museum.

First built in 1652, the Ta Dzong was historically the watchtower over the Trongsa Dzong, providing early warning of invaders from the north that would come down the slopes through the Yutong Pass. The tower was commissioned by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651), the ruler that unified Bhutan as a nation state. In addition to unifying the various warring fiefdoms for the first time in the 1630s, he also sought to create a distinct Bhutanese cultural identity separate from Tibetan culture from which it had its roots. Throughout its life the tower housed not only soldiers that would fire arrows through narrow slit windows, but also prisoners. Legend has it that two British soldiers from the Duar Wars in the south were manacled to its walls. In the eighteenth century the tower housed guns loaded with gunpowder made partially from yak dung. After peace came to Bhutan, the tower lost its military function, and became a home to hermits and pilgrims, two of which have vowed not to leave it until they meet their end. They can still be found residing in the southern wing where they meditate for their own salvation and pray for the peace and wellbeing of all sentient beings.

Down a steep ridge towards the Mangde Chu sits the majestic Trongsa Dzong, Bhutan's historic cradle of the monarchy and traditional home of the Wangchuck dynasty. It was in this central geographic location that the first king and every king after him had served as the governor of Trongsa in preparation for ascension to the throne. Trongsa also served as the capital of the nation until the third king moved it to Thimphu.

Trongsa Dzong is also the place where religious leaders are charged with watching over significant Buddhist relics that manifest benevolent deities. Since its construction many of the country's most precious and revered religious antiquities have been kept here under the watchful eyes of the Trongsa Monk Body.

So it stands to reason that the Trongsa Ta Dzong should be selected to house objects of great historical significance that relate to the monarchy and religion, and thus was born the idea of the five story, state-of-the-art Tower of Trongsa Museum, with work beginning in July 2005 and ending with the inauguration by the King on December 10, 2008.

Over two and a half million dollars made the transformation possible with majority contributions of financial and technical support by the Austrian Development Cooperation. Additional funding and antiquities were provided by the Royal Government of Bhutan and private donations. The museum is styled after the National Museum in Paro. It has eleven galleries spread throughout a triangle of three connected circular towers, with the massive five-storey central tower looming above the four-storey south and north towers in the shape of a triangle. Connecting the three towers are multi-storey side wings and beneath the tower complex are two, smaller free-standing semi-circular towers.

In this writer's humble opinion the ambience of the new museum rivals some of the best museums that I have visited in Europe, Asia and America. Much thought has been







Gallery Five — Explanation of Festival Artifacts:

Sacred dances called *cham* are performed by monks in the courtyards of *dzongs* and are the focus of a *tsechu*. Celebrated in honor of Guru Rimpoche, a *tsechu* is a yearly festival during which visitors gain the Buddha's blessing as well as spiritual release through a Tantric deity. The term *cham* can perhaps best be translated as 'mystery play', whose esoteric meaning is deeply embedded in the philosophical concepts of Tantric Buddhism. The dances activate the relationship between humankind and deities and help people to attain liberating insight into the meaning of the Buddhist teachings.

Some dances portray in a dramatic way the victory of Buddhist teachings over the unpredictable forces of the supernatural world. Other dance sequences are didactic in character, conveying moral or historical content. Still others purify the soul and drive away demons. To the spectator who is familiar with the religious and philosophical background, these dances also show the path to enlightenment. Yet not all that is seen can be expressed in words. Dance is a living cult, a ceremony and the key to understanding the Buddhist religion.

always came out victorious," says the commentator while the screen shows views of the magnificent Raven Crown. "Since the reign of the first king, Druk Gyalpo Ugyen Wangchuck, the symbolism of the crown has changed in interpretation to that of a triumphant royalty."

The kind reader of this article will notice that no photograph of the Raven Crown is provided, therefore, necessitating a tour of the museum to see first-hand this awe-inspiring and most revered secular artifact in all of Bhutan. The crown is on display in the third floor gallery along with many other personal and religious items. Also throughout the museum are displayed more earthly royal heirlooms of five generations of monarchs, everything from clothing to swords, eating utensils to betel containers, and even the Zenith radio presented to the third king, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, by an American businessman in the 1950s.



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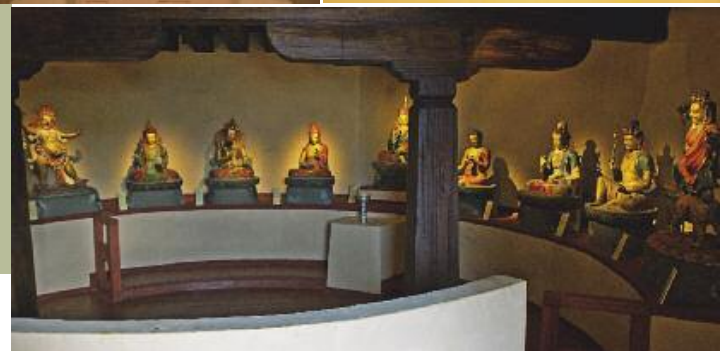


The Trongsa Ta Dzong Museum



Gallery Five — Costumes and Trappings of a Black Hat Dance:

The name of the Black Hat Dancers comes from their characteristic headgear. Once they have donned the black hat and costume, the dancers are transformed into beings with supernatural powers. With their dance steps, the black hat dancers drive away all evil spirits. The subduing of these spirits is achieved by the external compassionate anger of the Black Hat Dancers; internally they are characterised by an accomplished peaceful mind.



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For Buddhist pilgrims and devotees who visit the museum, being in the presence of precious and sacred religious artifacts on loan from the Trongsa Dzong is enthralling. The two temples of the Buddhist hero Gesar of Ling and the future Buddha Maitreya have been beautifully renovated and are integral parts of the museum. What makes the tower a sacred place for Bhutanese Buddhists is the fact that the religious statues and paintings on display, even though moved up from the temples of the Trongsa Dzong below, have retained their spiritual 'charge'. Thus they continue to offer the deities a physical body in which they can be present in the mortal world.

Also on display is a gallery of monastic dance costumes and other items used in Bhutan's iconic Buddhist festival, namely the Trongsa Tsechu which is held every winter to honor Buddhist heroes and vilify demons. The museum's festival artifacts explains the sacred dances that give moral messages and promote understanding by reenacting *Vajrayana* Buddhist history.

So whether you are a Buddhist pilgrim seeking a sacred place to connect with your gods or a traveller looking for a better understanding of Bhutanese culture and history through antique objects of art and everyday use, you should visit the Tower of Trongsa Museum in the heartland of Bhutan. Just ask your guide to take you there.

Text & Photographs: Robin Smillie

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