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## Photography In Bhutan; A Workshop Leader's Love Of Place

By Robin Smillie • Posted: Sep 1, 2009

"For uncounted centuries the highest mountains in the world have hidden a tiny jewel, the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan."



For uncounted centuries the highest mountains in the world have hidden a tiny jewel, the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan. In 1999 my wife and I were watching a 60 Minutes episode when Morley Safer came on and said, "While most governments are concerned with gross national product, we found a place, perhaps the only place on earth, where the government's first priority is something it calls 'gross national happiness.'" Safer went on to explain that Bhutan had just then begun to allow cable television broadcasts throughout the country.



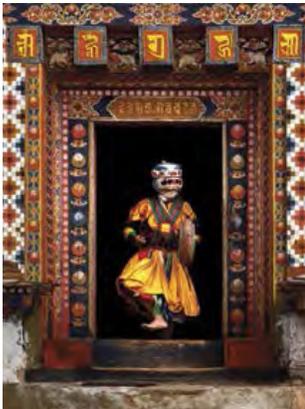
Smaller festivals allow for close-up capture.  
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My wife shouted, "I want to go there!" And so we did, in the spring of 2000. I have since returned 13 times, leading like-minded photographers on cultural and festival tours to what many people say is the planet's last Shangri-la.



Ringside seats at a smaller festival are better than 10th row seats at a larger festival.

Bhutan is precariously perched, politically speaking, between the world's two most populated countries, China to the north and India to the south. Because its king has resisted change and westernization, Bhutan offers globe-trotting photographers scenes right out of the 16th century.



A masked dancer exits the temple at Ugen Choling.

There are Swiss-like villages that have no electricity or roads, with farmers eager to invite the traveler in for butter tea. There are 700-year-old Buddhist temples and monasteries, resplendent with frescos of Buddhist saints and evil demons.

Red-robed monks walk about, happy to have their picture taken and engage in cultural exchanges. And there are what National Geographic's John Claude White, the first foreigner to bring back photos of Bhutan in 1911, called "castles in the air"—massive dzongs that were built in the 16th century to repel Tibetan invaders.



Trongsa Dzong as seen from a room at Yangkil Hotel.

### Himalayan Mardi Gras

For me, the best photo ops are at the Buddhist-masked dance festivals held every year in most villages to honor heroes and vilify demons. These week-long Mardi Gras of the Himalayas feature sacred Buddhist dances and lyrics to teach moral messages and promote understanding by reenacting Vajrayana Buddhist history. They have a deep spiritual impact on those believers who witness them. Using precise and complicated choreography passed down through the centuries by Buddhist masters, dancers perform the iconic Black Hat Dance, the Dance of the Heroes, the Dance of the Lord of Death, and many others. Each village also performs their own dance to honor local deities and scare away anything evil.



A pilgrim circumambulates the exterior of a temple 108 times to gain merit.

I always try to visit the small village festivals instead of the huge ones in the capital of Thimphu and airport city of Paro, where thousands of urbanites and tourists crowd temple courtyards, straining to get a glimpse of the dancers. The more intimate village festivals like those in Domkhar and Ura host perhaps 300 villagers and 30 tourists, a number that allows closer ringside seating to get tight headshots and motion in the elaborate brocade costumes. Too, over the years I have made friends with village elders and the village lama and they allow me and my fellow photographers special photographic access to dressing rooms and ceremonies inside the temples. The most important element in developing these friendships has been to show great respect for religion and customs. (And, oh yes, a gift of a multi-tool or reading glasses doesn't hurt either.)

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## Photography In Bhutan; A Workshop Leader's Love Of Place Page 2

Other photo ops abound, like archery matches at the village archery field. Passed down from when defending armies manned the thin-slotted windows of fortress dzongs, archery has become Bhutan's national sport. It is played mostly with traditional bamboo bows and arrows and is more like a folk festival than a sporting event. Women wear their finest kiras, hand-woven masterpieces with patterns from their native valley, and bring food and homemade wine called ara. They sing and dance during the competition, sometimes right under the flight path of arrows that are shot at a target the size of a dinner plate from 130 yards away. To throw off the concentration of the competition, wives and girlfriends get in a chorus line in front of the opposing competitor as he shoots, waving scarves in his face and shouting insults that refer to his manhood and ancestral lineage to throw off his concentration and aim.



White prayer flags in a high pass mark the passing of a loved one.

Archers stand in front of the target shouting insults as they follow the flight of the arrow, jumping out of the way at the last possible second. But with all this display of insults and arm waving, when an archer hits the target, the opposing team forms a line in front of the target and breaks into a beautiful song and dance to praise the archer's good shot and the ancestral gift of archery.

### Religion Helps Biodiversity Take Hold Over The Millennium

Several distinctly different biological realms converge between the low-lying rain forest jungles in the south and the alpine meadows in the north—the altitude difference is nearly 24,000 ft. Situated in the heartland of Bhutan between these two regions are vast rhododendron and conifer forests. When nature adds the heavy rains of the monsoon season and different climates associated with various altitudes, it is easy to see how tremendous biodiversity has been able to take hold over the millennium.



A pilgrim in Thimphu burns incense in front of huge prayer wheels.

Within the scientific community, Bhutan's list of rare and endangered wildlife and fauna is legendary: Bengal tigers sighted above 7000 ft, snow leopards, golden langurs, blue sheep, red pandas, takins, black-necked cranes, over 600 species of birds—many discovered in the last 20 years—and over 5000 plants, many of which contain medicinal properties. Rare orchids, carnivorous plants, and 50 species of rhododendrons round out the list. One species of bird, the satyr tragopan, was once thought to be extinct but was recently sighted in Jigme Dorji National Park. Too, the white-bellied heron, one of the 50 rarest birds on the planet with a population estimated to be between 20-200, has recently had numerous sightings of several birds in Bhutan.

I have a theory about why Bhutan has maintained this incredible biodiversity, and that is, religion plays the most important role. Bhutan remains the only surviving Mahayana (Tibetan) Buddhist country in the world, with the majority of the population living out their religion daily—most homes have a separate prayer room. To live in harmony with the mysteries and complexities of nature is a crucial Buddhist practice. One only has to look at acid rain, the ozone hole, and contamination of the earth's waters to see evidence of how harming nature eventually harms mankind. The Buddhist approach to nature is to show reverence and compassion to all forms of life, as well as limiting consumption to basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing.



Patience is your best tool—focus and frame on a great scene and then let it develop.

This philosophy, coupled with long-standing beliefs that key ecological areas are inhabited by underworld spirits, gods and goddesses, and a variety of deities, has served to protect much of Bhutan's landscape. If the local people believe that a powerful deity resides in a certain lake, then that lake will be given consideration when it comes to damming the river beneath or polluting the stream above. Likewise, if a certain forest is thought to be the home of gods and goddesses, then the felling of trees might better take place in another forest. Since habitat preservation is a key element in preservation of species, this all adds up to a culture that supports biodiversity and conservation of natural resources, albeit for ulterior motives.

### **Bhutan Enters The Modern World**

I remember looking out of the window as our plane roared down the runway to leave Bhutan after our first tour, thinking aloud to my wife, "Lord, please don't let this place change." But sometime during my many return visits I had an epiphany: who am I to wish these gentle people be locked into a cultural museum just so I can come here and take photos? Don't they deserve all the modern conveniences that I have? Wouldn't a washing machine make life easier for a farm wife instead of pounding clothes on a riverside rock? I enjoy watching TV and my cell phone gets constant use, so why wouldn't the Bhutanese enjoy the same things?



The fifth grandson of the Ura Lama is thought to be the reincarnate of an important 16th century lama.

Yes, Bhutan is changing quickly, so now is the time to visit the Land of Gross National Happiness before it fades into the fog of globalization. Last year cell phones came to Bhutan and now almost every shop has a sign that reads “Recharge sold here,” referring to buying minutes for cell phones. There are now traffic jams in Thimphu, the capital, the only capital city in the world without a single traffic light. The country is rapidly modernizing by building feeder roads off of the only paved road, the National Highway, and running electricity to isolated villages. The youth are embracing westernization, choosing to wear denim jeans instead of the government-mandated traditional men’s ghos and lady’s kiras. So take your camera and gear and go there sooner rather than later while you can still get images of the castles in the air.

Robin Smillie is a freelance writer and travel photographer living in Tampa, Florida. He specializes in leading photography tours to Bhutan—you can find out more about his tours and see more of his images of Bhutan at: [www.rainbowphototours.com](http://www.rainbowphototours.com). Departures are scheduled for every October, April, and May.