



Tailor made holidays in India

## JULY 2014 ESCAPE to BHUTAN!

LYNN STEWART

### ESCAPE TO... the land of Happiness

“Passengers on the left, look out now and you will get a fantastic view of **Everest** ...” the pilot thoughtfully announced.

Unfortunately, from my window seat on the right, this required me craning forward to catch a glimpse of the majestic peak soaring against an azure sky. Mental note, reserve seat **f** on the return flight!

My welcome to **Paro** airport was equally spectacular. We hugged the curve of the mountain, seeming to skim treetops, as we swooped into the valley. Disembarking, it was literally a breath of fresh air after the heat of Delhi.

My initial impression of Bhutan was one of peace and tranquility. There was no incessant car horn honking, no madcap drivers, no chai wallahs shouting, no elephants in the road.

I discovered a land of stunning mountain scenery. In March, the rhododendrons and magnolias buds were starting to burst into shades of crimson, pink and cream. Apple and cherry blossom were already in bloom and the mountains were 50 shades of green. The last of the winter wheat was being scythed and paddy fields were being prepared for summer rice. On the upper slopes the overnight rain turned to snow and the pine forests were dusted in white.

Most Bhutanese proudly wear their national dress, the gho for men and the kira for women and it is compulsory in schools and on formal occasions. I was amused at night in the capital **Thimphu**, the young people dress in western gear and hang out in karaoke bars!

Bhutan is a deeply Buddhist country with spectacular monasteries and fortress like Dzongs clinging to craggy outcrops. Shaven headed monks in deep red robes sit chanting inside, banging cymbals and blowing horns in an apparent cacophony of religious sound, whilst the young ones in maroon robes play outside after lessons. Prayer flags flutter on hillsides and criss cross paths as you drive along the only main road in the country.

Whilst there is poverty within Bhutan and rural life is undeniably hard, you can see why the Government promotes the idea of Gross National Happiness. I was warmly welcomed wherever I went and left feeling truly refreshed and enriched by my escape. *Happiness is a place...called Bhutan.*



ESCAPE TO ... Dewachen Hotel [www.dewachenhotel.com](http://www.dewachenhotel.com)

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Every Autumn, **very rare Black Necked cranes** fly in from Tibet to winter in Bhutan's **Phobjikha** valley. They are considered heavenly birds in Bhutan and called **thrung thrung karmo**, featuring widely in folklore. Their arrival signals the end of harvesting and time for families to migrate for the winter to warmer, lower villages.

Annually, on November 11<sup>th</sup> the **Black- Necked Crane Festival** is held in the courtyard of **Gangtey Goemba**. Children perform dances wearing crane costumes to celebrate the return of around 300 cranes.

**Dewachen Hotel** is a cosy, 16 room property overlooking the cranes' wintering habitat. Each room has a wood burning stove and lovely views across the valley to the Black Mountains. Hot water bottles are provided if required and the porridge at breakfast is almost as good as home!!

### **ESCAPE TO..... climb to a Tiger's Nest**

**Taktshang Goemba** is Bhutan's most famous monastery. It clings to the sheer cliffs and when I visited, the pine trees above it were dusted in snow. A round trip takes about 5 hours but it is quite hard going as the high altitude makes you short of breath. There is a steep walk up to a cafeteria (2940m) which marks about half way but even from here the view is stunning. Stop for a chai and some biscuits to sustain you. From here you hike another 30 minutes and reach a spectacular viewpoint at (3140m) opposite the monastery to take this classic shot. However you then have to descend and then ascend around 700 steps to finally reach the monastery. You have to hand in your camera and just record the moment in your head! The monastery is open 8am to 1pm and 2pm to 5pm and a permit is required to enter. So time it well or prepare to sit in the sunshine and enjoy the breathtaking view..literally!

### **ESCAPE.....**

### **Did you know?**

**Did you Know...** the capital city, **Thimphu** is the only capital city in the world without traffic lights. A policeman stands in the main street and orchestrates the traffic.

For visitors who have travelled to Bhutan, and to those who are escaping with us in October and November this year, you may wonder about the outside decoration of some of the houses.

Yes, you are not imagining what is climbing up the wall.

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**Did you know..** many Bhutanese houses are decorated with carved wooden phalluses, often crossed by a sword, which are hung at the corner of the roof, mounted over the door or painted on the walls.

It is not a fertility symbol, but is associated with the Lama Drukpa Kunley, the “divine madman” and believed to ward off evil spirits. Every home should have one!! Not sure it will catch on in UK..

### ESCAPE.....

### Latest news.

We will apply for your **Bhutanese visa** in advance of your visit. You require a print out of your successful application before you are allowed to check in on a Druk Airlines flight. So it is better to book your holiday as soon as possible to allow plenty of time for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn.

Over the summer we are **revamping the website** to be a bit more dynamic and to showcase the photo albums on Facebook to guests who don't have an account. We will have more travel blogs in the form of our “Postcards from...” series and testimonials from guests who have very kindly sent us feedback from their holidays.

As part of a new marketing campaign, introducing **Escape to India ...and beyond**, we have taken a half page advert in the June edition of the Lonely Planet magazine.

We will be exhibiting again at **Birdfair at Rutland on August 15-17**. So please come along and see us to chat about trips to India.. and beyond, whether it is wildlife or cultural, or a combination of both. Lynn is looking forward to welcoming a few familiar faces to her stand in **Marquee 3, stand 30**.

### ESCAPE ...

### Testimonial

Marion and Colin have just returned from Bhutan and we have downloaded some of their photos online on [www.facebook.com/escape2india](http://www.facebook.com/escape2india)

*“ The festival in Paro was fantastic, what a way to celebrate my birthday and totally unforgettable. In the “what to pack” list we suggest you add blow up cushions for events such as this.*

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*The views were amazing, with tightly packed mountains and the few valleys and we especially liked Punakha and the lit stoves in the bedrooms. Life for many in Bhutan is hard , poverty was overwhelming in some areas, especially for those working on the roads.*

*Amazing memories and some good photos... Thank you for organizing our trip of a lifetime and we look forward to seeing you at Birdfair."*

**The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.....**

Lao Tzu

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