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TRAVEL
JOE ENGLANDER



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Features

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THE NEXT BEST THING TO BEING THERE

Travel by JOE ENGLANDER

Cover Photo

"Sonam Watching Shacham" was made by Joe Englander at Thangbi Mani in the province of Bumthang, Bhutan with a Leica RB and an 80-200 zoom. There are no roads to this walled small village dzong; access is by footpath only. The necessary river crossing is by a handmade rope and plank suspension bridge. The window construction and decoration is typical of the area: hand-hewn, traditionally decorated, no screens, sliding louvers.

Mr. Englander says, "Besides the window being a beautiful example of local architecture and custom, the balance between Sonam's head in the lower right with the Thongka in the upper left combined with her smooth skin contrasting with the texture of the window impelled me to make the image."



COVER PHOTO © JOE ENGLANDER

TRAVEL

BHUTANwith **Joe Englander**

This is not an unbiased report about a place that is difficult to get to, difficult to get into, and difficult to get around, though it is all of that. This is a story about the most wonderful place in the world: Shangri La, also known as Bhutan.

Bhutan is the last independent Himalayan Buddhist country in the world. The others have been swallowed up and inundated by Hindus and Chinese.

When most people describe what they think Tibet is like, they are describing Bhutan. In fact, Bhutan has been the Hollywood substitute for

Tibet in many movies. Bhutan and Tibet were brothers born with the same genes, the same culture, the same architecture, the same religion. Until the Chinese. But now there is only tiny Bhutan, nestled in the mountains north of India, south of China, east of Nepal. A country the size of Vermont and New Hampshire but not as densely populated.

Until the mid-70s there weren't any roads and there weren't any tourists either. When Nehru visited Bhutan, he walked. Mountain roads are incredibly difficult to build by hand. And they are especially difficult to maintain when

they wash completely away with the yearly Monsoon rains. The lack of roads is also a kind of national defense and it seems to have kept the Chinese and Indians out, so far.

There really is only one road. During certain times of the year it goes from one end of the country to the other. During certain other times of the year it does not. Its distance is not measured in miles, but in time, switchbacks, hairpin curves and landslides. For the locals, it is generally far quicker to walk across the steep valleys than to follow the winding road around them. Most of what cross-coun-



Girl knitting blue material in front of blue hotel in Tasigang, Bhutan

Monks don traditional spirit masks and clothing to dance at Punakha Sedra



BHUTAN



Dance of Stags performed at Wanfdi Tsechu

Monk prays by counting verses on palm of hand

Monks consider a philosophical point in the courtyard of Paro Dzong



Young monks with recently shaved heads at Punakha Dzong

try commercial traffic exists detours through India where the roads are, if not better, mostly existent. The lack of roads deters armies of tourists, too. But the quota and daunting daily government tariff also help keep tourists out. Depending on who is doing the counting and on other influences, the number of people permitted into the country varies from 2500 to 5000 per year. Less people than visit Yellowstone in a month!

The tariff, or tourist tax, that must be paid to the government before visas can be issued is \$250 per day per person. There are usually additional lodging and tour operator expenses as well. Considering that Americans and Europeans must literally travel halfway around the world, most prefer to stay for more than a few days, so the expenses mount up quickly and the number who can afford the price is just as limited as the number who can obtain permits for entry.

Arriving in Bhutan is not the same as entering it. But even on arrival you know that this place is different. When I first visited Bhutan, the terminal buildings were made of compacted dirt with slate roofs. Now they are traditional in style but built of concrete. Nonetheless the airport, which is located in a narrow river valley of small rice farms, is where it is because that is the only place flat enough to build a runway.

The pilot generally warns passengers not to be disturbed by his flying. The mountains are so close and equidistant on either side that you can see the needles on the pine trees. It is the only approach possible. It is also the only approach possible because the King of Bhutan has mandated that visitors must fly in at least one direction on Royal Druk Airlines. But the alternative Indian buses from Calcutta or Darjeeling are so onerous that most choose to fly both ways. Royal Druk connects to Delhi and Bangkok. Tickets are sold only to those who have visas; visas are issued to only those who have tickets. After all, this is the Far-East where you must learn to deal calmly and patiently with apparent contradic-

tion!

Entering Bhutan is like walking through a mountain forest of Buddhist prayer flags. You feel as if your vision has always been blurred, even distracted, by bright colors blowing in the wind, but suddenly you can see. It is really like entering Shangri La, where the blind can see better than the sighted.

The longer I stay the more I see that the people are rich in a way that reveals in myself a certain poverty, a paucity of soul. For some this revelation doesn't happen, for others it happens when they return to the land of material wealth and begin to miss the place its own people call The Kingdom of the Clouds, The Land of the Thunder Dragon.

Staying in Bhutan is like going back in time, in more ways than one. The facilities at the best hotels, hotels built for royal guests attending the Coronation, are usually less than you'd expect at a rundown motel in small town America. And that's in the major tourist town of Punakha and the capital, Thimphu. Elsewhere private toilet facilities often don't exist; such showers as there are, are usually communal. Beds are generally harder than the carpeted floor. Although Bhutan's major export is hydroelectric power, the electricity frequently fails.

The country is essentially agrarian and self-sufficient. There are practical sides to the mandate that requires each family to own at least five arable acres to maintain citizenship. The country continues to have the ability to feed everyone during bad times, and it has forced an acceptance of birth control (if you have too many children in order for each to have five acres, some won't be citizens).

On all sides Bhutan is surrounded by countries that don't practice any birth control, by countries teeming with growing populations, by countries stripping their land of natural resources, by countries littered with the detritus of western commercialism; yet it has managed to avoid overcrowding and excessive population growth, conserving its resources, and placing

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Mountain forest of prayer flags at Kori La Pass



Young monk studying by window light in Tashigang Dzong



Jakar Dzong, known as the White Bird, in Bumthang region

Monk crosses
main courtyard
in Tashigang
Dzong



Girls in traditional silk Kiras at Wangdiphodrang Festival

Monks offering prayers and music with drums and horns in Ura Dzong



massive amounts of land into National Parks and Preserves.

An agrarian society works hard, usually 24/7. So religious festivals, festivals of harvest and of memory, take on even more importance as they are the only days many Bhutanese spend away from their land.

To say the festivals are colorful is as much an understatement as to say Bhutan is spiritual. The people come to the dzong, a combination medieval fortress and monastery at the heart of every major village or town, dressed in their finest; the monks perform religious dances and act out folk stories full of demons and angels.

While most of the younger generations have schooling, most of the elders do not. To these elders, the dances and stories are equivalent to animating oral history and mythology. Many elders believe that by paying close attention to the spirit dances in this life, they will learn to recognize and thus not be misled by evil spirits in the afterlife. It is a privilege to be allowed to watch religious and traditional ceremonies that are not being staged for tourists. It is also a cherished privilege to be welcomed into a land so utterly different, so absolutely wonderful, a place where visual beauty and spiritual beauty are inseparable.

The drukpa word for mountain pass is "la." I have been through many passes in Bhutan, Dochu La, Pele La, Shelthang La, Trumsing La, but the one I always remember is the one that first took me to Bhutan, Shangri La.

Joe Englander makes his home near Austin, Texas, but spends most of the year traveling to make photographs. Joe's traveling schedule for 2001 will once again take him around the world. He will be leading workshops in Alaska, Washington, Wyoming, Montana, Texas, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Scotland, China, Thailand, India, and of course, Bhutan. He can be reached at jenglander@englander-workshops.com. 512/335-0427. PO Box 203252, Austin, TX 78720.

BHUTAN

*Chorten with
prayer flags in
mountain pass
above Punakha*



Dance of Terrifying Deities, Wangdiphodrang Tsechu



*Dance of the
Heroes Guan Drug
Pawos at Wangdi
Phodrang Tsechu*