

April 20, 2004

e-Postcard from The Kingdom of Bhutan

The archer slowly drew back his arrow, his hands steady, the bamboo bow distorted into a wide-mouthed sideways U. Unlike modern compound bows, which actually get easier to pull the farther you draw back the string, this traditional Bhutanese bamboo bow grew ever harder to pull the further he drew the arrow towards himself. His eyes narrowed into slits. He slowly elevated the bow and arrow towards the sky, finely judging the fiercely blowing and ever changing winds and the 200 yard distance to the tiny target. He ignored the chanted taunts of the opposing team's cheerleaders questioning his ability to complete the reproductive process, challenging the ability to find certain parts of his anatomy without the aid of optical magnification and allegations of his heritage being closely aligned with Yaks. He blocked out the flicks of their scarves mere inches from his face, and released the arrow.

On its parabolic arc rode the destiny of his team and his village. Having fought through months of tournaments, he and his ten teammates found themselves locked in a tight battle in the deciding game of the national championship. Yesterday's two contests had taken a full day, with each of the finalists winning one game. Today's game would determine the archery national championship, and with it, which team would receive the prestige, honors and adulation of an entire nation. In Bhutan, archery is the national sport, and winning the archery national championship is comparable to simultaneously winning the World Cup, World Series, Super Bowl, Final Four and the local bowling league.

Archery embodies the culture of Bhutan. Matches can last for days, as it can take an entire morning before either team hits the impossibly small target from the long distances of the typical archery range. Thus, it reflects the patience and endurance of an ancient Himalayan Buddhist kingdom that has myths, legends and traditions arising out of the mists of lost valleys that trace their origins to the beginning of time.

The Bamboo bow and arrow reflect the foundations of traditional culture, along with its reverence for family, morality, charity, honesty and the pursuit of inner happiness. The culture runs deep, with nearly every stream, rock, mountain and lake in the entire country having an accompanying deity, legend and adventure tied to it.

The extraordinary distance between the targets reflects the long distances traveled by foot in a nation that built its first road in 1960, and even today has only a few rough highways between the district capitals. The majority of the population lives one to five days walk from the nearest road.

The colors of the banners around the targets reflect the Buddhist religion that permeates all aspects of daily life. With a color for each of the elements of life: earth, air, forest, fire and water, the archers are surrounded by the foundations of their theology.

The bawdy nature of the opposing cheerleaders' chants reflect the holistic and relaxed nature of the Bhutanese regarding the nature of men, women and sexuality. Virility and fertility are celebrated, with homes and buildings in Eastern Bhutan often decorated with paintings and carvings of male anatomical features.

The spotless and immaculately manicured archery range reflects the orderly, clean and well maintained homes, towns and businesses across the nation. Entire communities arise at daybreak to sweep the sidewalks, clean the gutters, and pick up trash. Most family homes and prosperous farms are as orderly and well-kept as any you could find in Germany, Austria or Switzerland.

The lone arrow streaking through the sky, almost impossible to see by the untrained eye, reflects the elusive and rare nature of a visit to the Kingdom of Bhutan. With fewer than 10,000 foreigners visiting the country per year, and only 55 motorcycle riders known to have toured the country prior to us, the tastes, culture, society and people of Bhutan are indeed singular and unique pleasures.

The winds that buffet the arrows in flight, pushing them from their intended course, reflect the pressures of world events, external societal changes and the cultural onslaught of television and the internet, both introduced in 1999, that are threatening to erode the unique cultural identity of this tiny Switzerland sized country and its 600,000 citizens. Already, there are drug problems arising in the high schools; Western dress is making inroads, displacing the traditional Gho, worn by men, and the Kira, worn by women; and parents and teachers are seeing a dilution of the ideals that have kept this society whole and intact through the centuries.

The taunts and cries of the opposing cheerleaders reflect the pressures of being a tiny high-mountain kingdom surrounded by the two largest countries in the world, India and China, as well as a Maoist insurgency in neighboring Nepal, fellow Buddhists dreaming of wrenching a free and independent Tibet away from China and militant separatists desiring to carve an independent Nepalese Gurkha homeland from southern Bhutan and Northeastern India.

The strength required to draw back and hold a bamboo bow reflects the iron will and strength of a nation and a king not afraid to stand up to the world's largest institutions in order to protect their culture and values. Even though Bhutan is one of the world's least developed nations, it has refused to go down the path of dependency that so many other developing nations have chosen. Bhutan, with a tiny \$400 million in foreign currency reserves, picks and chooses aid programs that match the needs of its people, and refuses to accept unsustainable projects that so often lie rotting in neglect while piling up crushing debt in other developing nations that eagerly fight their way to the aid trough.

The archer's uniform of a traditional Gho, contrasted sharply by modern knee high athletic socks and shoes, reflects the balance the nation is striving to achieve between traditional culture and developed countries' products and technologies.

The immense distance to the tiny target reflects the enormity of the challenges facing the people and leaders of this unique treasure of a nation as it strives to retain the values and principles of its culture while managing a healthy and sustainable integration of outside ideas, influences, standards, practices and capabilities.

The arrow reached the top of its ballistic curve and turned downward, streaking toward the target.

The archer's teammates watched the incoming arrow, not moving from their positions mere inches from the target. The arrow sailed in, and, improbably, incredibly and amazingly, hit the bullseye target for three points and a victory. A bullseye for the victory! A bullseye for the National Championship! It was unbelievable.

The archer sprinted to midfield, directly in front of the reviewing stand occupied by the royal ministers and honored guests. There he was met by his teammates for a special dance performed on such auspicious occasions. The cheerleaders then joined for a series of traditional songs as the victorious team draped the winning archer with the sashes of victory.

As I stood on top of the earthen wall that formed a backstop for the target and watched the winning team march towards me to celebrate their victory I thought that it may just be possible, regardless of how improbable, that this tiny nation, nestled in the highest mountain range on earth, may too find a way to hit the bullseye. They may find a way to put their nation's arrow in the target by retaining their identity, preventing cultural dilution and preserving their unique society and values while finding a safe route on the highway of development.

As I watched the winning archer, wrapped in the championship sashes of victory, shout in celebration, I said a silent prayer for the Bhutanese to reflect their champion, with a strong arm, a sharp eye and precise judgment of the winds of change.

Be well,
Doug

PS – Some photos of our time in Bhutan follow



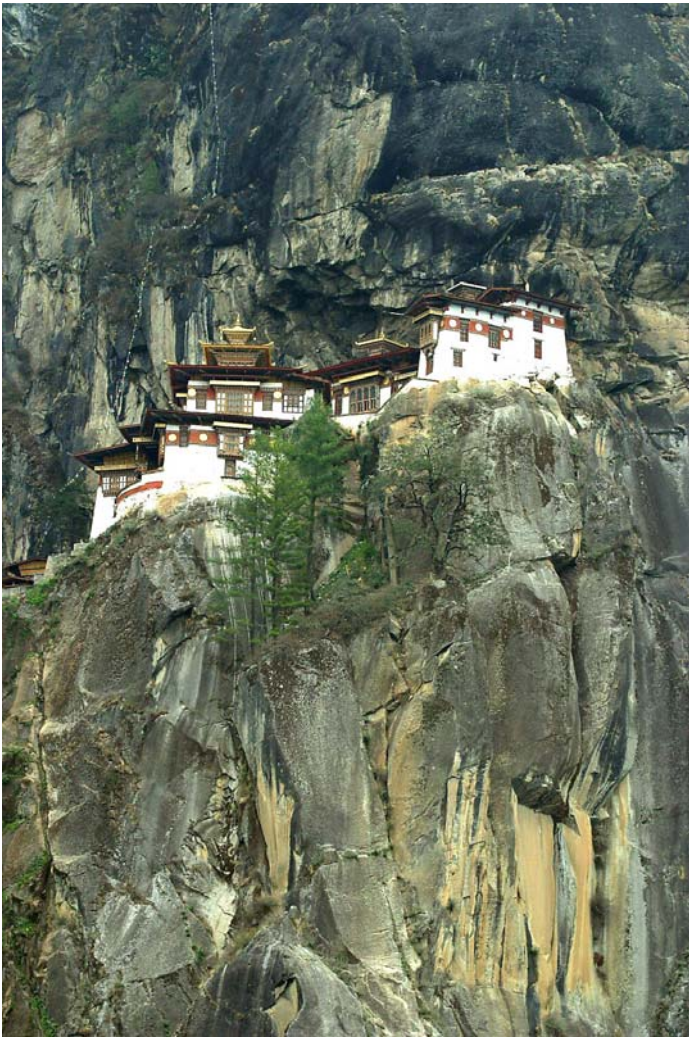
The entrance gate to the Kingdom of Bhutan. On this side, the frenetic chaos of India. On the other, a serene Himalayan mountain kingdom of hidden, mist shrouded valleys, gentle people and ancient wisdom. Photo by Stephanie Hackney. Phuentsholing, Bhutan.



A young boy turns prayer wheels on his way to school. Buddhists believe that each time the prayer wheel turns, it spins the prayer out into the world. Phuentsholing, Bhutan.



Typical road scene of Bhutan. Most roads are much rougher than this, but all share the two primary features illustrated here: a choice between a rock wall and a sheer drop for thousands of feet. Photo by Stephanie Hackney. Phuentsholing to Paro road, Bhutan.



Tiger's Lair monastery. We hiked up to this point, a climb of over 2,000 vertical feet. When this monastery was built, every stone, timber and item used in its construction was carried up the single track trails to the monastery's location by horse and person. Near Paro, Bhutan.



A master carver hand carving a beam for a new hotel being built in Paro, Bhutan. Note the hand formed wooden handled tools. Paro, Bhutan.



Finished fly fishing lures packaged for export viewed under an inspection magnification lens. The factory outputs 10,000 dozen lures a month, with each worker hand tying about 60 per day. The lures are made from a mixture of exotic furs and bird feathers, based on designs provided by the marketing company. This small handcraft factory was started by a Bhutanese who was encouraged by his Western friends who enjoyed fly fishing. Bhutanese do not fish, or kill any living creature, so special permits are required for catch and release fly fishing expeditions. Bhutan boasts some of the best fly fishing in the world. Paro, Bhutan.



Elderly Bhutanese shop keeper, wearing prayer beads around her neck. After each circuit of the beads, one of the small silver bands is moved. A full completion of the prayer beads involves over 10,000 prayers. Along the Thimphu to Trongsa road, Bhutan.



Typical Bhutanese farm. Although Bhutan is very small, about the size of Switzerland, if it was laid out flat, it would probably be half the size of the continental U.S. Its mountains are nearly vertical, are among the highest on earth, and form extremely steep valleys with rivers full of glacial and snow melt. Along the Thimphu to Trongsa road, Bhutan.



Trongsa Dzong, the largest Dzong in the country and long the seat of power. Dzongs combine a Buddhist monastery and a government administration center. They were built as fortified centers of power to govern the districts of Bhutan, which are formed from the four major river valleys of the country. Trongsa, Bhutan.



Kinzang, our Bhutanese guide, prepares betel nut with a bit of lime. The leaf is wrapped around the nut and placed in the mouth. Once chewed it makes a distinctive red paste and provides a mild effect. Many people in Bhutan chew betel nut and exhibit the distinctive red stained teeth that mark a user.



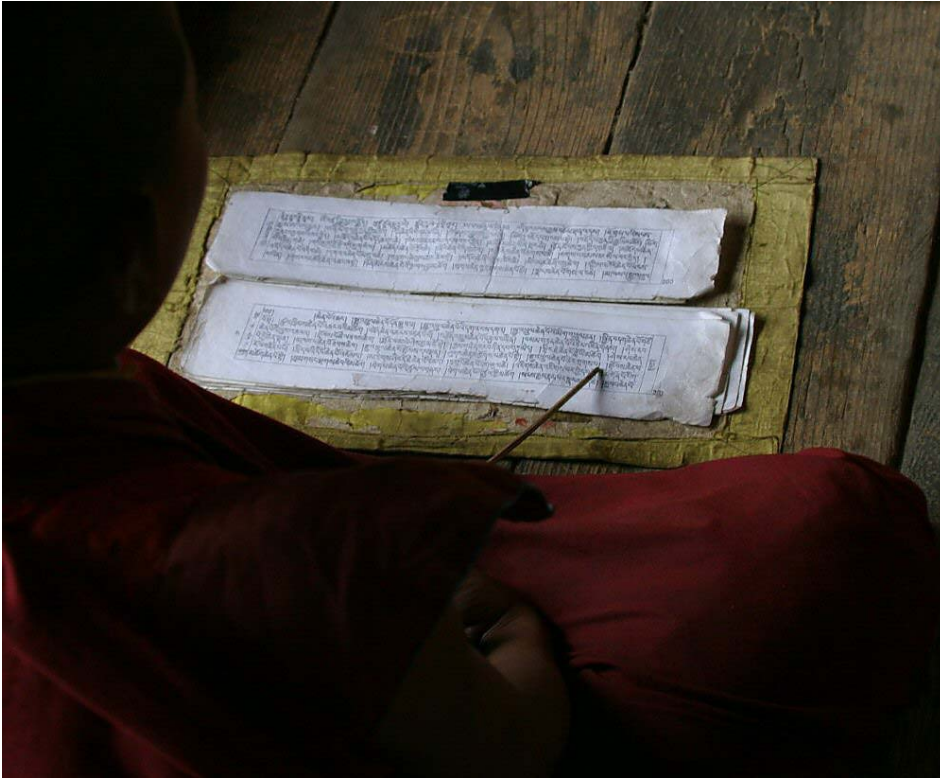
A Bhutanese delegate to an education conference takes digital pictures of the apple blossoms at our hotel while wearing a traditional Gho. This contrast of tradition and leading edge can be found often in today's Bhutan. Jakar, Bhutan.



Snow covered trees on a mountainside. About 20% of Bhutan's geographical area is snow covered Himalayan mountain peaks that stay white year round. Nearly 60% is virgin forest that is protected by the government. Nearly all timber exports are banned. Near Jakar, Bhutan.



Prayer wheel detail. Since this Monastery was built in the 14th century countless hands have turned this prayer wheel. Tamshing Goemba / Tamshing Lhendup Chholing, near Jakar, Bhutan.



A young monk recites his morning prayers. Buddhist prayers are kept loose leaf in a binder. Tamshing Goemba / Tamshing Lhendup Chholing, near Jakar, Bhutan.



Monastery detail. Fierce deities and manifestations historically converted animist and other local spirits into defenders of Buddhism. Contemporary roles relate to protecting the faithful and holy sites from evil. Tamshing Goemba / Tamshing Lhendup Chholing, near Jakar, Bhutan.



A young girl inspects our pannier box. We spent a couple of hours here shooting and printing pictures to give to the resident monks and lamas and to the local villagers volunteering their labor to maintain the monastery. Tamshing Goemba / Tamshing Lhendup Chholing, near Jakar, Bhutan.



Our guide, Patrick Moffat, giving rides to young monks. The life of a monk often means one devoid of entertainment and diversion. This was probably the most exciting thing these boys had ever done in their lives. Photo by Stephanie Hackney. Tamshing Goemba / Tamshing Lhendup Chholing, near Jakar, Bhutan.



School books from a primary school that Steph and I visited. Steph brought some school supplies to donate and I was able to interview the headmistress and address the students. English is a second language to all literate Bhutanese. Literacy rates are around 70% for boys and 40% for girls. In rural areas, parents fear for the safety of young girls walking hours to school through forests filled with carnivores. Near the Jakar to Trongsa road, Bhutan.



Monk washing his clothes. Even for the most faithful and enlightened, daily chores are a part of life. Trongsa Dzong, Trongsa, Bhutan.



Monastery detail. Homes, government buildings, businesses, monasteries and holy sites are covered in intricate carvings and paintings. Trongsa Dzong, Trongsa, Bhutan.



Unattended child watching television. TV and the internet, introduced in 1999, are both eroding the culture of Bhutan and threaten to dilute a truly unique world treasure. Trongsa, Bhutan.



Woman splitting bamboo for weaving panels used for housing. The split bamboo is laid in the road so traffic can flatten it into the pieces used for weaving.



Grazing Yak. The females are prized for their milk, which is used for cheese production.



Men slicing beef to be air dried. If a cow falls from a cliff and is killed, is killed by traffic or dies naturally, the people will dry the meat and use it for food.



National champion archery team and cheerleaders marching towards the winning target accompanied by dancers in native ceremonial costume. Thimphu, Bhutan.



Worker tosses water soaked wood fiber used in hand made paper from soaking tank to transport tray. Thimphu, Bhutan.



Dried cheese on display. This cheese is combined with hot chili peppers in the national dish, chilies and cheese. It is very, very spicy and very, very good.



The crowd attracted by our departure from our last lunch in Bhutan. The Indian manufactured 500cc Royal Enfield Bullet is a rare site in this part of the world, with all other scooters and motorcycles being 50 – 180cc. This shot represents the end of an era as the major manufacturers will begin importing selected large displacement motorcycles to India in late 2004 and 2005. The man in all white is a plainclothes policeman who was breaking up the crowd. The gate into India is visible in the background. Phuentsholing, Bhutan.



The old and the new. A boy wearing a traditional Gho walks past the Sony store in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. Finding a healthy and sustainable balance between the traditional values that have served Bhutan so well and the onslaught of new products, technologies and corrosive cultural elements of developed countries is the biggest challenge for today's Bhutan. Thimphu, Bhutan.