

## Dzongs in the Land of the Thunder Dragon

By Dr. Aparna Bagwe

[anbagwe@gmail.com](mailto:anbagwe@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The Kingdom of Bhutan is often referred to as the last Shangri la. For several centuries, this land-locked country - nestled in the lap of the snow-clad peaks and valleys of the eastern Himalayas - has been safeguarded by wise rulers who have maintained its isolated status, thus preserving its distinct Buddhist identity, culture and traditions. In 1974, Bhutan carefully opened its doors to selective numbers of tourists in a bid to promote its unique culture, offering outsiders glimpses into a very different way of life. Through the memoirs of my visit to Bhutan almost a decade back, I shall take the readers on a virtual walk to some of the ancient dzongs (fortress monasteries) of this Himalayan Kingdom.

### Keywords

Dzongs, Bhutan, Paro, Punakha, Thimphu

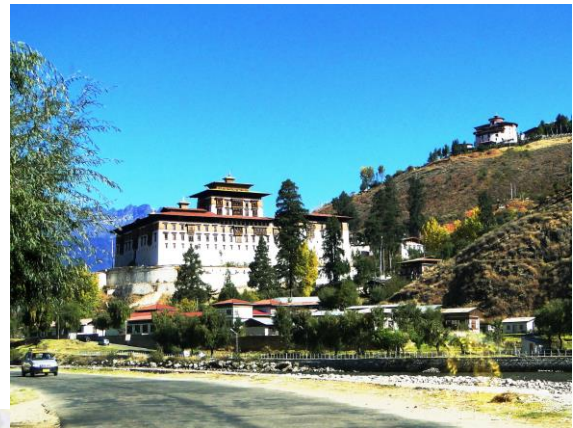
### Introduction

Buddhism was introduced into the region occupied by present day Bhutan around the 7th century AD, and the first Buddhist temples were constructed at Bumthang and Kyichu. The region, ruled over by several feudal lords constantly at war against each other, was unified in the early 17th century by the Tibetan lama and military leader Ngawang Namgyal, who went on to build a protective network of impregnable dzongs to defend the country against intermittent attacks from Tibet. In the 1880s, Ugyen Wangchuk came into power and in 1907, he was unanimously chosen as the hereditary king of the country. King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck from this distinguished lineage is the present reigning monarch. Bhutan's official name is Druk yul (country of the Drukpa, the dragon people, or the land of the thunder dragon, a reference to the country's dominant Buddhist sect). The country is referred to as Bhutan only in official correspondence in the English-language. Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government, with its capital in Thimphu. Dzongkha (language of the palace) or Bhutanese has Sino-Tibetan origins and is the national language of Bhutan. The Tibetan alphabet is used to write Dzongkha. Almost

two thirds of Bhutanese practice Vajrayana Buddhism. Over time, this form of Buddhism which originated in Tibet, has evolved and has its own unique rituals and style of worship in Bhutan. Many of the ancient dzongs are in active use today as religious shrines and monasteries as well as administrative centers of different districts of Bhutan.

## The Dzongs of Bhutan

**Rinpung Dzong** (the fortress on a heap of jewels) in Paro is a huge and impressive dzong of the Drukpa lineage of the Kagyu school. Just below this dzong lies a traditional covered cantilever bridge over the river Paro Chu, that is decorated with fluttering prayer flags, a beautiful sight that is so typical of Bhutan. Built in 1646 on the



foundation laid by the Guru Rinpoche under the command of Zabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, this dzong houses the district monastic body and government administrative offices of Paro district. Also referred to as Paro Dzong, its spacious interiors house several Buddhist shrines, the sandalwood stupa, a temple showcasing the Guru's eight manifestations, the monks' assembly hall, and apartments of high officials. A large number of exquisitely detailed murals including that of the Guru Rinpoche, one of the avatars of Buddha, decorate the walls of this beautiful dzong.

**Ta Dzong** is a seven-storied watchtower fortress built in 1649 above the Rinpung dzong. Since 1968 it houses the National Museum of Bhutan that is the repository of over 3000 of the finest specimens of Bhutanese art including bronze statues and colorful, intricate paintings representing the rich Bhutanese cultural heritage of thousands of years.

**Drukgyal Dzong** (the fortress of victory) constructed around 1649 lies just 14 km from Paro. This dzong is one of the four oldest defense fortresses. It was accidentally burnt to the ground in 1951, and what remains today are



just the ruins of massive walls and charred watch towers. On a clear day, one can see the Jumolhari peak, sacred to the Bhutanese.

The **Taktshang Monastery** near Paro is the most venerated and also the most visited shrine in Bhutan. It is truly a marvel of engineering as it literally hangs on to the cliff side in the rocky hills above Paro valley, and is accessible by a tough trek by foot or on a mule. Legend has it that Guru Rinpoche first brought Buddhism here on the back of a tigress, giving it the name



Tiger's nest. The trek to the monastery starts at Rumtokto near a beautiful prayer wheel powered by the water of a stream. After an hour long climb up a steep incline, you reach the cafeteria level that offers a wonderful view of the monastery above, and much needed refreshments. Many visitors like 'yours truly' reach this level and sit gazing at the shrine, letting the more daring ones go ahead. A further climb of 45 minutes brings you to the observation point where a chorten (memorial) has been erected. The monastery lies across a deep chasm from this spot, but it still takes over an hour to reach it using a narrow trail by the cliff side, past a waterfall and a hermitage fitted into a gap in the rocks, and a final climb up another flight of steep stairs. Inside the monastery are several pretty shrines, and hermitages in which devout monks live and study. There are several caves too including the cave where Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) first entered riding the tiger and the cave in which he meditated. A visit to this monastery is not for the faint hearted.

**Punakha Dzong** (Palace of great happiness)

is undoubtedly the most beautiful dzong of Bhutan. Built at the confluence of the Phu chhu and Mo chhu rivers in Punakha - the old capital of Bhutan, it is accessed by a beautiful wooden bridge guarded in uniformed guards.

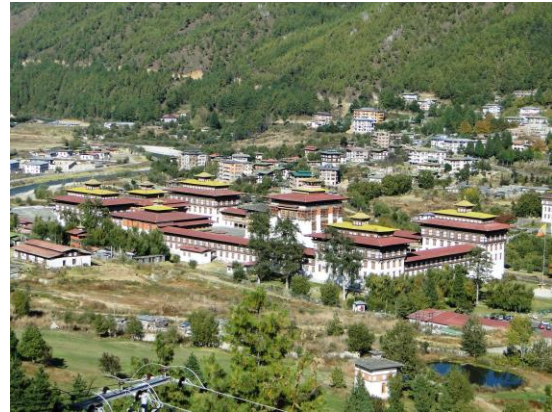
The courtyard has beautiful jacaranda trees that draw the eyes of visitors with their vivid



violet purple blossoms. The dzong has vividly painted murals and doorways, and a very

striking entrance accessed through a steep flight of steps. Its interiors too are built to impress, with elegant murals on every wall. There are carved, wooden staircases leading up to the second level replete with elegant balconies. The roofs have gold embellishments, with the corners decorated with dragon motifs. What truly impresses you is the massive Bodhi tree in the central courtyard of this dzong, and it is a unique experience to sit and meditate under it.

**Thimphu Dzong**, also known as Trashi Chho Dzong (fortress of the glorious religion), is a huge, impressive dzong located just north of Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. The structure seen today is a new dzong constructed in the mid 1600s to replace the original dzong built in 1216. Over a period of time, this dzong has undergone sequential expansion as well as



rebuilding after several devastating fires. When the capital of Bhutan was moved to Thimphu in the 1960s, it was expanded further. The magnificent structure seen today houses not just the King's offices and throne room, but also the secretariat and some ministries. It is illuminated at night and is a really a beautiful sight to behold.

**Simtokha Dzong** is a smaller dzong near Thimphu. As per legend, it marks the spot where a demon had disappeared into a rocky outcrop. It was built in 1629 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who unified Bhutan and is said to be the first dzong that incorporated administrative offices alongside the monastery. It houses one of the premier Dzongkha language learning institutes. A visit to this dzong reveals it to be a hub of activity with a number of young students engaged in serious study.

Thus, Bhutan is a place to be seen to be believed. It has embraced elements of modernity that are vital to its growth and development, while carefully preserving and nurturing its ancient culture, heritage and biodiversity. Its government lays a lot of emphasis on Gross National Happiness of its people. Bhutan offers us a glimpse at how life can be lived in harmony with one's inner self as well as one's environs.

## Acknowledgements

The author owns the copyright to all the photographs used in this article. Information gleaned by the author during her travels in Bhutan has been supplemented by details about the history of Bhutan and its dzongs from online resources and are cited in the bibliography.

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