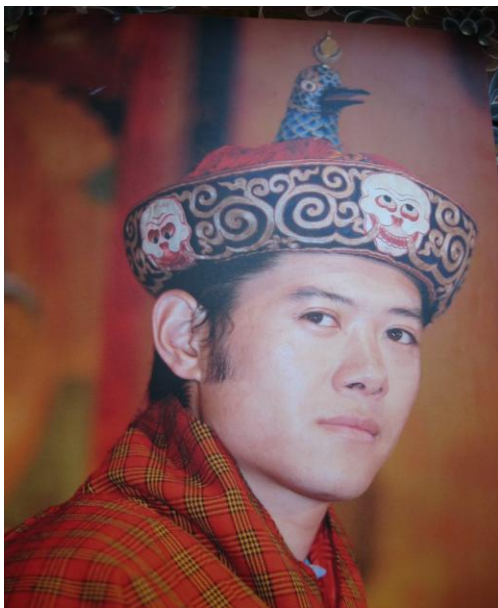


**November 2009**  
**A Collection of Suggestions for**  
**His Royal Majesty the King of Bhutan**

Many of you asked; "Bhutan, where is that? Isn't that where they had the Death March during World War II or something?" No, that was Bataan, in the Philippines. Bhutan is a small country in the Eastern Himalayas, between Tibet and India. It is ruled by a handsome 28-year-old, Harvard-educated and very eligible bachelor King. His retired father has four wives, all sisters, so prospective brides don't necessarily have to be first in line. But more on that later.



We flew from Detroit to Tokyo to Bangkok and spent a few days there to shake off some of the jetlag. Bangkok has changed little since our first visit in 1998. It is still crowded and polluted, but dotted with magnificent palaces and temples. Shopping is cheap, and the nightlife is wild, with massage parlors on every block and strip clubs with doors open onto the steaming streets. The front page of the Bangkok Post had an ad for a US\$1625 gender change operation. Touts pop up from everywhere with well-practiced lies. They tell you that where you are going is closed in order to persuade you to instead visit their brother's shop. In the departure line at the airport, appearances suggested that several people had come to Thailand solely for prurient reasons. Others came to live out of a backpack for a couple of weeks getting high and suntanned on a secluded beach.

Drukair – Royal Bhutan Airlines has a monopoly on flights into and out of the country's only airport in Paro. They have two modern Airbus A319's. It took four hours to fly from Bangkok with a fuel stop in Bagdogra, India. The last leg was magnificent as we were treated to views of Mount Everest and much of the Himalayan range. Final approach had Rich (a former pilot) spellbound. We descended through a narrow winding valley in a series of steep S-turns. The runway appeared only at the last moment around a corner, but the pilot expertly banked the plane and then leveled the wings an instant prior to touchdown on the short runway.



Our tour was arranged by Marie Brown who operates the only American travel agency specializing in Bhutan (<http://www.bhutantravel.com/>). She in turn contracted our arrangements to a local agency; Etho Metho Travel (<http://www.bhutanethometho.com/>). We can recommend either for our adventurous friends. Bhutan only gets about 25,000 tourists each year. Apart from the expensive airline tickets, the government limits the number of tourists by requiring that all tours come in a package that includes a private guide, car, driver, hotel, all sightseeing and three meals per day. The official, non-negotiable rate is \$200/person/day with a \$30 surcharge for groups smaller than four. Full payment has to be wired (no credit cards) to the government before a visa will be issued. This keeps the tourists on a relatively short leash, and there are consequently no problems with backpackers or bums. As a precaution against the H1N1 virus, we had to have our temperatures taken before we were allowed to pass through Customs and Immigration.

While a relatively poor developing country in economic terms, Bhutan's former King has instituted a formal policy of "Gross National Happiness." Democracy is budding, but the King is keeping tight limits on things perceived to dilute the culture. Tobacco is outlawed. People must wear formal dress in Government buildings and schools. Men wear a wrap-around dress called a Gho with formal dark knee socks. Cheryl knows the legend of the Scotsmen and wondered what our guide, Ngawang, wore under his.





Weaving, wood carving and painting are taught in government-run trade schools. There has been a Bhutanese TV station since 2000, and a few people are starting to get satellite dishes. The King has prohibited MTV out of fear for the damage that it will inflict on the country's youth. Bhutan does not have a single traffic light, but cell phones are popping up in places that never had wired service. An application for a Starbucks franchise was denied, but we suggest that His Majesty reconsider. The tea that was served at every meal was not to our taste, and locals won't be able to afford \$3 cups of coffee with an average daily income of \$9; less for farmers. The banks would not accept foreign ATM cards. To make matters worse, only Visa cards are accepted in stores, and we carry only MasterCard. The King might want to look into this as a way to increase foreign trade. Lack of credit and ATM availability kept Cheryll's souvenir shopping in check. On second thought, maybe strict financial controls aren't such a bad idea after all. One interesting facet of Gross National Happiness is that there are no lawyers in Bhutan. There is little crime, and people are expected to argue civil cases personally before a panel of judges.





The food was rather.... uhh....ummm.... consistent. Yeah, that's it! Consistent. At each meal we were served bountiful portions of rice and vegetables with a little mystery meat or potatoes. Bhutanese spice up their diet with large portions of hot red and green chilies. Tourists are only given a side of chilies on request. The King may wish to reconsider his stance forbidding McDonalds. One paradox is that Buddhists won't kill animals, but are happy to eat meat from animals slaughtered in India and shipped across the border. We had toast with yak butter at breakfast, yak cheese at lunch, and yak jerky for Thanksgiving dinner. Mmmmmm ..... Yakalicious! We washed down several meals with Druk 11,000 beer. We're not sure what the 11,000 stands for, but it tastes good and it packs a big punch with 8% alcohol. The King may want to look into exporting this stuff to America. He could sell it as the new trendy malt liquor. All it needs is to be repackaged into a 40 ounce bottle and renamed after a firearm. How about AK-47,000?



We had been warned to bring motion sickness tablets for the hours and hours of travel on the bumpy and windy mountain roads. We had a good driver named Karma and a Korean SUV, but only averaged 20 mph in the difficult conditions on the narrow roads. We passed many road work camps housing Indian laborers. For \$3/day, the workers mix asphalt by hand over wood fires and break river rocks into gravel with sledge hammers. Several women were performing this labor with babies strapped to their backs. Apparently the Gross National Happiness Policy does not apply to Indian "Guest Workers."



Bhutan is overridden by hundreds of thousands of stray dogs. In some hotels they kept us up at night with their incessant barking. We dodged dogs on the roads. We dodged their droppings everywhere with less than total success. We added a sterilization program to our suggestion list, but later learned that the King has already done this. Last year, the Humane Society donated six vans with a staff that is rounding up the dogs and vaccinating and neutering them. Nice, but it'll be a long time for this program to have a measurable effect.

We enjoyed several strenuous day hikes in the mountains and valleys. The most arduous was to a 16,000 foot peak after which we enjoyed an elaborate picnic in a field. Many of the hills and mountain passes are draped with colorful prayer flags. Our guide produced a large, sharp knife out of the front pouch of his Gho and carved walking sticks for us in the steep sections. We never knew that he had it hidden in his pouch. The King has prohibited technical climbing on the country's tallest peaks. Cheryll found the answer to her original question when a puff of wind caught Ngawang's Gho; blue plaid boxers. Archery is the Bhutanese national sport and on several hikes we came across archery ranges. Groups of men spend all day shooting at a small target over 150 yards away. Singing and dancing is required to celebrate every hit. A fifth grade boy joined us during his two-mile walk home from school. He had just finished his final exams. Rich asked about the test and he reached into the pouch of his Gho and produced it for us. It was about science and written in English. We were impressed with how well he did with the difficult questions. We gave him a baseball cap as a reward for a job well done.

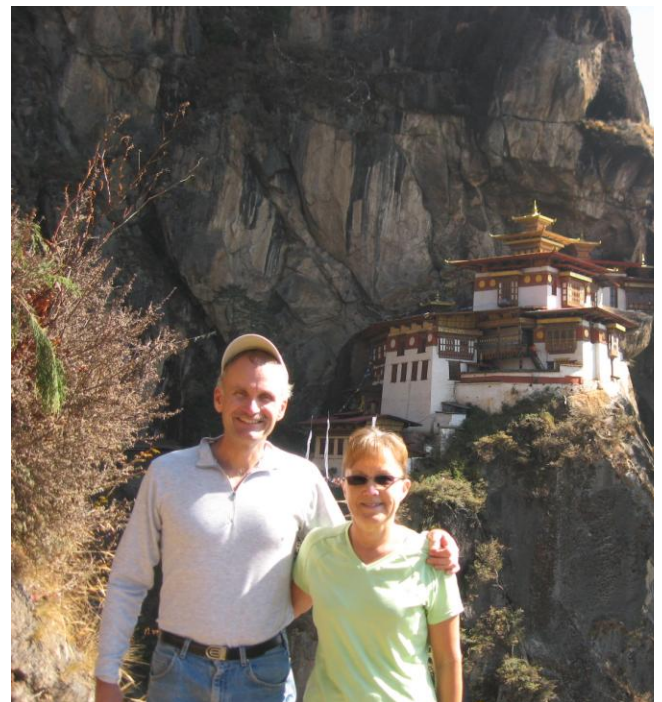


Many of the fields are lined with marijuana plants. It grows like a weed in Bhutan. At first we thought that we had come across the source of Gross National Happiness, but abandoned that theory when we found few people with red eyes or in the stores buying munchies. We did get a very strong whiff when we passed a field being burned at the end of the growing season.



What our hotels lacked in Western amenities was made up for with excellent service. The waiters were very efficient and attentive. Two hotels used wood stoves for heat, and the staff lit fires prior to our arrival. At one lodge, the “bellman” went to fill hot water bottles to warm our beds for the night. The wood stoves made the electric space heaters at the other hotels seem downright luxurious.

There were many Dzongs (fortresses) above the towns. We climbed to dozens of remote monasteries and nunneries high on the hills. The Bhutanese are devout Buddhists and the monks are very much revered and supported. Someone had donated a Detroit Red Wings sweatshirt to one who wore it with pride, but likely little understanding of its meaning. Our guide agreed to have one monk’s cell phone recharged when we returned to the city from his secluded dwelling perched precariously on the edge of a cliff. During each visit, we made a small donation, and then a monk poured saffron water onto our hands. At one monastery there was a young monk who tapped each visitor on the forehead with a large wooden phallus as he chanted a fertility prayer. We hope that it doesn’t work for us. We bought some prayer flags to hang up over our bed just to be sure. The outside of many of the houses in this area were decorated with large graphic paintings depicting male climax. The King may wish to have this “fountainous” artwork toned down a bit; particularly since his government is distributing free condoms in an effort to reduce STD’s. On the other hand, celebrating and honoring manhood may dissuade people from traveling to Bangkok for a \$1625 plastic surgery.



The King has opened himself up somewhat, and has a Facebook fan page. The people think that he is sooooo cool! One final suggestion is that he marry a supermodel and/or a hot American actress. We hear that Lindsay Lohan is available. If she hears that marijuana is growing wild by the roadsides, she'll be sure to sign on. This will really put the country on the map. The paparazzi will be all over the place, and no one will ever again have to answer the question; "Just where is Bhutan?" Joking aside, he has a difficult task to maintain the culture and tradition of Gross National Happiness during a period when the people gain greater exposure to the outside world through television and the internet. We wish him well.

On our flight back to Bangkok the passenger announcements all started with; "Your Majesty, ladies and gentlemen....." This was amazing. The King was aboard! We had stumbled onto the Bhutanese version of Air Force One. The flight attendants were keeping the curtain between us and business class tightly closed. We started scheming for a way to make it up front and deliver our suggestions to the King personally. We were a little let down when we learned that it was not the King aboard, but rather the Queen Mother. This is even less auspicious when you consider that there are arguably five Queen Mothers; the King's mother, his grandmother (she is the former King's mother), as well as his father's other three wives who are certainly his aunts, but could also be considered his step-mothers. We're not sure which of them was aboard the plane. We never spoke to her, so it looks like His Majesty will only be able to read our suggestions at <http://www.odendahls.com/>. Stay tuned.





