

CLIFF NOTES

The Paro Taktsang Monastery, also known as the Tiger's Nest, was built in the 17th century on a cliffside about 10,000 feet over Paro Valley.

THE HEIGHTS OF HAPPINESS

Does the Kingdom of Happiness live up to its name? We take a high-altitude tour through Bhutan's monasteries, spas and villages to find out.

BY ADAM H. GRAHAM

“Is it *really* happier here?” I wonder just before touching down at Paro Airport, a short landing strip wedged into the basin of a remote Himalayan valley.

I descend into the eternal folds of granite that make up Bhutan, one of the last remaining Buddhist kingdoms.

Over the next two weeks, I hope to have the answer revealed to me while hiking to remote Himalayan-perched monasteries, visiting cloistered *dzongs* (Bhutan's hybrid of government administrative centers and monasteries), and learning more about the mindfulness that's earned Bhutan its nickname: the Kingdom of Happiness.

In 1972, a policy of GNH (Gross National Happiness) was instituted by the fourth and very beloved Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in order to emphasize the value of happiness over GDP. The 60-year-old is responsible for most of Bhutan's modern reforms, but has since abdicated the throne in favor of his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. Today, the retired monarch can be seen cycling the pine-choked foothills of Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, perhaps serving as a living model of his own policy. And since the country opened to tourism in 1974, and then allowed private sector investment in the 1990s, visitors can experience this happiness, too.

While interested in exploring this uniquely Bhutanese claim to fame, I confess to a streak of skepticism. It's not that I don't believe Bhutan is happy but, rather, I question whether a country can quantify happiness. And frankly, I'm also here to experience some serious short-term pleasure: a stay at five different Aman properties, each with its own flavor and mix of mile-high modernism, tranquil spas and, in some, traditional hot stone baths (a mixture of river water and

wormwood touted for its medicinal properties). After all, the ancient name for Bhutan is The Land of Medicinal Herbs and its traditional medicine stretches back to seventh-century Tibet, with elements borrowed from ancient Indian Ayurvedic techniques. Surely, this too is a source of its happiness.

To assist me, I hire a Bhutanese guide, Namgay, a stout 30-year-old new dad with a love of competitive archery, Bhutan's national sport. (Guides aren't just a plus here, they're a necessity – see sidebar.)

First stop, the famed Tiger's Nest Monastery. The 100-minute hike up the wide, switchback trail is steep and at times difficult, requiring a few breathers along the way. The trail passes tattered prayer flags, bright mountain wildflowers and dogwood berry trees strewn with a lichen called “old man's beard.”

“It never gets old,” says Namgay wistfully, when we reach the first view of the 17th-century cliff-perched monastery, known locally as Taktsang Palphug. It's every bit as breathtaking in real life as it is in photos, and its origins only add to the mystique: The temple complex was built around a former tiger's lair, and legend has it that Rinpoche, an eighth-century Buddhist guru, flew there from Tibet on the back of a tigress before meditating for three years in the caves. The final stretch of trail to it crosses a bridge that spans a waterfall adorned with prayer flags flapping in the misty wind. This spot, where nature intersects with human-made forces, can choke up the most hardened of world travelers, myself included.

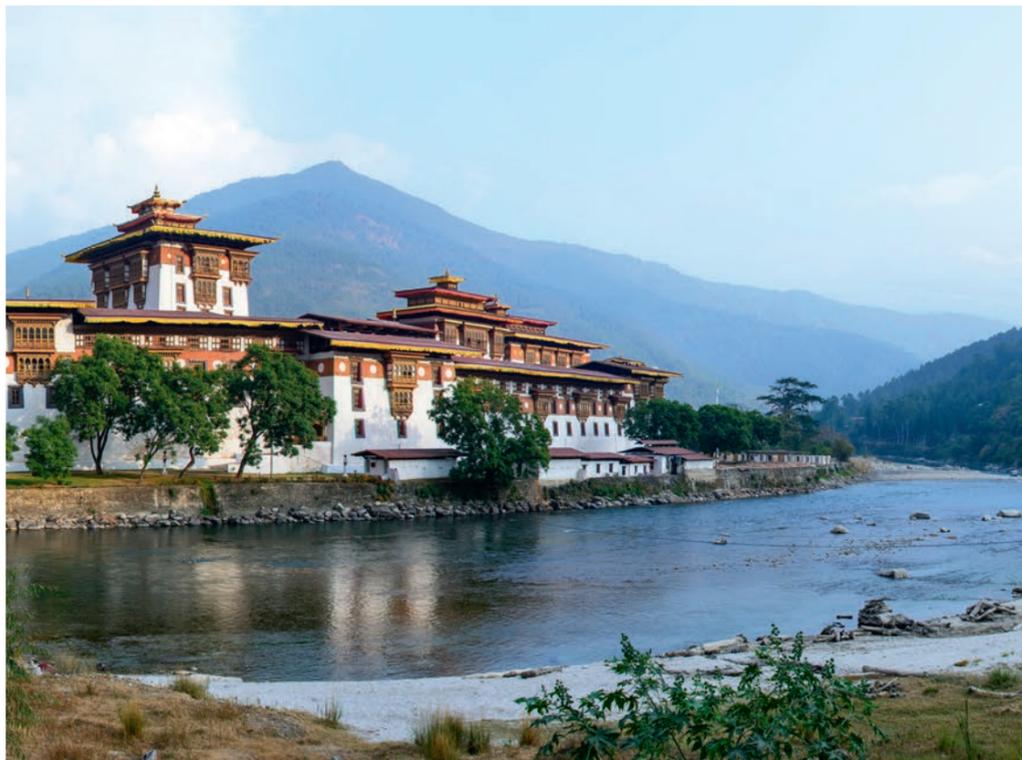
Like all Bhutan's sacred sites, photography inside the monastery itself is strictly forbidden. With phones and cameras put away, visitors can interact with the monks and admire with the naked eye the ornate yak-butter sculptures that adorn its three separate temples. I sit with the monks during meditation and ask them to bless my copy of the *Dhammapada*, a collection of the Buddha's sayings. They do so by reciting the sanskrit mantra *om mani padme hum* several times before giving me holy water for drinking and washing my face. Like many travelers exiting the temple, a stillness washes over me. It's not happiness I feel, not sadness, but something else in the middle. Indeed, sustaining this “middle way” is one of the primary tenets of Buddhism and it's said to be a great reliever of suffering.

While there may be a melancholia and feelings of transcendence at Tiger's Nest, I come down the mountain with a sense of optimism that I didn't have going up. Maybe it is the accomplishment of finishing the hike, or the sacredness of the temple, but I feel my skepticism ebbing.

Later that night, I settle in at Amankora Paro, with its rammed-earth walls and traditional *bukhari* woodstoves. I eat dinner with a Korean-American couple and we exchange Tiger's Nest stories over pumpkin bruschetta and blueberry ice cream, laughing as we admit that we only pretended to drink the holy water, unsure of its origin. >



IN RESIDENCE
Buddhist monks at the Punakha Dzong in the country's ancient capital; the "Palace of Great Happiness" is the monks' official winter residence.



Back in my room, a fire has been lit and a bath drawn in my absence, so I slip into the silky almond-scented hot water while the pinecones and oak snap and crackle in the stove.

Namgay picks me up early the next morning and we set off for Thimphu, Bhutan's capital. The spectacular drive hugs the sapphire blue Paro Chu river, showcasing scenes of red chili peppers drying atop tin roofs and endless rocky hillsides dotted with ornate woodwork architecture. At the confluence of the Paro and Thimphu rivers we pass stupas, mound-shaped reliquaries that serve as meditative places, and hundreds of tiny ornate *tsa-tsas* – small votive objects the size of jam jars, made with cremation ash – wedged into rocky crevices along the roadside. Both are said to ward off bad spirits and maintain a sense of peace.

While Thimphu might be a happy city by most urban standards, I get the sense that not *everyone* there lives in bliss. There are signs of poverty and growing pains found throughout the developing world. Labor camps for Indian migrants line the roads, suggesting that Bhutan is not a sealed bubble. Perhaps calculating Gross National Happiness is more complicated than it seems.

Thimphu's Amankora property is circled by blue pines and inspired by the architecture of the dzongs, with high, whitewashed flagstone walls, soaring ceilings and wood-paneled interiors. It is near the royal family's palace, and the capital is so small – at 91,000 residents – that run-ins with royalty are not unusual. On my first evening, I am alone in the hotel when suddenly a flurry of staff rushes past me to ready the spa for the Queen Mother, a frequent guest. Later that night, I hit the town with another Bhutanese guide, Lotay, who takes me on a

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tour of Thimphu's homegrown music scene, finishing up at Mojo Park where we bump into the dashing young Prince Jigyel. Perhaps the down-to-earth royals help keep people content?

My non-royal schedule resumes the next day as we set off for a three-hour roadtrip to Punakha. The ancient capital is home to the mighty Punakha Dzong, the official winter residence of Thimphu's monks, due to its warmer climate and lower altitude. The road to it from Thimphu climbs up to the Tibetan refugee village of Hongtsho before topping off at the 10,170-foot (3,100-meter) high Dochula Pass, where the ratcheting crank of prayer wheels and twinkling bells fill the cold rarefied air.

The pass is marked with 108 stupas, commissioned by the Queen Mother to memorialize the soldiers killed in Bhutan's 2003 war with Assam rebels from India. It is also the site of Druk Wangyal Lhakhang, a temple built in 2008 to celebrate 100 years of Bhutanese monarchy. The temple is home to some wonderfully modern paintings of the Bhutanese royalty dressed >



INNER WORKINGS
(From top) Amankora Thimphu lodge's exterior is inspired by dzong architecture; a suite and staff member at Amankora Paro.



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LOCAL FLAVOR
(This page, from top) Live *drangyen* (lute) music at Amankora Punakha; *Ngaja*, a sweet milk tea, is part of the traditional Bhutanese morning ritual; (opposite) the view from the Amankora Paro includes mountains and pine forests.

as floating deities and sporting uplifting smiles that could give the Mona Lisa a run for her money.

A three-hour drive takes us to Gangtey, a marsh-soaked plateau nestled in a glacial valley on the sunny western slopes of Bhutan's Black Mountains. Lording over the treeless valley is the imposing, 17th-century cloistered Gangtey Monastery, where Buddhist monks in burgundy *gho* robes meditate and play *dungchen* – brass trumpets used during ceremonies. The monastery closes for the winter and most of its monks move to the winter capital of Punakha. When they do, Gangtey's other trumpeting residents arrive: migrating black-necked cranes. The endangered birds hold a sacred place in the hearts of locals, as symbols of peace and longevity whose haunting calls signal the arrival of winter.

That night at Amankora Gangtey, I'm led by a staff member to a source of happiness hidden in plain view: In a mountain meadow planted with beetroot and potatoes, a rustic stone shed has been converted into a hot stone bath. Inside, a dozen votive candles flicker from wall mounts and an ornate bell cast with Tibetan script sits on a table next to the steamy tub. I'm told to ring it once I'm settled in. With one strike, the shed's bamboo doors open to reveal the deep valley below me and the mist-strewn 17th-century Gangtey Monastery. During my sublime and serene 40-minute soak, I listen to the black-necked cranes' calls bleed into the wails of the *dungchen* horn. I let my mind return to the prayer flags fluttering beside the Tiger's Nest Monastery waterfall and to Thimphu, and take the time to meditate yet again on what it means to be happy.



The next morning, Namgay and I hike to the Black-Necked Crane Visitor Center armed with binoculars. "Every winter when the cranes return, they circle the monastery three times before landing," says Namgay, solemnly, watching the birds. "The monks believe they are the reincarnated souls of former lamas – the high priests of Buddhism – and that they come home to pay homage to the beloved monastery of Gangtey Gumpa. So seeing them is a reminder of what home is. And home is happiness."

Just like that, I get it. I watch Namgay watching the birds, and see the pleasure wash across his big round face. To the Bhutanese, the love of home *equals* happiness. I think of my own home, and smile. ■

Guides

Bhutan's daily visa requires that all travelers (except citizens of India, Bangladesh and the Maldives) hire and travel with a Bhutanese guide at all times. Audley is an upscale tour agency that offers bespoke itineraries to Bhutan's spas and more rugged treks to its far-flung monasteries and convents. audleytravel.com

Bridge to Bhutan is a locally established agency that emphasizes Bhutan's sustainable projects and cultural tours. bridgetobhutan.com



SENSE OF PLACE

(From top) A Bhutanese artist creates a traditional divinity painting; Amankora Paro's stone baths are heated by fragrant *bukhari* woodstoves.



Hotels

Amankora is a network of five different Aman properties scattered across the mountainous kingdom of Bhutan with a common design theme including terrazzo tubs and traditional *bukhari* – woodstoves stuffed with local oak and pinecones. The modern 24-suite Amankora Paro boasts a library, spa with sauna, hot stone baths and yoga area. The 16 *dzong*-inspired suites at Amankora Thimphu feature high rammed-earth walls. Adjacent to the royal palace, the property has a spa and an outdoor dining deck surrounded by fragrant blue pines. The five-suite Amankora Gangtey, the smallest and most remote of the properties, sits on a cliff overlooking the bowl-shaped Gangtey Valley. Don't miss its traditional hot stone bath. aman.com