BHUTAN - WHY NOT?

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Brief apology

Dear Reader,

If you wish to read a learned article about a little-known Himalayan culture, its people, history and religion, you may stop here. Also stop here if you want to add to your already in-depth understanding of the Kingdom of Bhutan. There is not much on the following pages that can be described as “in depth.” Moreover, for a general introduction you should read instead the guidebooks that most people seem to refer to, namely the Lonely Planet guide and the Inside Pocket Guide; these were valuable sources of reference during my visit.

What does follow is an account of the observations and recollections of one member of the 27-person Royal Asiatic Society study tour of Bhutan, that took place from 8 to 19 February 2002. All aspects of this logistically demanding tour were organised most ably by Dr Brian Shaw and his wife Felicity. I must record here my thanks to Brian for his help in ensuring that at least the factual content of this narrative is not too far off the mark. All other observations are mine alone, and indeed might be at variance with those of other members of the tour.

The source of the Nile

The first announcement for the RAS trip to Bhutan appeared in the Society’s newsletter in about September 2001. I looked at it and thought that I would think about it. After all, where was it? What was it? Why go there? Sure - I had heard of it and I knew that it was somewhere like Nepal, Assam or Sikkim. The adventurer in me said that I had to go, simply because I had not been there before. So I thought I would do some reading about it - and then decide. Inevitably I did not quite get round to doing the reading. I looked at a few websites, and found myself side-tracked into some antiquarian book dealers’ offerings, imagining what it must have been like to set out to discover the source of the Nile. At least I knew that the Nile did not originate in
Bhutan, so when the absolute deadline for bookings came in December, I simply said ‘Why not?’ and sent in my cheque.

Unfortunately my favourite travelling companion (my wife) was not able to come with me. The start of the RAS trip coincided exactly with the start of her parents’ six-week visit to Hong Kong to stay with us. I honestly cannot recall which booking happened first, theirs or mine - honestly.

**Mountains of reading**

I was able to do some rather brief research before the journey, although I was not able to do justice to Brian Shaw’s three-page bibliography. (With much relief, I found out later that I was not the only one to have failed in this regard.) I was able to discover that this “tiny” mountain kingdom is not so tiny after all, being about the size of Switzerland. Until unification in the 17th century, Bhutan was a series of independent valley-states. Initially influenced by its much larger northern neighbour, Tibet, what is now Bhutan became Buddhist in the 8th century and is now perhaps the staunchest of Buddhist countries. The country was never part of British India, but following a clash in the mid-19th century relations with the Raj warmed and these continued after India’s independence. Even so, Bhutan remained for most purposes cut off from the rest of the world until the 1970s, not least due to its remote location in the eastern Himalayas.

It is almost inevitable, if travelling to Bhutan from Hong Kong, to route via an overnight stopover in Bangkok. But this can hardly be considered a hardship. By the time our evening flight had delivered us to Don Muang airport, and thence to the Windsor Hotel, it was well past midnight and bedtime, although I did hear some enthusiasm being expressed for a neighbouring beer garden.

I awoke the following morning just in time to catch the tail end of breakfast, and then repaired to the room to really sort out the bags I had packed in a bit of a hurry. The rest of the day was spent looking for photographic opportunities along Bangkok’s klongs (canals), and trying hard not to think of the 4.15 a.m. wake up call the following morning.
Closers to the ground

The call came, loud and clear, and 30 minutes later we were off, bound for the BAe 146 aircraft, a reassuring piece of British engineering, and the flight to Paro. Some Bangkok to Paro flights route via Dhaka in Bangladesh, but most call in at Calcutta. When, during my less-than-extensive research, I had seen ‘Kolkata’ on the itinerary I presumed it was somewhere in Bhutan. But like Mumbai and Yangon, Kolkata is modern-speak for an old familiar name. I wonder if it will catch on?

The leg from Calcutta (obviously didn’t catch on with me) to Paro was just over an hour - long enough to serve a boxed meal and deliver a warning to all passengers. The pilot came on the overhead speakers to tell us that the approach to Paro is quite unusual. ‘Do not worry if you appear to be closer to the ground than normal. This is quite standard.’

I thought to myself: ‘This chap doesn’t realise that he is dealing with 27 people who have done many landings at Kai Tak.’ But, loyal as I am to all things Hong Kong, I have to say that the approach to Paro is a bit more hairy than Kai Tak used to be. It is rather like flying into Happy Valley as far as the foot of Blue Pool Road, doing a u-turn, and then landing on Queen’s Road East using a runway about one-quarter as wide as Kai Tak’s was.

On the walk across the tarmac to the terminal building I was able to talk to the pilot and congratulate him on such a challenging landing. He told me that he had been with his country’s national carrier, Druk Air, for thirteen years, always flying 146s. In fact he started on them after only 250 hours experience. 250 hours! Even I have 350 hours of flying experience - but I am very happy to leave such interesting landings to him, full load of passengers and fuel and all.

A pleasant surprise

The temperature on arrival was a pleasant surprise. On the plane, the pilot had initially reported - 5°C, and then -2°C and just before landing +5°C. Obviously things warm up pretty quickly when the sun comes out. And it was certainly out when we arrived - clear blue skies and what felt like 15-20°C, although noticeably cooler in the shade.
On arrival, I was immediately impressed also by the warmth of the Bhutanese people. Our guide came up to me and shook my hand in welcome. The 27 of us piled into the minibuses, and were presented with a white silk scarf each, a traditional Bhutanese form of welcome. The scarf proved to be a very welcome first line of defence against later chilly winds.

The road from the airport is reputed to be the longest stretch of straight road in the country. It has no choice, considering that it shares the narrow flat valley with a river and the runway. Half way up the winding road that took us from the valley floor to the hotel, I was rather touched to see the Department of Civil Aviation building - or perhaps "cottage" would be a more appropriate description. This delightfully small, two-storey wooden structure, beautifully decorated with traditional patterns, had a commanding view over the entire airstrip. One could imagine Mr Director looking at his pocket watch with pride as KB125 made another greaser of a landing exactly on schedule.

Into the Interior

I have spent many holidays in the Appian Alps in northern Tuscany, and my first impression of Bhutan's scenery was that it is all very similar, but more so. The mountains are bigger, the valleys steeper and wider, the light brighter. Comments also abounded comparing the scenery with Switzerland - mountains, neat and tidy, uniform. It soon struck us that the houses were all from the same design catalogue. Later we found out that this was in fact the case and was due to government decree - there is a standard traditional design that must be followed. And followed it is. At 7,200 feet above sea level, the air at Paro was very fresh, and being a mile and a half nearer the sun, the ultra violet was very much in evidence. (I thanked my wife for reminding me to pack my sunscreen.) Not many of us had been for long at such an attitude and there was much debate about altitude sickness. Would we all fall over or feel nauseous?

The minibuses quickly delivered us to the Olathang Hotel, about ten minutes from the airport. First impression was that it looked a bit like a monastery, but that was a function of the required building style making everything look somewhat religious. The reception desk had above it a large framed photograph of a good-looking man wearing
what appeared to be a dressing gown. The hotel’s general manager? Employee of the month? I am ashamed to say that I later found out that this was none other than His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, an active monarch-of-the-people who is held in very high regard by all Bhutanese.

After being allocated a room key, it was more than I could manage to take my small case from the young lady who had been detailed to take it to my room, so I followed behind feeling a bit embarrassed. The “room” turned out to be a separate bungalow in the spacious and wooded grounds, replete with a twin bedroom, a lounge with triple sofa and twin armchairs, a dressing room and a bathroom. Having learnt from my wife, the first thing I checked was the bathroom. I wonder if the hot water is hot? YIKES!! Immediately, scalding hot water gushed out of the tap at high pressure. Very welcome, given that the bathroom otherwise felt like a refrigerator. Two electric heaters served to make the bedroom very cosy - I even had to turn one of them off.

**Will two rolls be enough?**

Brian’s very comprehensive briefing notes included the advice that we bring two rolls of lavatory paper. My inspection of the bathroom revealed that this advice was very sound. The roll next to the loo had about a quarter inch thickness of paper remaining. There was a new roll, still wrapped in its cellophane wrapper, straight from the factory, but even this only had half an inch. I wondered at all the industry and effort that went into manufacturing and marketing rolls of lavatory paper with such limited reserves, in a country where chillies were a staple. I was worried!

I left the room, carefully turning off each of the two light switches in the bathroom, the four in the dressing room and the eleven in the bedroom/living room (all being controlled by a majestic GEC fuse box containing equal amounts of ceramics and electrics) and headed for lunch.

I am a very conservative eater, and my first exposure to Bhutanese food was approached very much with Brian’s ‘two rolls’ advice on my mind. But lunch could not have been more pleasant or more welcome.
Spread before us was a buffet of rice and vegetables, fish, veal and, for those who wanted them, green chillies. All this was followed by strawberry pancakes. To help lunch go down we had half an hour to wander round the grounds. There was a cool breeze singing in the pine trees. Everything was beautifully fresh and clean. Numerous little sitting-out areas with wooden seats and benches made it possible just to sit and enjoy it all, accompanied by the distant sounds of an off-duty member of the hotel’s staff sitting under a tree and strumming a guitar.

A cash-less society

Before setting off, we were told that we could change money at the hotel, but there was none to be had as we had to wait for the man to come up from Paro with the cash. There were post cards and local handicrafts in the hotel shop, but this was well and truly locked with a large pad-lock. Perhaps the absence of local money was not going to be a problem if this stronghold masquerading as a shop was anything to go by.

We all piled on to the minibuses with much discussion about what to wear. Sure enough it was warm in the sunshine, but in the shade was an entirely different matter. Dozens of traditionally dressed staff were standing around with big smiles to see us off. It looked as though they were ready to stand down as soon as the two small buses and their contents disappeared for an explore.

Until the 1970’s Bhutan had been more or less closed to outside influences. Even so, the spread of ‘western civilisation’ has not had a very pronounced effect in the last 20-30 years. Similar to pre-Meiji Japan, there are rules on a number of aspects of everyday life, including what Bhutanese people must wear - the go. I heard that for this reason, Bhutan is a popular holiday destination for Japanese; it reminds them a bit about their past. As I noted earlier, there are other regulations about building styles - they all have to follow the same traditional pattern. This makes for a very attractive and orderly appearance, but it also means that when a 16th century monastery is pointed out to us it does not look particularly old; a brand new one would look pretty much the same.

Our first destination as a group of tourists was the National Museum
in Paro. This is housed in the circular Ta Dzong, a former watchtower built in 1649 by the first governor of the Paro valley to safeguard the main dzong from inroads by Tibetans. The museum is well stocked with a great deal of Buddhist artefacts, including a number of 'miraculous footprints;' a whole floor dedicated to postage stamps, for which Bhutan is famous in the world of philately; copper teapots and spittoons, the latter being for the use of betel-chewing monks during religious ceremonies; and costumes and coins. Having been frustrated at the hotel, I still wanted to buy some post cards. I saw some, together with other articles for sale, in a glass cabinet that was being guarded by three members of the museum staff. However, I was told that I could not buy any as nobody had the key to the cabinet. It transpired that this was only to be used by the official responsible for collecting the cash, and she had been taken ill and gone to distant Thimpu for treatment. The poor thing could have derived some comfort from the knowledge that her three minions were guarding her stock-in-trade against all comers - especially those that wanted to buy things.

**Perfect posers**

From the museum there were spectacular views up and down the Paro valley from its floor at 7,000 feet to the surrounding mountains, some of which, snow-capped, reached 17,000 feet. And it was up the valley we went to look at the ruined Drukgyel Dzong. Originally built in 1647 but destroyed by fire in 1951, this was one of the many fortresses designed to counter the frequent Tibetan invasions. Our visit included a wander round the village, where we found for the first of countless times to come how willing the people are to be photographed. It almost seemed as though they automatically adopted perfect poses and groupings, even very small children, because they knew that better photographs would be the result. I regretted later, when my films were developed in Hong Kong, that they could not also advise on apertures and exposures. Maybe this will come.

With a glance up to the sharp and snowy peak of Jhomolhari, Bhutan’s second-highest peak at over 24,000 feet, we set off again down the valley for afternoon tea and bickies at the Eye of the Tiger Lodge. Sipping our refreshments we could gaze over the valley at the famous Taktsang Monastery (the Tiger’s Nest), perched 3,000 feet above the road up a cliff face, and be thankful that we did not quite have the time
to climb up to it.

Being an official Royal Asiatic Society group, coupled with Brian’s immense knowledge, experience and influence, had a number of advantages. One of these was being able to go inside the Kyichu Lhakhang, a 7th century temple, noting the obvious Buddhist nature of the place but also the significant differences from the Chinese temples that most of us were more used to. It seemed to be much calmer, generally less busy.

The high valley walls meant that the sun left us at about 4:45 p.m. and so photography became a bit of a challenge. But once again the children and older people were very accommodating about being flashed at, or waiting that much longer for correct exposures and shutter speeds to be estimated.

By the time we hit the shops of Paro High Street it was completely dark. On our way up the valley we had seen the orderly row of shops, about 30 or 40 of them, all looking the same but all looking inviting nonetheless. What was a surprise, however, was that they were virtually all the same - well stocked with the goods they had to offer, but I couldn’t help wondering why one would use any one of them as opposed to another. As I still wanted my post cards, I was delighted to find a store that stocked them. I also wanted a small book to write notes in, so I asked the young lady behind the counter, very slowly and clearly: ‘Do you have a writing book?’ I was most surprised when she answered in perfect and accent-free English: ‘You mean a note book? What about this one here?’ I did not want to sound patronising, but I had to ask her if everybody in Paro spoke English as well as she did, to which she replied: ‘No, most of them are uneducated.’ Well, there you have it.

I was very ready for dinner, after which, on returning to the hotel, I was delighted to find out that some kind soul had already turned on the electric heater in my room.

Ha Haa

The destination for the second day was Haa, the principal town in Bhutan’s western Haa Province. The road from Paro would take us
over the Chelay-la pass, 12,400 feet, a journey of about one-and-a-half hours. But it would not take us there today. Black ice was reported at the top, and so an alternative route was chosen to the south, following the river valleys. This took four hours, but it did offer one wonderful vista offer another. Again, wherever we stopped, villagers were only too pleased to be photographed by these visitors from outer space, sometimes happily pausing in their backbreaking toil to pose for us.

On the outskirts of Haa we stopped for one of our frequent comfort stops. (One big advantage in travelling with a group whose average age is a tad over 21 is that there are many such stops.) There was a path down to the river, which we could see led to a large flat area, then back to the road about half-a-mile further on. Some of us took this, looking for photo opportunities. One such was a tiny mini-van (about a quarter the size of ours), which was surrounded by a cluster of red-robed monks. On closer inspection, we found that another monk was in the driving seat ‘learning driving,’ as we were told. They too were more than happy to pose for a photograph. By way of thanks, one particularly English member of our group who was with me at the time, said in his pukka accent: ‘Garden chair’. I was quiet for a while, but I had to ask him why on earth..... In fact what he was saying was the closest he could get to the Bhutanese word for ‘thank you’ (kadinche).

Just then, a particularly bizarre sight met our eyes. On a tarmac helicopter-landing pad at the side of the river, a long table had been set out with 20 or 30 actual garden chairs. Must have been waiting for a reception for some visiting dignitary shortly to arrive by helicopter. A bit over the top, I thought to myself.

Haa is Bhutan’s main army base and was closed to visitors until December 2001. The Bhutanese Army, some 17,000 strong, is a regular army (there is no national service) and is trained and supplied by the Indian Army. In Haa township the army was much in evidence, the many red corrugated iron roofs signifying buildings of military occupation. There was even a small putting green, presumably for the use of officers only.

Also much in evidence were Indians, and not just the military sort. There must be thousands of Indian contract labourers, living often in small huts by the roadside and doing such jobs as clearing landslips
and rock falls. We saw one such team, hard at it, with a pot-bellied sergeant doing the important job of watching them.

A dignified repast

On the far side of Haa we took the road up the valley to inspect a small village, Nagyel - we were even able to go inside one of the houses and poke around. Everything was, of course, wooden and very solid. But at 9,000 feet we were a bit puffed and in need of lunch - and so headed back down the valley again. Very soon we realised that we ourselves were the visiting dignitaries for whom the large table and chairs had been set up. We had not up to now realised, but in addition to our two minibuses and the smaller one for our baggage, there was yet another. This fourth vehicle contained the catering crew of three, who had gone ahead and prepared a splendid al fresco buffet lunch. What a treat! An excellent spread and served most professionally. And not over the top at all, now we realised who the diners were to be.

The second night’s accommodation was waiting for us in the capital city, Thimpu. As that was four hours away we had no time to hang around, but we were able to stop for a treat along the way. This was the Napchong Hadang Monastery, where we found we were just in time for a puja for the water god. This ritual, dating from the 17th century, lasts for three days, the third day involving a long procession through the nearby villages. We were there on the first day, and were lucky enough to enter the temple and see two lines of red-robed monks, sitting cross-legged on the floor facing each other and eating rice from their bowls. At the head of the lines was the master. When he started chanting the rice bowls disappeared under the robes pretty sharpish as all were expected to join in. The older monks, sitting nearer the master, had drums whilst the younger ones had enough to do to try not to stare at 27 members of the Royal Asiatic Society. To one side were two, as it were, oboists and to the other were two, as it might have been, bass horn players. The whole ensemble was absolutely magical, something I had never seen nor heard except on the National Geographic Channel.

The three further hours to Thimpu were spent in happy conversation on the bus, the subjects ranging from Tung Chi Wah’s chances of a second term to African insects that lay their eggs under your toenails. I don’t know how I did it in the face of such intellectual challenge, but I
snoozed for a lot of the way.

Happily, I was awake when we arrived at the Riverview Hotel because there was a large banner on the front of the building, welcoming us to Bhutan and to the hotel. Mobile phones have not yet arrived in Bhutan, and not everywhere has an international dialling service. Thimpu, however, being the country’s capital, offers this service at its major hotels. So I made a quick two-minute call to Hong Kong to report in. Two minutes after that there was a knock on my door. A member of the hotel staff was asking if I would like to pay for my phone call now - US$51! A big chunk of my spending money went, just like that - but what a worthy cause!

Dinner that night was rather special, preceded by a cocktail reception hosted by our local tour company, Etho Metho. There was Bhutanese music, singing and dancing. Like many similar experiences, appreciation of Bhutanese music is an acquired art. It really did seem to me that the musicians misinterpreted our applause, for each time we clapped they appeared to play the same piece again. But I guess that is just my ignorance showing through. I had a long and interesting conversation with Aum Dago Beda, a most impressive lady and the company’s urbane managing director. After dinner there was a thorough and rather complex (for my IQ) briefing from Brian who promised us ‘a full day’ for the morrow. He was not wrong.

A peer through the gate

Day 3, the eve of Losar (the Bhutanese New Year) started with a fairly leisurely 7:00 a.m. breakfast and 8:00 a.m. departure for the Queen Mother’s formal residence. This is set in a very secluded spot up the valley from the capital city. Her estate has a lot of trees in the grounds and a very impressive entrance gate - and that is all we were allowed to see. Usually, tourists were not even able to get as far as the gate, so I suppose we were privileged.

Perhaps one of the most photographed buildings in Bhutan is the Tashichho Dzong, our next destination. This is the seat of government and houses the offices of the majority of government departments. As the King is the head of the government, a role he plays similar to that of the chief executive of a large corporation, a great deal of respect has
to be shown whilst in the vicinity of his head office. Government and other official visitors have to observe a certain dress code - a white shawl has to be draped over the shoulder for male visitors, and a colourful shoulder band for females. We were not allowed past the guard at the beginning of the entrance path, but even so I was asked to take my hat off (one of the very few times that I did).

The Tashichho Dzong is ginormous, and driving straight up to the front door, so to speak, does not give one the opportunity of seeing it in proper perspective. Therefore, we drove up a nearby hill to a vantage point (covered, as most are in Bhutan, by flapping colourful prayer flags) from where we could appreciate how the building dominates its setting.

As soon as this had been appreciated, and photographs taken to prove it, once more it was ‘all aboard.’ No organised tourist trail is complete without a visit to a local industry. Ours was the Jungshi Handmade Paper Factory. Here, in a building about the size of a double garage, half a dozen people were making excellent quality paper from the roots of the daphne plant. I often find myself amazed by the course of human progress. I mean, how on earth, with the thousands of species available in Bhutan, did they find this particular plant, mash up its roots with water, spread the mush on a bamboo sushi roller, dry it and say: ‘Do you know, I think I have found a way of making paper!’

**Spreading the word**

There was an awful lot of paper at our next port of call - the National Library. We had an appointment for 11:00 a.m. to meet the Director, but it turned out that he was busy with a previous visitor. Would we please wait for 20 minutes? Our energetic tour leader is not a man to wait and so the time was usefully filled by visiting the nearby Folk Heritage Museum. This was rather nicely done, being set in a typical farmhouse and containing examples of every sort of rural implement and artefact - perhaps more than had ever before graced the insides of any one farmer’s dwelling.

His other business by now done, Mynak Rinpoche Tulku, the Director of the National Library of Bhutan, was ready to receive us - and he looked every inch the Director. Resplendent in his go he greeted
us and welcomed us, at the same time giving a brief background history of his library. With very limited resources, he has made good use of his previous 20 years experience with the National Museum to bring order and inspiration to his new project. There are a great many books in the Bhutanese language, mainly on Buddhist issues, and an increasing number of books in English and other foreign languages. We increased this number further by presenting the library with a full set of HKBRAS Journals.

Lunch was in the delightfully named Plum’s Cafe, including a slice of their famous apple pie. As shopping never seemed to be far from the thoughts of us Honkies, a visit to Choki Handicrafts and then the National Handicrafts Emporium sated the appetite sufficiently to face the next leg of the journey.

This was to be an enormous climb up to the Dochu-la pass (10,140 feet), being the gateway to the Wangdiphodrang Valley. The weather had been fine on the trip so far, but coming to the top of the pass the clouds descended, and with them came snow. However, as luck would have it, just as the army of RAS photographers took up their positions the clouds lifted, a rainbow appeared and we were offered enormous vistas of Himalayan peaks stretching off to the west. Thereafter the weather became (and stayed) clear as a bell.

That bell rings a name

Did I say bell? Was that a yak approaching? No. In one of the handicraft shops in Thimpu, Brian had bought himself a brass bell. We were to hear that bell a lot in the coming days. It was to become his method of signalling to his unruly brood that it was time to board the buses and move on. So effective was it that when a “real” bell sounded in one of the temples, it had the effect of causing a stampede to the transport by all of us - except, of course, Brian.

From the heights of the pass it was a very long and bouncy ride down to the hotel in Punakha at 4,300 feet. Thankfully, it was an early dinner and early to bed. Orders had already been issued for a 6:15 a.m. wake-up the following day. Even though the guide told us that we were in a sub-tropical climate zone, I had to break open my Chinese Emporium silk long johns before climbing in to bed. (Any man thinking
of acquiring for himself some of these wonderful and effective garments should avoid the very extensive Men’s Underwear Department on the ground floor of the Queen’s Road Central branch; they can only be found in the Ladies’ Underwear Department on the second floor.)

The fourth day (only the fourth ??) did indeed start early and we managed to leave the hotel on time at 7:00 a.m. Our briefing notes told us that there were ‘splendid views’ to be had from the hotel. And that may well have been the case - there were even little balconies attached to each room from which one could have enjoyed the panorama, from the comfort of a garden chair. But we arrived after dark and left fifteen minutes before the sun breached the high tops of the valley wall. When daylight once again returned, we appreciated that ‘sub-tropical’ was not an unfair description. The season seemed to be more advanced here. The paddy fields were green. The early morning mist was hanging low. In a word, it was beautiful. My camera trigger finger was itching, but I would have felt very uncomfortable asking for a photo stop only five minutes into the journey. So I had to sit and admire.

I have never been on a specific photography holiday, but perhaps I should try some day. As it was, I was left reflecting on whether we should simply observe and enjoy, or worry about the best viewpoint from which to preserve the scene for .... Well, for what?

Better late than never

Whilst still reflecting I found that we had arrived at Wangdiphodrang, a delightful little roadside village where all the buildings seemed to be half the normal size. The sun was coming up, the shops were open, and smiling faces were everywhere. Set back from the main row of buildings was an important-looking office - the Flood Warning Station. Not much of a problem up here, I thought to myself, as we had climbed a good 1,000 feet up the valley from Punakha. But of course, the whole point of a warning station is to warn people, and in the case of flooding the people who would most appreciate being warned would be those 1,000 feet further down the hill where the river is. In fact, there was a bridge down there at the bottom of the climb. This one was built in 1962, to replace its predecessor which had been built, so we were told, 1,277 years earlier but which had been destroyed in a flood. At a guess, I would say the warning station had first been

The road continued past fresh rushing rivers and terraced fields. These were either brilliant green or bright yellow, the latter being mustard. Prayer flags flapping on every promontory completed the picturesque scene. Not quite so pretty was the state of the road. This had become very muddy with much evidence of landslides. Coming from Hong Kong we felt a bit uneasy not to see every slope covered in concrete and with a number on it. Perhaps we can teach these Bhutanese a thing or two after all.

At one of our stops some youths were playing the local version of darts. They were using lethal looking missiles almost a foot long which were thrown either at the ground or at a convenient tree or piece of wood. The object seemed to be to get yours as close as possible to the other chap's, and so this necessitated the other chap to stand close to where his had landed. Either they are all very good shots, or they have lightening reactions, or they are very trustful of each other, or perhaps all three - but it looked jolly dangerous to me.

Further up there was a splendid view of snow-capped Jomolhari, last seen in Paro. We came to our own peak at Pele-la pass (11,200 feet'), from where there was a two-hour cruise downhill to Trongsa. About half way from the pass to Trongsa, at Chendebji Chorten, we saw a familiar sight. Right next to this magnificent Nepalese-style stupa, complete with eyes painted at the top, was a long table and 30 garden chairs. Lunch had been prepared. What a privilege to be catered for in what is presumably a sacred site. It felt for all the world like a scene from E.M. Forster when Dr Aziz organised a picnic for Miss Quested at the Malabar Caves. Can you imagine similar treatment for a group of foreigners at, say, Stonehenge? Ha! (or as they say in Bhutan - Haa!).

Into The Hundred Acre Wood

The stunning Trongsa Dzong looked quite close when we first saw it, occupying a commanding position on the opposite side of the valley. However, it was another half-hour before we could find our way round the valley and see it at close quarters. Tea and bickies at Trongsa Norling Hotel were very welcome before setting out on the
last leg of the day’s journey, to Bumthang.

We were now passing into Central Bhutan. The country gets more remote and primitive the further east one goes. The road by now resembled a quarry, thanks to the ambitious road-widening project that has been under way since late 2000. Until then, road vehicles were required to cross into Indian Assam in order to get to the east of Bhutan. This route became less favoured when some Indian militants shot a Bhutanese bus driver in order to prove a point. (Brian did not mention that in the briefing notes!) To compensate for the road, the trees had become particularly impressive. We were now driving through gigantic pine trees, just like in the Hundred Acre Wood. I could easily imagine Pooh Bear falling out of one, had he been there.

About half-an-hour short of Jakar, the capital of Bumthang province, two or three woollen goods shops formed the nucleus of a knitting and weaving industry, so of course we had to stop and boost the local economy. I saw a scarf I particularly liked. The young lady in the shop told me it was 300 ngultrum (about HK$50). I have never really learned the art of bargaining, and so I offered her 250 and a large hopeful smile. She smiled back, but the smile quickly faded. ‘Excuse me’ she said, ‘there’s 50 missing.’ I was so flustered that I tried to pretend that it was all my fault and I quickly gave her the missing note. I hung around a bit to listen to how the hardened shoppers managed to bring the price down, but I had to bow out in the face of such expertise and experience.

We reached the hotel at dusk and found it to be rather like a ski lodge - fresh and inviting on the outside and warm and toasty on the inside, with pine-clad walls. Welcoming tea and bickies were laid out in the communal sitting area of the dining room. The bedroom was also toasty, almost a sauna. The source of the heat was a wood-burning stove. This gave off a terrific amount of heat, but burnt through its contents very quickly. When I returned to the bedroom after dinner it was like stepping into a fridge, so quickly had the heat disappeared. As the electricity supply was rather intermittent, each room was provided with a candle. ‘Ah-ha’ I thought, ‘salvation.’ I lit the candle and held it against a thinnish piece of pine for no less than fifteen shivering minutes, but the blighter wouldn’t light. So I had to climb into bed, wondering about such news headlines as: ‘Careless cigarette
end burns down multi-storey building.’ How? Please tell me how, when I had been trying hard with a naked flame to set light to a piece of wood?

I was not in bed for long. Suddenly I found myself in the middle of the floor, heart a-pounding. About a foot above my head, on the wall, was a “thing” with black legs about two inches long - and it was moving! As I did not have my wife with me I had no alternative but to try and deal with it myself. Rustling up all the courage I could muster, I approached it step by step. I was happy to see that it had not moved any further. Perhaps it was also frightened of me. In fact, it could not have moved at all. In fact, it was three electric wires poking out of the wall - the site of a future reading light. The “movement” was caused by the flicker of the candle. Feeling rather like St. George having at least tried to slay the dragon but rather glad that nobody had been there to witness his attempt, I once more got back into bed.

**Bacon hallucinations**

The following day started with a welcome lie-in - breakfast at 7:30 a.m. This was a buffet of porridge, congee, hard-boiled eggs, toast, honey and coffee. I had to attribute the strong smell of sizzling bacon to the hallucinations I had suffered the previous night.

The first stop was the nearby Jampey Lhakhang, a temple dating from its first construction in 659, making it one of Bhutan’s oldest, although some additions are as recent as the last century. The sun had risen and, yet very cold, the day was warming up. But there was still frost on the ground reflecting in perfect outline the intricate silhouette of the building as the sun cast its shadow. The photographers amongst us were surprised to find, on Day 5 in Bhutan, the first indication of somebody who was unwilling to be photographed. This old gentleman, on his way to his morning devotions, turned out to be the only reluctant subject on the entire trip. Perhaps he himself was a tourist, or maybe he had missed the briefing from the Bhutan Tourist Authority.

Having inspected the temple complex inside and out, we were distracted by loud and continuous shouting coming from a little way below us. A riot? Amongst these charming and friendly people? Or another invasion by the Tibetans, those charming and friendly people
to the north? It turned out to be neither of these, although weapons were certainly involved. What we had heard was an archery contest in progress. Archery is Bhutan’s chief sport (although we were delighted to see some cricket being played once or twice.) The bows are made of two pieces of bamboo, lashed together, and the arrows are also of bamboo, with steel tips and plastics flights. The target is the size of cricket stumps and is aimed at from an incredible 150 yards away, or the equivalent of seven cricket pitches. About twelve young men were competing against each other. I have to say that the scoring system seemed particularly mean. The archer was awarded one point for landing his arrow near the target, and a measly two points if he hit it. I would have thought an audience with the king and a pension for life would have been a more fitting reward. For the 20 minutes or so that I was watching, not one arrow hit the target. Once an archer had shot his arrow, he rushed to the target end of the pitch, where there were already a couple of umpires, the better to see where his fellows’ arrows were landing. ‘See’ is an interesting word in this context. Not one of us visitors could see anything at all until we heard the thunk of an arrow hitting the ground - and this was usually within a foot of the feet of the encouraging crowd of archers. Although not understanding a word of Bhutanese, we knew that the shouts of encouragement were along the lines of: ‘I say, Jack, you were a tad off target there,’ or perhaps some colourful local equivalent.

Surfeited with excitement, and dodging the missiles, we had a half-hour’s walk, over a wobbly bridge, to visit the 17th Century Tamshing Monastery. Although again beautiful, placid and very atmospheric, I was getting to the stage of not being able to tell t’other from which.

How now brown cow?

Back on the ‘bus, the guide pointed out in the adjacent fields a herd of Swiss brown cows. ‘How now?’ we thought. The herd is a present from Switzerland and is used to make cheese. This was available for sale in a nearby shop and was excellent. But we must not eat too much, though, as lunch was waiting for us down the road, courtesy once more of Mr Fresco. The usual long table and chairs had been set up on the grounds of a deserted royal palace, the Wangdichholing Palace. This rather cute but still impressive building dates from 1856 and is the
birthplace of Bhutan’s first king, Ugyen Wangchuk. There were one or two dogs, children playing, old people wondering through, and 27 members of the Royal Asiatic Society being waited on hand and foot. I got a clear impression of what it must have been like to take The Grand Tour in Europe in the 18th Century. I have seen prints and paintings of people wandering at will over sites of enormous classical importance, threading their way between dogs and children playing amongst the ruins, thinking to myself ‘those were the days.’ I imagine that in years to come such sites as the one at which we were to have lunch will be cordoned off and entered only on payment of an admission fee. I felt extraordinarily fortunate and privileged. To complete the picture, two small boys were playing Pooh-sticks from a stone bridge over a very fast stream.

Lunch done, we found the caretaker of the once-royal residence and he led us inside. My first impression was that we had entered Gormenghast Castle; I was to have this impression again a few times in the coming days. Upstairs in the large wooden building, one room led into another and another, until finally, at the end of the link, was the privy, from which there was direct access to the grounds via a narrow chute.

Next to come was Jakar Dzong, or the Watchtower of the White Bird. Set in a commanding position up the mountainside, this looked every inch a watchtower from without. Within, it was rather like going back to a medieval European castle, in which a small village had taken root. Galleried wooden courtyards and stone steps, it would make a fantastic hotel if permission could be gained. Its present uses include a chamber for the District Court. Some of the monks were very young (monklets, perhaps), and one of them asked me in Japanese if I was alright (‘O genki desu-ka?’), reminding us that we were probably not the only tourists to have visited, although we had seen no others.

As the day was getting on, we had to as well, as the next item on the itinerary was the Jakar bazaar. Sadly for the shopaholics amongst us this turned out to be a single shop. Being the second day of New Year all the others were closed. So it was back to the hotel for tea and bickies and a much-needed opportunity to get some laundry done. Then as the light faded, again, so did the electricity, again.
Hitting the highway

Day 6, and the winding road, 1,000 feet up the valley side, that was taking us to the next item on our agenda, and along which no two vehicles could pass without one of them either reversing a few miles or risking an extremely rapid journey to the river, was referred to by the guide as ‘The East-West Highway.’ Along the route we had a brief but stunning view of Gunga Phunsum, at 24,614 feet the highest unclimbed peak in the Himalayas.

At about 11,150 feet Shingkar village was the highest settlement we visited and the most remote. Even our guide had not been before, but needless to say Brian had. With the assistance of some international aid money, each house had been fitted with a small solar panel, but it was not certain whether or not they were working. However, that was the only hint of modernity. The rest was pure Middle Ages England. The village straddled a stream, which flowed through its middle unchecked, running where it would. The water was only diverted at one point, through a narrow wooden channel into a small stone structure, by which time the water was rushing with quite some force. Was it used to fire a generator, or to turn a mill wheel? The very beginnings of a local industrial revolution? No. Of course, the water was being harnessed to turn a prayer wheel. We wandered along the village’s stone and mud paths, between the widely spaced and randomly placed houses. Up here at the back of beyond these people have precious little, but what little they have is precious.

Our itinerant chef, Al Fresco, once again conjured up a good and welcome meal of rice, vegetables, salad and chicken. This time we were watched by a crowd of inquisitive but well-behaved onlookers - a novelty compared to all previous outdoor lunches.

A short distance down the valley was the village of Ura, at about 10,170 feet, special for having its houses huddled more closely together. For warmth? It was not clear. But it had been a feature of all other villages that we had seen that the houses had been widely spaced; unlike their Chinese counterparts, for example, Bhutanese village-dwellers usually like to have a bit of space around them.
Progenitory implements

Hanging from the eaves of most of the houses were crosses of wood, one axis of which appeared to possess a shape that was strangely familiar. We had seen them in other villages, and one of our members asked Brian what they were. With extreme hesitation, Brian said that they were: 'Er ... um ... er ... progenitory implements.' This was greeted with confused and polite silence, until the true meaning dawned on us. 'Oh, you mean they are willies!' In fact, the Bhutanese have quite a fixation with the male sexual organ. We had seen on a great many village houses and other buildings we had passed along the way large (up to five feet long), bright and life-like paintings of them on the walls. Always pointing towards the rafters, sometimes with two lower appendages, occasionally gift-wrapped with a pretty ribbon, usually pink but at times tiger-striped, now and then captured at the point of gushing forth, these representations were becoming ten-a-penny. Local custom has it that they bring fertility to those within.

It had been arranged for us to visit the inside of a village house in Ura. We had seen early on that all Bhutanese village houses were really quite large, and we had been told that they were not made so in order to be able to accommodate large extended families. We were surprised therefore when, going through the main door, which sported a sign saying: 'Wel Come New Year 2000,' we found the insides to be quite pokey. Perhaps it was the dark wood with which the houses are built (at least, it had become dark with smoke and other usage), or perhaps it was the small size of the windows, or maybe the fact that there were inside 27 more people than usual. Nevertheless, as is the Bhutanese custom when visitors arrive, arak and snacks were offered to all. An old lady sitting in one corner weaving a carpet took us all in her stride without dropping a stitch.

Outside again it had become the later part of the afternoon, and the sun was imbuing everything and everyone with a warm glow. I know that the Bhutanese are a very friendly and happy lot, and apart from the one exception noted earlier, are very happy to have their photographs taken. But a question did occur to me: does the Bhutanese Tourism Authority train them to stand around in picturesque little groups of three or four? I think they could not have been better posed had they been transported to a professional studio.
Somewhat of a surprise

A group of 15-year old girls took a very giggly interest in us and were keen to talk to us using their excellent English. They must have been accustomed to the usual banal questions from tourists: Were you born here? Where do you go to school? Do you study English at school? But there was one answer that we were not prepared for. Question: ‘Do you find English easy?’ Answer: ‘Oh, somewhat.’ Somewhat?? Forsooth!

Some of the paths between the houses were cobbled, the trees had been recently pollarded, and the stream was rushing along, reminding us that we had to do likewise. A couple of hours had us back at the hotel, wondering if there would be electricity or would they have to turn on the generator again, with its engine sounding like that of a Spitfire. I don’t know about the others, but I managed to get my wood-burning stove going. I had found the secret! I asked a member of the hotel staff to come and do it for me. This she did in a trice with the aid of some candle wood. This is the natural wood of the candlewood pine, or blue pine, and once lit it flares into life with happy ferocity.

One of the highlights of Day 7, a Saturday and the day we started heading back to Paro, was to be a visit to the remote and beautiful Phubjikha Valley, one of the few sites in Bhutan where the rare black-necked cranes winter over from their summer home on the high Tibetan plateau. We had not been en route for more than five minutes before there was a loud cry from the back of the ‘bus. ‘Cranes!!!’ The engineers amongst us became excited for a moment, but the cranes turned out to be the black-necked variety and they were pecking at the ground not far from the road, stocking up for the long flight home. It is remarkable that these creatures make a long flight every year and always come back to the same spot in Bhutan. But Brian and Felicity do that as well, so it can’t be that remarkable.

Our route took us back over the 11,835 feet Yutong-la pass and down to Trongsa, where the Trongsa Dzong was awaiting our inspection, from the inside this time. Originally built in 1543, but repaired and added to many times since, this fortress occupies an extremely commanding position, perhaps as well if one’s job is to collect taxes and generally subdue the neighbouring population. And it still exercises
authority to this day. We could only enter on certain conditions: no hat (okay, we had become used to that), no cameras (ho hum), and no scarf! What?? I had become extremely attached to my white yak-wool scarf and to leave it in the ‘bus was quite a wrench. Inside, the Dzong was suitably large and impressive, but a bit cold without a scarf.

Lunch was again provided by the catering crew who had gone ahead of us to Chendebji Chorten, the same site we had used on our way east. One was becoming somewhat blasé with all this looking after in such stunning settings.

The village of Gangtey Gompa in the Phubjikha Valley was where we were supposed to see the cranes. We did see some, but only at a great distance, apart from a squadron that flew in formation close overhead, practicing for the ceremonial re-entry to Tibet. The village was interesting for having an over-sized dzong in its midst that was being extensively renovated. Electricity is forbidden in this valley as it might upset the visiting cranes, so all work has to be done by hand and in daylight.

A dog’s life

Not prone to doing things by daylight were the dogs. Throughout Bhutan it was remarkable that the dogs were extraordinarily docile. I could not imagine entering the average New Territories village and emerging with my four limbs intact. But in Bhutan a large group of strangers comes in from Mars, as it were, and the dogs just look, disdainfully, and resume their slumber. And then somebody pointed out the obvious: they are up all night yapping their silly heads off and are therefore exhausted by daybreak. But why do they do that? My theory is that they are trapped in a vicious cycle with no way out; they go to sleep in gentle morning sunshine but when they awake the sun has gone. All night, they are in a state of panic. Where has the sun gone? When at last it returns, even if in the opposite side of the sky, they can once more go to sleep and dream happily. I might be wrong in this analysis, however.

On leaving the village, I saw a sign that made me wonder if I had missed one of the attractions. Attached proudly to a post was a sign that read, ‘AIDS IS DANGEROUS. AVOID MULTIPLE SEX
The next day started with a quick drive-past, with a photo opportunity, of the Punakha Dzong, said to be Bhutan’s most holy. The first king was crowned there in 1907. This commanding fortress stands on shingle banks at the confluence of the Mo and Pho rivers. Its situation certainly makes it picturesque, but also vulnerable. A flash flood ten or so years ago caused extensive damage which is still being repaired. The sad thing is that this deluge was probably not an isolated flash flood at all, but the first of many - the result of the effect of global warming on the frozen Tibetan wastes. Anyway, by command of the king no expense is to be spared in the restoration work, as we would see later.

Tomorrow was to be the start of a major festival, and we were to return to see it. The festival invokes Bhutan’s principal deity and protection for the country in the coming year; it also marks the beginning of spring. But for the moment we had other things to see further up the Mo. People were drifting past in threes and fours in the opposite direction, including some members of the Laya tribe. I guess we could have appeared to them as no less unearthly than Princess Leia herself from Planet Alderaan. Our ‘bus had to stop right next to a group of Laya, having to give way to some more fortunate people descending to the dzong in a vehicle. These Laya, a Bhutanese nomadic tribe, comprised mainly very old women and very young children and were, we were told, just coming to the end of a three-day trek to get to the following day’s festivities. Quick as a flash, the old crones in the walking party whipped out from beneath their vestments some shining “jewelled” necklaces with which to tempt the wealthy tourists. They did not make a sale that day, but I felt it was only a matter of time before their family assets would be disposed of to some tourist or other in this manner. I also guessed that if one of us happened to take a shine to their shoes, they too would have instantly had a price attached. (Some of their shoes, more like embroidered felt boots, were indeed very fine.)

Still no bacon

It was with mixed feelings that I also saw a large pig, foraging by the roadside - the first I had seen in Bhutan. I happen to like pigs very much, but a very large part of me was wondering (again) if there would
ever be bacon for breakfast.

Twenty miles or so up the valley, still passing people coming in the opposite direction, we came within sight of the Crown Prince Chorten, also known as the Khamsum Yulley Chorten. Built only in 1999, this chorten nevertheless has some importance through having been constructed under the patronage of Bhutan's four current queens. Very decent of the other three, as only one of them could have given birth to him for whom the temple is named. To get to this site we had to leave the buses, walk across a wobbling suspension bridge and stroll for half an hour up the side of the valley to a promontory, on which the chorten is built. Had we strolled further, after a few weeks I am sure that we would have reached the ridge of 20,000 feet peaks that stood like sentries at the head of the valley, guarding the way into (or maybe out of) Tibet.

Having tried (and, as I subsequently found out, failed) to do photographic justice to the view of the Mo, meandering down the valley into the misty distance, a gentle stroll down the way found us back at the waiting buses. These obligingly took us off to our lunchtime stop. This was to be the last that was courtesy of our terrific chef, Signor Fresco. Again, he did us proud, setting up the table and chairs next to the river on a shingle bank. As the sun was rather hot, most of us repaired to the shade of the nearby pine trees. A highlight was being able to watch a cormorant diving into the icy water for his lunch. On the whole, I think we did better than he.

A rare treat after lunch - a comfort stop back at the hotel! The afternoon's destination was a temple with an unusual theme. The village of Chime is home to the Chime Lhakhang, also known as Drukpa Kinley's Lhakhang. The village was about half-an-hour's stroll away from the road, through the village of Egwakha. These villages are on a bit of a plateau on the valley-side, surrounded by rice paddies - and it was along the paddy walls that we had to thread our way. It is not unusual in mountainous areas for an anabatic wind to pick up in the afternoon as the air mass heats up and flows uphill - and today was no exception. By 3.30 the wind, although not strong enough to remove my much-admired Tilley hat from my head, was enough to wobble my camera when lining up for a shot.
As I have pointed out already, the male sexual organ is depicted quite a lot on Bhutanese buildings as a symbol of fertility, or at least as an invocation of longed-for fertility. It so happens that things come to a head, as it were, in this lhakhang at Chime. Not content with mere pictures, this holy place has replicas that can be picked up and, well, fondled. Personally, I thought they were enormous - but I was told by one of my grinning fellow travellers that they were actually pretty lifelike. Young ladies come to the temple to pray for babies if they are having trouble otherwise. There is one particular statue that was donated to the temple by a local official. The statue is unmistakably male and gives the impression of being very pleased to see visitors. The story is that this official had led such a life of sin and debauchery that before he died, he made a donation of this fine upstanding figurine by way of atonement. More likely, in my opinion, is that he merely donated one of his ribald collection of standing ornaments as a way of ensuring it went to a suitable home.

Through these villages flows a stream, and a particularly fast-flowing one too. We had seen water power being harnessed to drive prayer wheels before, but the speed of this stream meant that they must have had the fastest turning prayer wheel in the kingdom. So fast was it revolving that it was not possible to make out the blur of words that whizzed round. I hope they get a bit more sorted out before they get to heaven, otherwise all that effort may be wasted.

An every-day story of country folk

Last stop of the day was to admire Wangdi Dzong, which we had seen briefly on our way east. Yet another large, imposing, impressive fortress in a commanding position above the river, this reminded us again of the purpose of a dzong. They were built as defensive fortresses, a centre of government and power, a place of worship and Buddhist learning, and a general focal point for the surrounding area. This one qualified on all fronts, complete with 32 boys in residence studying Buddhism and other monkly pursuits. Not quite so in keeping with this peaceful sounding activity were the ten or so very smartly attired young men who were practicing archery inside the main entrance. The targets had been set up with the standard 150-yard separation, but this time the archers were using not the local bamboo bow, but carbon fibre composite bows, complete with telescopic sights. The results were twofold: firstly
they were a bit more accurate, and secondly, being faster, the trajectory of the arrows need not be so high. Arrows were whizzing past us at just about head height. It reminded me of the old line: ‘Do people get killed here often?’ to which the reply is: ‘No sir, only once.’

The Wangdi Dzong was built in 1638, and that in Punakha in 1637. Both are massive structures and it can only be wondered at what effect all this building activity had on the local economy and employment market. Perhaps similar to the time in England when vast stone cathedrals were going up, many at the same time. More comparisons to mediaeval England and building methods were to follow, but first there was dinner and bed.

Day 9 brought us to what for me was the absolute highlight of the entire trip. So overwhelming were the sights and sounds that faced us that I knew neither what to write, nor how to write it. As I am afraid you will find out on the following pages, however, I soon found some words - although it is impossible to capture anything more than a few personal observations.

We knew already that the usual ‘no hats, no scarves, no cameras’ rule applied, and this was in many ways a blessing - we were indoors mostly, it was fairly warm, and the absence of a camera meant that I was not distracted by apertures and shutter speeds. Immediately inside the first courtyard, the atmosphere struck like a blow in the face. Red-robed monks standing about in twos and threes; a deep horn blowing its long steady notes somewhere off-stage; sounds of many heavy footsteps on bare wooden floors; a small crowd cheering somewhere from within a building; a stone mason chipping a hole in a flagstone; men carrying impossible loads of stone on their heads, on their backs or in their arms, up an equally impossibly steep flight of stairs into an inner sanctum (whether they were doing so to gain merit, or because they were contract Indian labour doing what Bhutanese chose not to do we did not manage to find out). Something was clearly happening. No - Something Was Clearly Happening.

This was, after all, the beginning of Day One of a four-day festival, one that has been going on for so many centuries that it is now by no means clear what it is all about. The triumph of the Bhutanese over the marauding Tibetans. The triumph of Buddhism over evil. Whatever it
was commemorating, it was certainly doing so with great Excitement and Atmosphere.

Across another courtyard, up a dark flight of wooden steps to a square viewing balcony with space for perhaps 40 people to stand next to the railing, looking down into ...

**Temporarily speechless**

... one of the most amazing and moving sights I have ever seen. So much so I had to leave after a few minutes, and go and look at the sunlight and distant mountains before venturing back in, still in a state of some shock. Seated one floor below us, lit only by smoking candles, cross-legged on the wooden floor, were four rows of monks dressed in their dark blood-red habits, two rows facing the other two rows, 48 monks in all. Each had a drum of about two feet in diameter, which was held vertically with the aid of a three-foot pole. They were beating these drums and chanting in the deep-throated growly tones that one only hears in Buddhist temples, all to a set but irregular rhythm without the apparent aid of written music or any other form of instruction. Wandering along the ranks of seated chanters was a sergeant-major or choirmaster with a large and sold-looking stick in his hand. He used this to apply a none-too-gentle rap on the shoulder to any monk whose drum was not held perfectly upright. I regret that my less than classical education made me think of Indiana Jones when he was deep inside the Temple of Doom amongst the thuggees. I apologise if I am upsetting any reader's sensitivities with this comparison, and I freely admit that there could hardly be less similarity than between a gentle Bhutanese monk and a murderous Indian thuggee.

Seated behind these monks, beneath our viewing platform, were countless other monks - some with instruments, some without. Some of these, it seemed to be the young novices, for no apparent reason received three lashes each on the back from a gentle monk carrying a cat-o’nine-tails. (Parent: ‘Did you have a nice day at the temple today dear?’ Young Novice: ‘Yes thank you mama.’ P: ‘Did you get thrashed?’ YN: ‘Yes mama - thrice.’ P: ‘That’s my boy! Your father and I are so proud of you.’)

Back to centre stage, where the performers were considerably more
fortunate. An official-looking monk passed along each row, giving what looked like two banknotes to each seated monk. Then, down each row, ran a small boy-monk with a metal kettle, leaving a small trail of water behind him (the water coming from the kettle, I should point out). Obviously symbolic of something - ritual cleansing? Stunned and devoid of all feeling except a sense of being overwhelmed, we were ushered out into the next and final courtyard, beyond which was the building that had suffered most in the flood.

It may have suffered, but was now receiving its reward. This vast structure was the principal target of the king’s no-expense-spared command. Ten years later and the restoration was far from complete. (But didn’t Salisbury Cathedral take about a century to build?) The focus of this hall, the highly decorated ceiling of which stretched about six or seven storeys above our heads, was three enormous seated statues. The centre figure was that of Buddha himself, about 40 feet high and carved in wood. He was flanked by two smaller (30 feet) figures, one of whom was Guru Rinpoche. These, we were told, were of brass but they had been covered in clay. In front of these was what must have been a container-load of prayers and religious representations printed on tissue paper. It is the custom to fill the hollow back of statues with printed prayers, so that they are always there. These were waiting to be sealed within Buddha and his sidesmen.

Attention to detail

Working in a stream of slanting sunlight, and with the dubious benefit of some 40-watt light bulbs, were about a dozen artisans who were putting the finishing touches to 100 or so smaller seated statues. These figures, about two feet high, were waiting to be placed into a similar number of niches in the walls around this 200-foot square hall. Other workmen were carving wood, modelling detailed bits of decoration in clay, and painting. Rood wooden scaffolding surrounded the three major figures, behind one of which I climbed. There I saw a craftsman carefully moulding clay to represent more perfectly the flowing robes of the seated guru. What struck me most was that nobody would ever see the fruits of this man’s labours, but that did not seem to matter one bit. Again, thinking of my own culture, a similar amount of unrecognised effort went into the facial expression of a gargoyle high in the wall of Salisbury, or the decoration of a ceiling boss 200 feet off
the ground.

Unobserved, I saw through a latticed window at the back of the hall the younger monks coming off duty from their performance next door. They were walking along happily, chatting and joking, just as young people would do anywhere, and pulling snacks from deep within their flowing robes.

Returning my attention indoors, I saw that the wooden floors were also, in their own way, a work of art. Onto the pressed mud floor had been laid three-by-nine-inch joists, over which, cross-wise, had been placed two-inch thick planks. And over this second layer was a third, also two-inch planks, laid at right-angles. This last would eventually become the floor and would have the feel of polished marble when finished.

In the so-called civilised world, with so many obvious technological and other advantages over an undeveloped country such as Bhutan, would it be possible to use traditional skills, methods and materials to rebuild one of our national treasures if it were destroyed? I very much doubt it. It was most moving to see such skill and attention to detail.

Then a workman’s mobile ‘phone rang.

**Brother, can you spare me a dance?**

It was time to return to the viewing place as the monks were about to do their traditional dance. I don’t know about you, but I don’t normally associate monks with dancing. I was intrigued. Crossing the courtyard again, the sense of Something About To Happen was greater than ever. Some of the people wandering about were clearly important officials. They were wearing very smart gos, but the traditional white shawl in these cases had red designs on it, and they had extremely fancy woven footwear to boot. More to the point, they were carrying large shiny swords. All Bhutanese gave them an extremely wide berth. I thought it wise to do the same.

The viewing balcony was more crowded by now, even some other tourists. (Apart from ourselves, foreigners had been very few and far between during our trip - almost to the extent that some of us were
saying: 'Hey! We booked Bhutan this week. What are you lot doing here?') What we were about to see must have been on the itinerary of every other tour group in the country. I was lucky enough to squeeze up to the front, and stand facing sideways in the general squash but with a reasonably good view of the floor below. After a while, two of the shorter horns (akin to oboes) started up and the general air of expectancy increased tangibly. Then two of the long bass horns started blowing their deep notes; each horn had to be held by two monks. They were blown for about five minutes, and then they were joined by the oboes. By now there was an enormous sense of anticipation, rather like at the beginning of a concert listening to orchestra tuning up but never quite getting there.

Then came the officials, looking resplendent and led by a pair of horn players (the oboe variety). One official had a large and lethal-looking cat-o’-nine-tails, which was this time, thankfully, being used to thrash the floor in front of the other dignitaries. However, judging from the conspiratorial grin he flashed at me when he passed by, he would probably be happy to thrash anything (or anyone - even me).

The official procession having passed, some of the dignitaries returned with their families - and we realised that we had committed something of a faux pas. When trying to get to the best vantage point at the railing, I had noticed that some brightly coloured mats had been placed on the floor. It did cross my mind that it was a pity to have them trampled under foot by the assembled multitude, and then I thought nothing more of it. Until, that is, that I saw one of the official-looking gentlemen, clearly disappointed, motioning to his wife to the area near my feet. Like the proverbial Germans at the hotel swimming pool, it seems that these good people had reserved their spot at dawn, only to have it snaffled. Ho hum. I do not know what he did, but it was clearly impossible for him to claim his spot. I was squashed sideways onto the rail itself; at my waist was a child’s head, and underneath her were two more wriggling youngsters.

Meanwhile, back on the stage, there was some activity. One orange-robed monk led out a team of 15 red-robed brethren and stood with them in a little huddle, talking sotto voce. He was like the coach at the beginning of a rugger match. ('Now, lads. I want a good clean puja.')
The wrong sort of bees

When it did eventually start, the dance proved to be well worth the cramp and the extremely long wait. Two monks appeared, dressed head to toe in crimson robes with brightly coloured sleeves and other attachments. The bull’s head masks that they wore meant that the dancers were totally covered, and they whirled and twirled, leapt and stepped, dancing like demons. It was over in three minutes. The purpose was to cleanse the area of evil spirits - and it worked as far as I was concerned. I am afraid to say that I had had enough. I had been standing in a most uncomfortable and twisted position for an hour with one arm stuck up in the air. I was afraid that, like Pooh Bear when he had been observing the wrong sort of bees from a balloon, my arm would stay up straight in the air for more than a week. Added to that I was being pushed in the back by people who had, some of them, been walking for the best part of three days, presumably without the advantage of a hot shower every day. Besides, I thought it only fair for some of them to get a shot at the front row.

Outside I found a cool corner to watch the world go by and collect my thoughts. As I left the dzong there was still a steady stream of people coming in past the policeman at the main entrance standing, incongruously, with his fixed bayonet. If they were all heading for the viewing gallery, I realised that I had indeed chosen the right time to withdraw. It might be days before the front row could extricate itself.

From my shady vantage point I could see some wooden shacks standing in the shadow of the citadel. From these dwellings I heard the sound of a child screaming in distress. It struck me that until now I had not heard this all-too familiar sound in Bhutan; Bhutanese children all seemed to be smiling and happy, but this experience proved them to be the same as children everywhere. However, I should have had more faith. On inspection through my binoculars I saw that the little mite was screaming with delight at being chased round and round by an elder sister.

All too quickly, we realised that the only thing left to do on our trip was to get back to Paro for the night, in time to catch the plane the following day. There was a real sense of last night blues in the restaurant where we had dinner. A few of us felt compelled to sing a song or tell
a joke or do a trick. (See the evening’s programme, set out in the appendix.) The laughter and applause must have been heard all the way up and down Paro High Street.

A last munch

The last day dawned, beautiful and sunny as ever, and was celebrated with scrambled eggs on toast aplenty. Checking in at the airport was as depressing as it can be anywhere, expect that this time there were 27 people with some very happy and unforgettable memories behind them. For me, my last example of the friendliness and humour of the Bhutanese people was at the shop in the departure lounge. I had not realised I had chocolate withdrawal symptoms until I saw a pile of Kit-Kats on the shelf. I rushed up and asked how much they were. '25 Nu' I was told. When I found that I only had 20 Nu left in local currency and looked suitably crestfallen, the young girl at the counter said: 'Never mind. For 20 you can have a munch.' I was impressed. Was she actually willing to let me have a munch on a Kit-Kat, and presumably put the rest back for the next customer? Actually, no. She laughed when I explained to her my misunderstanding. There was a smaller and slightly cheaper chocolate bar called 'Munch'.

I have known for some time that Paro is one of the most challenging airports for pilots, and so I was pleased to see all that I have learnt about short-field take-offs is applied equally in a BAe 146 as in a Cessna 172. Full length of the runway, two stages of flap, full throttle before releasing the brakes, and then best angle of climb to avoid the mountains. Then course was set for Calcutta - and that was that.

NOTES

1 [Hon. Editor, I have always been a little bit worried about Robert. This article confirms my suspicions!]
APPENDIX - THE LAST-NIGHT PARTY IN PARO

Programme:

1. Introduction and limericks - Robert Nield
2. Extract from ‘HMS Pinafore’ - Jenny Wu and Rupert McCowan
3. Some Welsh songs - Ian and Jean Wilson
4. Amazing conjuring tricks - Charles Slater
5. Extract from ‘The Yeomen of the Guard’ - Jenny Wu and Robert Nield
6. Some songs from Old Jamaica - Ian Wilson
7. ‘McPherson’s Lament’ - Chris Coghlan
8. ‘The Wild Rover’ - Ian Edwards
9. Another extract from ‘HMS Pinafore’ - Jenny Wu and Rupert McCowan
10. ‘Albert and the Lion’ - Robert Nield
11. Some North Country culture - Marlene Courbert
12. ‘The Police Song’ - Russell Harding
LIMERICKS, OR LINES WRITTEN IN THE BACK OF A 'BUS

1 Travelling around in a bus
There were 27 of us.
I sat and wrote down
These lines of my own.
I hope you find they’re humorous.

2 I’ve described all the members in verse.
Some are better but some are much worse.
If any feel cheated
By how they’ve been treated
The complements they may reverse.

3 Russell
No group, it seems, is complete
Without one who, to judge by his feet,
(Which, while we were talking
Were off again, walking)
Would feel more at home on the beat.

4 Mary
This next lady don’t make a fuss.
She just sits at the back of the bus.
‘It’s comfy,’ she said
But she’s banged her head
On the roof more than any of us.

5 Jean and Ian
There’s one chap who went for a swim,
And his wife just sat and watched him.
I think he was silly,
Coz he lost his willy.
At least - it went terribly thin.

6 Marlene
This lawyer from Lancaster-shire
Has the nicest accent you’ll hear.
I’m afraid it would grate
If I tried t’imitate,
So listen to her, she’s just here.

7 Laura and Clark
For Brits, it is always quite pleasing
To have Americans around, just for teasing.
But hey - let’s be fair,
They’re a jolly nice pair.
(Do you think that I sound too appeasing?)

8 Gillian and Peter
The next one is also a pair.
They’ve travelled a lot, here and there.
‘When we were in Iran
We lived in a bam.
It was much worse than this. So there!’

9 Andrew
He’s tall, unassuming and blond.
Of food, he’s inordinately fond,
Though you’d never know,
Coz it just doesn’t show.
He’s not what the French would call “ronde”.

10 Leona and Victor
She bought an ethnic cardigan,
And hardly took it off again.
He has more endurance.
Perhaps it’s insurance,
Or maybe he’s terribly vain.

11 Gaye and Peter
There’s one couple, they’re quite romantic.
I’d describe them as “transatlantic”.
The long and the short

12 Janet
The next lady’s also a Yankee.
She don’t stand for no hanky-panky.
She keeps getting passes
Is that they’re not the sort
To ever be thought of as frantic.

Diana and Charles
This group of ours includes all manner
Of people. There’s one who’s a spanner.
There’s no end of ditches
He’s spanned with his bridges.
His wife’s quite nice too - that’s Diana.

Alan
There is one other engineer,
From whom every day you will hear:
‘It’s better by far
With the KCR.’
But not in Bhutan, I fear.

Giovanna
C’è anche una bella signora
Da Padova in Italia, allora.
She ‘as a bag-a, più grande.
She say: ‘Is a-very ‘andy,
Whenever I go on a tour-a.’

Helen and Ian
Australia has regulations.
It’s one of those fussier nations.
But he wants to take back
The tail end of a yak.
Says she: ‘This will strain our relations.’

Jenny
Shopping, and more shopping yet.
She’ll be at it tomorrow, I’ll bet.
With her hats and her scarves
She don’t do things by halves.
But remember, it’s a very small jet.

Christopher
A classical scholar, a star,
He’s been high and low, near and far.
He’s come quite a journey,
This pukka attorney.
He’d go anywhere if called to the bar.

Felicity
The style of this lady is simplicity.
So calm, yet so much tenacity.
She has to be so.
It’s her husband, y’know
You all know her name - it’s Felicity!

Brian
There is one chap who’s made our lives hell.
I didn’t have time to do me.
For he’s constantly ringing his bell.
I’ve been up half the night, y’see.
But his job’s been quite tough
But I suppose if I must
With a group that’s so rough.
I could ... maybe ... just.
Napoleon - we all think you’re swell!

Robert
I’ve been up half the night, y’see.
But I suppose if I must
I could ... maybe ... just.
Leave it with me a while and we’ll see.
FROM "HMS PINAFORE" (with apologies to G&S)

I am the captain of the Bhutan tour
   And a right good captain too
I'm exceedingly polite, and I think it's only right I command a right good crew
   He's exceedingly polite and we think it's only right
   He commands a right good crew
Even when I've had a beer I never never swear whatever the emergency
Though "Bother it" I may occasionally say. I never use a big big "F"
   What never?
No, never!
   What, never??
Well, hardly ever!
   Then give three cheers and one cheer more
   For our captain, dear old Brian Shaw
   Give three cheers and one cheer more for good old Brian Shaw

I do my best to satisfy you all
   And as a group we are quite content
You sometimes complain and I find it quite a pain near my progenitive implement
   We sometimes do complain and he finds it quite a pain
   Near his progenitive implement
I got meself a bell, and it's given you all hell whenever I have something to say
I'm sure you will agree if you listen carefully you'll learn something more each day
   What, always?
Yes, always!
   What, always??
Well, sometimes!
   Then give three cheers ... 

I'm sure you will have seen that I'm always very keen
   To get a good punctual start
This little bell of mine will keep you all in line like Napoleon Bonaparte
   This little bell of thine will keep us all in line
   Like Napoleon Bonaparte
I'm sure you will agree that my wife Felicity is worth her weight in gold
Wherever I go she's usually in tow, and she always does what she's told
What, always?
Yes, always!
What, always??
Well, not very often!
Then give three cheers ...

3 FROM "THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD" (with more apologies to G&S)

I have a song to sing-o
Sing me your song-o
27 of us going by minibus to see the sights of Bhutan
We arrived by a little plane in Paro
Got into the buses and off we go
What we're going to see we did not know
But that didn't seem to matter
Bhutan, Bhutan. How we love thee, lovely country
Until we return our hearts will burn
And we'll sigh for the love of this country

I have a song to sing-o
Sing me your song-o
I tried to photograph, just for a laugh, all the sights of Bhutan
I've got a camera, filters, film and all
And trying them all I was having a ball
But throughout this trip there has been a doubt
I fear that none of them will come out
And so I will come to you, cap in hand
And ask you if you'll be willing to lend
The shots that you were going to send
To all your friends and relations
Bhutan, Bhutan ...
Paro Airport
Monks learning
Your lunch awaits
Prayer flags on mountainside
Wangdiphodrang-downtown area
Lunch at Chendebji Chorten
Trongsa Dzong
Jampey Lhakhang
A right royal welcome
Chendebji Chorten
View up the valley
The archers
Dr Brian Shan donating a set of RASHKB journals to Mr. Mynak R. Tulku, Director of the National Library of Bhutan, February 2002.