

## BHUTAN

ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL OBERT  
 TRANSLATION FROM GERMAN BY JASON NICKELS

It's about me, about my life—it's about all or nothing. Rinchen Chewang, the royal astrologer of Bhutan, has just inquired as to my name and my date of birth. Now the barefoot giant, clad in a blood-red robe, broods over a scroll bearing the images of some gods as he consults dice made of human bones and recites ancient verses in a scratchy voice.

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 He narrows his browless eyes, wrinkles his smooth, child-like forehead. Suddenly, he pulls a calculator out of his robe. Solar. Digital. He adds, multiplies, subtracts. Finally, he declares: "In total, five!"

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 The number five! Five shall be my number. Today, he tells me, is the fifth day of the week, an ideal day to set off on an extended journey.

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 With my companion Lhawang and Pema, our driver, I want to follow the only paved road in Bhutan, a sinuous, 600-mile stretch that makes its way from west to east through the last Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas. Even if we are setting out under auspicious stars, the astrologer warns us, we may want to present the gods with prayer flags and butter lamps along the way. To be on the safe side. He then tosses his bone dice into a little pink plastic bag with the logo "Supermodern XXL" on it and leaves the tent adorned with the forms of dragons.

Bhutan is a land full of contrasts and surprises. A land performing a cultural balancing act. Even just a few years ago, television wasn't available in this country the size of Switzerland, with a population of 800,000—no daily newspaper, no telephone. News was carried by messengers over the mountain passes. It was only in the beginning of the '60s, after centuries of self-imposed isolation, that Bhutan began to open itself to the outside world—cautiously, unnerved by the Chinese invasion of neighboring Tibet. The king coined the term "Gross National Happiness" to describe that which is to take precedence over the gross domestic product. In other words, no ruthless exploitation of the resources, least of all, the vast Bhutanese forests. No unrestrained pursuit of prosperity and progress. No copy of the West.

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 Instead: Happiness! Because their king—who married four sisters so that he, as his subjects joke, would only have to have one mother-in-law—has willed it. Thus, the Bhutanese are to lead fulfilled lives according to the values of Buddhism—egalitarian, prudently ruled, in harmony with nature. Bhutan will open itself up and simultaneously preserve its traditions. Squaring the circle?

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 We buy some prayer flags and butter lamps for the road gods, leave Paro, the city with the only airport in Bhutan, and head off in an easterly direction, always following the milky Pachu River, passing by rice fields and houses with high, white walls and carved, colorful windows suggesting a mixture of Swiss chalet and Tudor castle. With shingled roofs, carpeted by drying, red pepper pods.







Lhawang, a delicate little black-haired man with a bowl cut and three months schooling in guiding tours, is touchingly concerned about my well-being. If I so much as pluck at my scarf, he instructs Pema to close the window. If I clear my throat, he inquires as to my health. If I look too interestedly out the window, he lets me know again and again that I just have to say the word and we'll stop the car so I can have a look around.

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The valley soon narrows, the fields vanish, the villages as well. Mountainsides plunge into forested ravines and, above it all, we are carried off by a crumbling strip of asphalt, sometimes so narrow that two cars can, only with difficulty, squeeze by each other. You drive on the left in Bhutan and the top speed is 25 miles per hour—a mark we will never reach over the course of our journey.

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As old as the road looks, it's not. In 1958, the Indian premier Nehru, in the absence of a suitable transportation route, rode a yak to the court of the Bhutanese king. After the arduous, day-long ride, the premier offered to build a road, cutting through the country from east to west. Bhutan is a buffer zone, jammed between the two rival superpowers, India and China, and on this new road, Indian soldiers would be able to advance more quickly on the Chinese, should it come to that. Thus, for a quarter of a century, Indian soldiers blasted their way through the eastern Himalayas until the East-West Highway was finally finished.

That's how it all started, Bhutan's process of opening up. As we reach the capital, Thimpu, on the very highway that set this process in motion, we see the incredible speed with which this transformation is starting to occur. There's construction on every corner. Hairdressers promise "fancy haircuts." Posters advertise "webcams, voice chats, photo scans." The Internet reached Bhutan in 1999. Since 2003, it's possible to use cell phones. And 40 satellite channels, broadcasting around the clock, make it clear to the Bhutanese that they will be incapable of surviving without a Toyota Landcruiser, a microwave and a steam iron. Meanwhile, the only national channel lectures over Buddhist paintings, traditional wood carvers and temple restorations: reports that work like sleeping pills.

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But the biggest change still lies before the Bhutanese. For the king himself has decreed that his country shall become a democracy. That seems to have confused some of his subjects considerably. "We haven't formed a party because we have a concept," one of the founders of a party in Thimpu confesses, "We've formed a party because our king ordered it."

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In March of 2008, for the first time in the history of the country, a parliament was voted in. The clear victor was the Bhutan Harmony Party, which won 44 of 47 seats in the National Assembly. And with that, the last Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas became the youngest democracy in the world, almost without a noise and completely peacefully. Which is not necessarily typical on the roof of the world. In neighboring Tibet, a conflict with the government has been raging. Nepal and Bangladesh have had to struggle bitterly to maintain their democratic achievements. Even the affairs of Bhutan's big neighbor, India, are filled with contention and chaos. In Bhutan, even after the country steps into a new era, no real political change is expected. The ruling party is thought to be completely loyal to the king.

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As we stroll through Thimpu, actually just a small town with two main streets, Lhawang tells me how, a few years ago, three intersections got traffic lights. The first traffic lights in all of Bhutan! The people, however, protested this "affront to unity and tradition" so doggedly that the lights were eventually removed and police officers were once again allowed to wave the traffic through.

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There is still evidence of a certain nostalgia in Thimpu's day-to-day life. The Bhutanese are required by law to wear their national costume: men the knee-long *kho*, a mix of kimono and bathrobe, below that, knee socks and leather shoes; women the *kira*, an elegant full-length robe. But as soon as the clothing police get off for the evening, the streets are filled with young people in jeans, Nirvana shirts and baseball caps.

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On this particular evening, in Buzz—disco balls, black lights, mirrored pillars—we're dancing to American pop music. Tshergen, a 20-year-old in skinny jeans and Chucks, explains why he left his hometown in eastern Bhutan for Thimpu: "More jobs, more money, more ladies." Almost half of all Bhutanese are under 21 years old. In Thimpu, they come looking for everything that those who wish to preserve national traditions would rather keep at arm's length. But when Tshergen hears that we want to travel eastward, he tells us unexpectedly, "In the East, that's the real Bhutan, the genuine Bhutan." The Bhutan that he urgently wanted to leave behind? "The Bhutan that tourists love."

So to the East it is. Behind Thimpu, the street wends its way up through a forest of pines. Our driver, Pema, is in his early 20s. Beneath his kho, his little legs look so thin in their black knee socks that they might snap off the next time he brakes. Before each curve, he honks vigorously. There should be about 25 curves per mile, Pema tells me. As a vehicle comes towards us, he brushes his hair from his forehead with one hand and wrenches the wheel with the other, swerving onto the gravelly shoulder of the road above a sheer drop-off. I estimate that we have about 15,000 more curves to navigate until we get to the Indian border and I begin to understand why Bhutanese buses are known as the "Vomit Express."

Meanwhile, Lhawang, in the back seat, seems to have nothing better to do than observe my every movement, so that he might sense some desire of mine long before I myself am aware of it or would even be capable of expressing it.

"You must be tired, Michael."

"No. Thank you very much, Lhawang. I'm wide awake."

A little later: "You must be terribly hungry."

"We just ate half an hour ago, Lhawang."

"These roads, all of these curves, Michael. It must be awfully boring."

"A straighter road would probably bore me. No worries, Lhawang."

On top of the over 10,000-foot-high Dochu Pass, an impressive panorama greets us. Above the lush forests of Bhutan, the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, well over 20,000 feet high, line up before us. We get out and walk up a hill between white stupas, small domed and spired shrines where travelers have unfurled prayer flags in amongst the trees. Framed in thousands of colorful squares, the Buddhist verses, flapping in the wind, seem to dress up the forest for a celebration. We add our flags as the astrologer recommended and drive onward, down toward Punakha.

Like a great, white stone, a Dzong towers above the confluence of two rivers. The pagoda-like roofs of such monastic fortresses rise up everywhere in Bhutan, dominating the surrounding countryside like enthroned kings. We scale the steep, wooden steps, give the prayer wheel at the entrance a turn and walk into the elaborately painted inner courtyard, surrounded with balustrades.

In the prayer hall, red-robed novices recite Buddhist verse and light butter lamps in front of an enormous Buddha, who holds vigil behind 54 golden columns, flanked by the two protagonists of Bhutanese history. Guru Rimpoche converted the land in the 8th century to Tantric Buddhism, and Shabdrung forged the scattered principalities into one state in the 17th century and also had most of the monastic fortresses built.

As many as 3,000 monks are said to follow in Buddha's footsteps in the Dzong at Punakha, one of the spiritual centers of Bhutan. But even in this stronghold of tradition, change has started to creep in. In one of the wings of the fortress, monks enter ancient Buddhist texts into a computer. Beneath intricately carved columns, painted with Sanskrit symbols and dragons, novices' fingers fly over the buttons of their cell phones, bringing text messages to the outside world. (Love notes, Lhawang tells me.) They listen to music under their robes on their iPods, enjoy *Harry Potter* on DVD and chase each other around the monastery courtyard—as disciples of the religion of peace—with toy machine guns.





Most of the visitors that we meet along the way still want to experience the "Land of the Thunder Dragon," as Bhutan is called, before it becomes completely absorbed by modernity. They hurry because they have to. And, thus, become agents of that change—even accelerating it. Because tourism is booming. The daily rate of \$200, which includes car, driver and guide, should in fact discourage them. But the 18,000 tourists that visited in 2006 were already three times more than those in 2003, and according to some estimates, this number should double in the coming three years.

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Until now, Bhutan has been considered an exclusive destination, forgotten by the world. Whether or not this perception can be maintained—when the inns and hotels, springing up everywhere, need to be filled—is questionable. And existentially important. Because there are Buddhist monasteries to be explored elsewhere. For less money.

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In the area around Punakha, we discover several houses with phalluses painted on their façades. "To ward away evil," Lhawang explains. "As did Lama Drukpa Kunley." The favorite saint of the Bhutanese is also called the Divine Madman because of the, shall we say, unorthodox methods with which he approached certain problems back in the 15th century. Whenever he came across evil spirits, he would whack them with his rock-hard penis, a thing so potent that, with its help, the venerable Lama subjugated all the troublemakers in Bhutan and turned them into tutelary deities.

In the temple of the Divine Madman above Punakha, we are fortunate enough to experience what that must have felt like. As we bow our heads respectfully before an altar, a monk blesses us, and our heads are beaten from behind with a heavy, ivory phallus.

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In Bumthang, an area in central Bhutan surrounded by rice fields, most people turn around and go back along the same stretch to the airport in Paro. We, however, follow our highway toward the east. Pema turns the wheel untiringly as the streamers hanging from the rearview mirror sway in rhythm with the curves. Behind us, Lhawang rustles around in a bag of betel nuts, a red fruit chewed everywhere in Bhutan that is capable of producing slight feelings of euphoria.

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"In your country," Lhawang starts again, "in your country, I bet there aren't any roads that are so narrow and bumpy, isn't that right Michael?"

"No Lhawang." I answer this time. "Such dreadfully narrow, bumpy, curvy, boring roads are only in Bhutan!" Lhawang leans back and makes a satisfied sound. "Bhutan," he says after a while, "is an underdeveloped country. But it's making progress. It's really making progress."

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We drive 10 miles an hour. There are fewer and fewer cars on the road until it's just cows and goats and us. Troops of monkeys with white whiskers flit about through the underbrush. Between isolated villages, we see fields of buckwheat with their pink blossoms and subtropical forests with bamboo groves, ferns and lianas. Water cascades from the sheer cliffs above us, is channeled beneath the highway and shoots out, only to be swallowed in the emptiness below. Thousands of feet below—as much as a mile.

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At each mountain pass, we unfurl a prayer flag and light butter lamps in the temples of the Dzongs in order to appease the road gods. Does it work? At one point on the way to Trashigang, Pema comes to an abrupt stop and examines with his critical eye a field of debris on the road. Above us, boulders and uprooted trees seem to wait for a whisper to slip and sweep us off into the depths below. The road is constantly being destroyed by such stray chunks of rock, and when it happens, eastern Bhutan is cut off from the rest of the country for weeks.

Pema drives on. Everything seems okay, but then, halfway through the field, pebbles suddenly start to clatter off the windshield. Pema accelerates, the motor roars, the car lurches, it finds traction, gains momentum—and we're out of danger. To whom do we owe this bit of luck?

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"Prayer flags and butter lamps," says Lhawang, breathing deeply. And Pema stretches out, demonstratively, the five fingers of his hand: the number five! My lucky number! And in fact, as with our visit to the astrologer, today is again the fifth day of the week. "Otherwise, we probably wouldn't have made it," Pema tells me solemnly.

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The eastern part of Bhutan is thinly populated and has, until now, barely been touched by the modernizing forces at work in the West. There are few houses that have televisions, tractors are rare and truancy is difficult to combat because many towns can only be reached by a daylong hike.

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In a hamlet not far from the road, Kezang Dorji warns us about encounters with the Migoi. "He looks like a human, but he's strong and covered in hair, like an ape, but without a tail," says the 70-year-old farmer. Kezang wears a red, checked kho and rubber boots. He doesn't speak Dzongkha, the dominant language in Bhutan, but rather Sharchop, one of the many minority languages in the East. "The feet of the Migoi point backwards," he says, starting to get worked up. "You want to get away from the Migoi, but you end up right in his arms. The Migoi's armpits smell bad, but this smell can knock you out. And then he gets you, the Migoi, and sucks out your blood."

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In "the time before the road" as Kezang puts it, one often used to see this cousin of the legendary Yeti up above on the Yongphu Pass, but the noise from all the cars has driven him away. The Migoi lives now somewhere deep in the heart of the forest. Point for modernity.

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However, in the east of Bhutan, tradition still has a trick or two up its sleeve. On the way to the Yongphu Pass, we suddenly find ourselves on an airstrip. The only 500-yard, straight-as-an-arrow, drivable stretch of asphalt anywhere in Bhutan lies on a windswept ridge, 50 yards wide and completely abandoned. After the landing strip was built—or so people tell us—it turned out that the local gods didn't like airplanes. So they sent lightning and freezing rain and ice down, making it impossible to land anything. And that's why the airstrip was abandoned. Point for tradition. And it's all tied up.

The Yongphu Pass lies isolated in the clouds. In this shapeless calm, surrounded by the ghostly silhouettes of conifers and pines, we perceive very clearly why the Bhutanese consider mountain passes to be dangerous places, worlds between worlds, in which demons lie in wait for travelers and demand a decision: Turn around or go on.

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And all at once, as we're standing there somewhat lost in the mist, we start to understand the image presented by the place. All of Bhutan finds itself on just such a pass, at the crossroads between winter story time and 40 TV channels, between messengers on foot and the World Wide Web. Can a country actually remain in a perpetual state of transition?

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"Just let me know when you want to go on, Michael," Lhawang whispers. "Really. Really, no one can stand it for long on this nasty pass." He looks nervously about as something makes a noise somewhere in the mist behind us. Just then, the chirp of a bird or an insect rings out. Or is it a cry? Is it the Migoi?

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We grab the last of our prayer flags out of the trunk. Not that we were really paying attention, but it turns out we have five of them left—yes, that's right—five flags. We hang them hurriedly and take off downward toward the valley, constantly downward toward the hot, hectic cities of India.



