

# Out in the open

The once-closed Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is evolving at a lively pace

AARTI BETIGERI

MY guide, Thinley, tells me: "We Buddhists believe that you must work for the good things in life." We are trudging across a vibrant green paddock dotted with grazing ponies, thickets of pine trees and a gurgling stream.

Above us is Bhutan's most popular and recognisable attraction, the Tiger's Nest monastery, or Taktshang Goemba, perched precariously atop a sheer cliff. It's been an arduous five hours climbing through mud and rain. Thinley mentions that the Tiger's Nest burned down and was rebuilt more than a decade ago, and a cable car erected to expedite building materials to the mountaintop was dismantled in 2004.

"Why?" I wail, my toenails aching from the steep climb. But Bhutanese are devoutly Buddhist: no pain, no spiritual gain.

Bhutan, that once reclusive kingdom tucked between India and Nepal and ringed by the Himalayas, is like no other place. Its geography quarantined it from outside influences and only in recent decades has it started to open up, albeit cautiously. There is only one airport — in the picturesque town of Paro, nestled in one of the larger valleys, which is dotted with paddy fields, the odd resort and clusters of farmhouses in the classic Bhutanese style.

It is compulsory for Bhutanese buildings to incorporate elements of traditional design, at least on the outside, so all structures are white and ochre, with timber supports and carved window frames. It's one of many dictums conceived by Bhutan's rulers to retain its unique character as it opens up. Government and tourism-sector workers are required to wear national dress: a tunic called the gho for men, and for women a straight woven skirt (kira) paired with a silk jacket (toego).

Television was permitted only in 1999, and the first democratic elections held in 2008. Bhutan has



always been known as a mystical land of low-hanging clouds hugging hilltops, of saffron-robed monks and steep mountain passes, a Shangri-la where the environment is mercifully free of plastic bags and marijuana grows wild.

Even now it clings to the qualities that set it apart. Mahayana Buddhism permeates all facets of daily life: prayer flags and chortens dot the countryside, and the world's biggest seated Buddha is being built atop one of the many hills overlooking Thimphu. While the 2008 constitution demands 60 per cent of the country be covered in forest, the actual figure is almost 72 per cent and Bhutanese are ever-mindful of the impact they have on the environment.

Despite efforts to keep foreign visitors at arm's length, Bhutan now wants to build up its tourism sector and aims to attract 100,000 tourists next year, although it is maintaining its policy of a \$US200 (\$186) tariff per day. To reach that goal, resources are being pumped into the tourism sector, two domestic airports are being built and hotels are under construction.

Back in town, Thinley takes me to one of Paro's only momo houses, a small teahouse near the centre, for some post-trek fortification. It's here I encounter the

first of Bhutan's many surprises — its first transgender. Dechen Seldon is tall, willowy and with a narrow, beautiful face fringed by a stylishly cut curtain of straight black hair. At just 19, Seldon has been dressing and living as a woman for five years. "I'm the only one in Bhutan, there's no one else like me," she declares. "Well, in Paro or Thimphu anyway. I would know them. Maybe in a small village out there," she adds, with a wave of her hand.

After a battle to be accepted by school authorities — Seldon was forced to approach the education ministry to help her gain permission to wear the kira to school — she found an unusual level of acceptance. "I'd like to be a role model. I want people to think, 'Well, if she could do it, so can I.'"

Whereas Paro is small but spread out, mostly rural with just a few main streets, the capital, Thimphu, is sprawling, with tightly packed blocks and dual-carriage roads. But, notably, there is not a single traffic light. There used to be one, but it was deemed counter to the Gross National Happiness index and removed, and a traffic policeman now directs cars in the crowded centre.

On the drive, Thinley explains the reverence in which Bhutan's King is held. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck became the fifth king from the same line when he succeeded his father in 2008. Now the 31-year-old is as loved and respected as his father. He has a girlfriend and everyone has been waiting for their engagement.

Coincidentally, during my visit the king announces he will marry, during the inaugural summer session of parliament. His bride is a beautiful 20-year-old student he has known for some years. "I cannot say how she might appear to the people," he said. "But to me she is the one." The King's father had four wives, all sisters.

Later that evening the couple drop by at a function and are immediately surrounded by well-wishers. The young King, affectionately dubbed K5, is charismatic and handsome; next to him throughout is his fiancée, Jetsun Pema, dressed in a bright pink silk toego. They make a point of



Taktshang Goemba, or the Tiger's Nest monastery, perched precariously on a cliff, is Bhutan's best-known tourist attraction

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A shop selling trinkets and handicrafts in Paro

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attempting to speak with as many people as possible.

One asks Pema whether she's aware her husband-to-be has been judged the hottest royal in the world by internet users. She laughs and says she knows, before the King leans over and adds: "But perhaps you should remind her of that fact every few years."

While K5 and his forebears are revered across Bhutan, with their

portraits often included in family shrines and worshipped alongside idols of Buddhist deities, Bhutan is now developing its own pop culture. Druk Superstar, a singing competition, is televised live for six hours each weekend on Bhutan's only channel.

Half an hour before broadcast, the set is electric with anticipation; in one corner sit the judges, some being groomed. Across the stage



King Jigme Wangchuck will marry Jetsun Pema in October

AP

are the competitors, while the audience fills the rest of the room, everyone in national dress. The current series features people active in the fledgling entertainment industry, so many are already familiar faces.

One contender tells me shyly that he wants to win for the fame; he wants to be recognised on the street. The show is immensely popular and although there is no

formalised TV ratings system, each week the station receives about 95,000 SMS votes, in a country of just 750,000.

Bhutan may be a place that is yet to lose its innocence, but things are changing: there are reports of growing social problems such as drugs and street violence, and a disturbing increase in suicides. Since a ban on cigarettes was implemented in January, 22

people have been jailed for up to three years.

For a country that considers the Gross National Happiness quotient for all policies, this is cause for concern.

But Bhutan does provide the tantalising opportunity to glimpse a relatively untouched destination, a place that offers a view of how things might have been without the corrupting influence of consumerism.

That is not to suggest Bhutan is a living museum. It is evolving, broadening and very much alive.

## Checklist

World Expeditions has a 13-day central and western Bhutan trip with a cultural focus departing April 4. Land of the Thunder Dragon — Paro Tsechu Tour visits Thimphu, monasteries and a selection of Bhutan's most significant Buddhist sites; \$3790 a person twin-share, including most meals, accommodation, tour guides and internal transport. International airfares extra. More: 1300 720 000; worldexpeditions.com.

## Dancing in the streets, gaucho style

A barrio on the outskirts of Buenos Aires comes wonderfully alive on Sundays

MARIAN MCGUINNESS

WITH so much history and beauty in Buenos Aires, it might seem odd that I'm in a taxi heading to the western fringe of the city.

I'm leaving the beaten tourist path of the Argentine capital for the barrio of Mataderos, former home to the kilometres of abattoirs where cattle heads used to hang around the neighbourhood like washing on clotheslines. Some stockyards are still worked by the gauchos, but come Sunday, the cowboys celebrate their culture at the Feria de Mataderos.

"It's the real people who come here," says my cab driver, who locks the doors whenever he slows down at an intersection.

"It's not created for the tourists. People come to meet, to dance,

to talk about the good and the bad things."

After 30 minutes of pinballing through the traffic along a geographic cross-section of the city, I'm abandoned on a street corner. It's as if I've stumbled on to a time-warped movie set where the wide avenues are arcaded by lime-green tipa trees filigreed against the ocean of sky.

The buildings and corrals are whitewashed or painted in the brightest pink. My chatty driver has already enlightened me to the use of ox blood in colouring the walls of the slaughterhouses.

The same method created the rosy hue of the 19th-century presidential palace, the Casa Rosada of Peron fame.

It's only mid-morning and Mataderos is in full swing. The gauchos, portenos (locals) and migrant workers from neighbouring Bolivia, Uruguay and Paraguay have come to the crossroads of Avenida de los Corrales and Avenida Lisandro de la Torre, to the square of the Resero where the bronze statue of a gaucho on his horse watches over the festivities.

The national anthem is played, the blue and white Argentine flag is raised above a makeshift stage and hundreds of people leave what they are doing to sing with gusto. In the centre of the cobbled square the music starts up for the zamba, the national dance.

The young, old, handsome and homely circle each other like pairs of wild birds in courtship. With arms raised, they flirtatiously wave white handkerchiefs while whirling around each other, but never touching.

Everyone joins in up and down the street; many are dressed in



A gaucho and his dance partner at the Feria de Mataderos

PHOTOLIBRARY

traditional costumes, others in everyday clothes. Then the men break into rhythmical tap-dancing in their gaucho boots and every-

one cheers. The oldest gaucho — 82-year-old Rodolfo, with a face as leathery as a saddle — is dressed in full regalia. He is revered like a god

He addresses me in passionate Spanish and my new friends laugh as they tell me I've just been proposed to

as people stop and salute him while he dances.

Meanwhile, as I'm chatting to a romantic dancing couple, Ruben and Beatrice, a gaucho approaches me. He addresses me in passionate Spanish and my new friends laugh as they tell me I've just been proposed to.

I set off to wander the four blocks lined with more than 300 artisans' stalls selling leather, silver jewellery and just about anything you can imagine that could be made from a cow's hoof.

Three barefoot kids clip-clop past on their stocky horse. Another horse follows; riding bareback is a small dog.

A man leads a llama dressed in what is apparently the latest llama fashion of ribbons and beads. It checks me out with its double eyelashes and rolls its fleshy lips. There must be a lot of local wine flowing as I'm tapped on the shoulder by a man who gestures to his heart and lets me know that his casa is only a few blocks away.

Alas for him, it's my stomach and not my heart that calls, and I head off to suss out the smoky *parillitas* where giant forks of sausages sizzle on hot grills, and myriad stalls selling empanadas, tamales and humitas.

At 3pm the crowd moves to line the Avenida Lisandro de la Torre for the Carrera de Sortija, or the Race of the Ring. Gauchos of all ages ride at breakneck speed down the sand-covered street. Such is their skill that while standing in their stirrups at full pelt, they aim small wooden lances at a tiny ring suspended from an overhead frame. The winner holds the ring

aloft to the cheering crowd as he searches for a beautiful senorita to offer it to.

But my story ends where it began. As I sit in the back of the taxi returning to the city centre, I entertain the cabbie with my tale of Mataderos.

Instead of locking the doors at an intersection, he stops, calls a flower seller over to the window and buys a beautiful posy of jasmine. And presents it to me. Ole.

## Checklist

The Feria de Mataderos takes place every Sunday from April to December (11am-8pm). In February and March, a smaller version is held on Saturday nights from 6pm. More: destinoargentina.com. Small-group escorted tours of Argentina are available with Australian-based South American specialist Blanco Touring Company. More: blancotouringcompany.com.

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