

# Almost Eden

On the Edge of Reality in Bhutan

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Land of the Raven Crown, Bhutan is an enigmatic Shangri-La, its journeys measured in dzongs and guarded by the Nephilim-like peaks of the Himalayas. The world's last Vajrayana Buddhist Kingdom has many roots in prophecy, including the Tantrist priest Lam Jangchub Tsonдру consecrating a raven-topped crown, a symbol of the country's protective deity, for the royal progenitor, Jigme Namgyal. It was this scepter, imbued with godly power, that was believed to have played a crucial part in the unification of Bhutan and the miraculous defeat of the British at Dewathang in 1865.

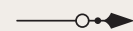
In fact, the deity's protection is cast further back in the mists of time to seminal victories over Mongolian and Tibetan armies centuries before. Here, nothing is chained to the mortal; every aspect of life, society, the arts, and manners are bound to the Divine, and even the winds rushing through the juniper-carpeted valleys seem to prostrate themselves before such devotion.

Once known as Lhomal (southern darkness), shamanism was the prevalent religion among the fearsome highland people of early Bhutan before Buddhism arrived with a clash of cymbals under the 7th-century reign of Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo, the first

of the three Dharma kings who was a convert having been influenced by his Nepalese princess wife. The other pivotal seed sower was a powerful evangelist, Guru Rinpoche, who is nearly as revered in Bhutan as Buddha himself. Said to have flown in on the back of a tiger and conquered pesky demons, the Guru landed in Bumthang, where he cured the wilting king, and a cypress tree (still standing) sprouted from his staff.

Strewn through the landscapes are the immense fortified dzongs, symbols of both defense and guardianship of sacred ritual, bone-white and glinting gold stupas, fresco-filled monasteries, and walled nunneries. Each Bhutanese family is entwined with these talismanic sites. Talking to anyone, no matter their age is to be astounded at the deep visceral relationship with their Buddhist heritage, which manifests in a rare, perhaps unique, culture of peace, mindfulness, and esoteric wisdom passed down, often on the journeys taken by foot to varied corners of the kingdom, it is fascinating to hear distances still spoken of in the amount of days they take to walk.

As much as places of piety and spiritual lineage, the dzongs and temples are deeply important repositories of painting and sculpture, each one a furnace of





symbolic art and layered visual storytelling transporting prince and peasant alike into states of meditative knowledge. In the capital, Thimphu, high on a ridge above a stone said to be quelling an ogress from which the city takes its name, is the otherworldly Dechen Phodrang monastic school. Its name meaning 'Palace of Bliss,' within the school's chapel dwells 12th-century devotional wall paintings, monitored by UNESCO and protected by gauzy, yellowish screens that can be pulled back to reveal gently-restored scenes of heroic victories against the underworld, revered disciples of Buddha and totemic figures such as the snow lion (*Seng in Dzongkha*) one of the four dignities and symbolizing earth elements of power, fearlessness and joy.

Snaking through the central umbilical cord of the country, the road that leads to Bumthang is to encounter the delirious might of the Jakar Dzong. Its name translates as 'castle of the white bird;' this is the largest religious fort in the country and a fascinating example of the traditional vernacular with the unusual feature of the *utse* or central tower placed on an outside wall. Throngs once lived within these walls, monks, artisans, serfs—now only robed lamas remain, and all is still. At festival time, this transforms into an arena of almost medieval revelry and worship with whirling devotees and rollicking *atsaras*, "those sacred and profane jesters waving their huge wooden phalluses as they pranced...to the sound of cymbals, horns and trumpets and deep droning chants," alongside astrologers and mystics bearing relic-filled tabernacles and monks holding vast brocade standards.

Folded into the valley below on the fringes of the hauntingly frontier-like old settlement of Bumthang is the low-roofed Tamshing monastery. Unassuming on approach, the gumpa, out of which a flock of scarlet-robed tiny boy-monks scatter like starlings to go

and buy Sunday 'tuck,' is a palace of pictures. Built in 1501 by a locally-born saint, Pema Lingpa, one of the Five Great Treasure Revealers of the Nyingma tradition, the place survived through the ages in a feudal fashion owned by the saint's descendants, the Chöje family—akin to Bhutanese Brahmins, and related to the house of Wangehuck.

The coeval wall paintings here are among the earliest and most mesmerizing in the country. Still bearing the scars of earthquakes, the sacred paintings were done by many renowned artists of the time, including Kuntrey, Tshempa Tshering, and Kharwa Tshering. They drew and painted with pigments and minerals that were given by the Tibetans. In his autobiography, the Great Lama describes the process. "The Senior artist Tshering began making... the Buddhas of the Three Times, the heaven of the Great Compassionate One, the Lamp that Dispels Darkness along with the Highest and Most Secret Buddha of Long Life, [and] the Highest and Most Secret Horse-headed."

These precious murals of the Sutra hall, including friezes of 21 Taras (female form of Buddhista), are a place of giddy pilgrimage for young people, whom we watched make atoning walks wearing an iron-chain vest that had belonged to Pema Lingpa himself.

When we stumble across an upper chamber of the *utse* startlingly hung with a cacophony of ritual dance masks, some dating from the 18th century, forming a leering troupe of their own in the silent shadows, it is another moment of teetering on the edge of reality and the 'other' that this remote land seems to lead into. In the words of filmmaker Harry Marshall, "If there is any country on Earth that qualifies as Eden—not just in part, but in its entirety—I believe it is Bhutan."

























































