

Revered as the birthplace of the first King of Bhutan in 1862, Wangduechoeling Palace holds a near-mythical place in the hearts of the people of the Land of the Thunder Dragon. Nestled on the edge of the otherworldly settlement of Bumthang in the center of the country, the palace is a glorious example of the traditional vernacular sporting distinctive paintings on its façade, a trumpet's cry that heralded the heroic dawn of the Wangchuck dynasty, which has ruled for the last two centuries. Rising like a spiral of incense from the fertile green rice fields of the Jakar Valley, the palace may have been built on the site of a great battle, one that secured the future of the present monarchy, but its arching legacy is that of being the first mansion built in the country without a defensive purpose. Both a palace of pleasure and, perhaps more importantly, of worship, Wangduechoeling's beating heart was, and still remains, the sacred shrine of the Royal Family perched with shadowy potency atop the *Utse* (central tower). Here, overlooking the Chamkar Chhu River, visitors still make the pilgrimage for daily offerings at the five *chukhor manis* (water-powered prayer wheels), which dance with vivid colors and a serene Stupa.

Largely neglected for the last fifty years, with only a wing housing a monastic school, Bhutan's most beloved royal residence is undergoing an exciting and deeply soulful restoration. Overseen by the Royal Government of Bhutan's Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs and the Department of Culture, Division for Conservation of Heritage Sites, in collaboration with the Bhutan Foundation (a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C.) under the patronage of the Queen Mother Galyum Tshering Pem Wangchuck, a new epoch is coming to fruition with ambitious plans afoot. "We are working to restore the palace to its stately beauty, while investing in a future that will be a unique showcase for our heritage, craftsmanship, and culture." Says Her Majesty, a keen conversationalist and champion of revival. Such a vaunted fresh chapter is fitting for what the World Monuments Fund has rhapsodized as "an architectural masterpiece" after listing it as an endangered heritage structure. Indeed, Wangduechoeling is a veritable Wunderkammer of Bhutanese traditional building practices in its most elevated form. Each floor is an

homage to the mastery of local carpenters (*Zow*) and masons (*Dozop*), who were reputed to be so skillful that they created jewels like this without any use of design drawings sketched on paper beforehand.

Inside the enfilades of rooms that line the *shabkor* (four-sided building), much of the original 19th-century colors have been replicated with startling vibrancy. The simplicity of the color palette belies their symbolism, rich in a historical and social context. Yellow runs riot through the old royal chambers, punctuated by motif murals in varied veins, including dancing floral patterns, auspicious cloud patterns, and abstract animal figures in hues of blues, magenta, burnt orange, and greens. Adding to the visual narrative, an entire language in itself, the gaily-decorated timber lintels and cornices (known as *bogh*) are worlds within worlds, their paintings often a trompe-l'œil of the contemporary with geometric shapes and occasionally almost Bloomsbury-esque naïveté. One shadowy room, designed for receiving the most distinguished visitors, swirls with the Divine, its glowing ceiling embellished with an intoxicating *khorlo* (wheel of dharma) depicting the noble eightfold path around the Tashi Tagye (eight signs of auspiciousness). One of the triumphs of the ongoing restoration has been procuring the original mineral paint ingredients, which have been sensitively applied by specially trained conservation students. According to Delhi-based conservationist Pramod Kumar KG, who has been working on the forthcoming museum that will be housed at the palace, "The paintings were done in several layers in the 19th and early 20th centuries with some rooms, particularly those for spiritual masters, being touched-up before they descended for brief residences."

The future is bright once again for this storied palace—in more ways than one. In addition to an exciting community outreach program, where historic activities such as archery and spiritual festivals will once again bring the local population thronging through its gates, Bhutanese artisans will be invited to practice the 13 traditional crafts such as silversmithing, woodturning, and textile weaving. The rooms will once again tell the story of the Wangchuk family and its court through objects and treasures, many curated from listening to stories told by descendants of courtiers and attendants in service of the royal family in the early 1900s.



## Wangduechoeling Palace

Restoration and Revitalization  
in the Land of the Thunder Dragon

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