


TALES FROM THE ROAD, PART 2: BHUTAN, THE LAND OF HAPPINESS

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TALES FROM THE ROAD, PART 2: BHUTAN, THE LAND OF HAPPINESS

Posted By  Maeve Nolan /  Adventurer at heart, Be an Insider, Bhutan, Mountain Love, Off the Grid, Travel Stories /  No Comments



By Ana Caroline de Lima; This week, our blog features the work of Ana Caroline de Lima, the winner of Backyard Travel's 2014 Photo Competition. She won a trip of her choice in Asia. Here, she recounts her trip and shares her stunning photography from Bhutan. If you like Ana's photos, check out her [website](#) or follow her on [instagram](#).

Where would you go if you could choose among the best Southeast Asian destinations with one of the best travel companies in the region? These were my thoughts after winning Backyard Travel's 2014 Photo Competition. But one country came immediately to mind: Bhutan. Nestled in the Himalayas, Bhutan is a unique and untouched destination and, for a Brazilian like me, a completely different culture and environment. It reminds me of Peru and the Andes but with Eastern traditions.

Bhutan, however, wasn't my first destination with Backyard Travel. Last year I was in China on assignment with Getty Images and decided to spend three months in Southeast Asia to start my journey with Backyard Travel in Myanmar. You can see how it was [here](#). So, when I came back this year, I already felt a little familiar with Southeast Asia. So I left Bangkok for Bhutan. My "Bhutanese journey" began with a flight into Paro.



As soon as you arrive at Paro Airport you see a billboard with a photo of Bhutan's king and queen. The airport is small and its unique decoration prepares the visitor for the architecture you'll see during your stay in the country. After I got my visa stamp, I saw my tour guide: Arun, who together with the driver Ganesha was one of the best tour guides I've had so far. Both always tried to find me good places to photograph and did whatever they could to offer a very happy trip.

Backyard Travel

Backyard Travel is an Online Travel Agency specialising in authentic and local travel & tours in Asia. Our travel specialists reside in Asia. They live Asia, they breathe Asia. And they're intrigued explorers as much as they are citizens of Bangkok, or Bali, or Luang Prabang.

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On the way to my hotel, I could already see the beautiful, clear blue sky of Bhutan. My hotel was not far from the airport, and it was big and very comfortable. As it was the low season, I was the only guest in the hotel: a total first for me. After visiting some of Paro's touristic points, I took a stroll through the colorful streets.

The next day, I woke very early to go to Dochula. But before leaving Paro, I went to the top of Kuensel Phodrang Hill where I found some children having karate lessons. Then it was time to attend a very unique festival called the Druk Wangyel Festival. It is an annual celebration established in 2011 to celebrate the success of a military operation against Indian troops who wanted to occupy some parts of the country. The festival takes place on Dochula Pass, one of the most scenic places in the whole kingdom, offering stunning panoramic views of the Himalayan mountain range.



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I guarantee that attending a festival in Bhutan is an absolutely unique experience: I spent almost the whole day there and I only saw ten other tourists aside from me. Everyone else was a local. It was interesting to see how attached the Bhutanese are to their traditions. With the Himalayas, pine trees jungles and a mist surrounding you, you get the impression that you're either in a movie or a fairy tale. Fantastic. After the festival, it was time to driving to Punakha Valley.

The next morning I woke up early to explore the picturesque villages of Talo and Nobgang, the ancestral home of the Queen Mother of Bhutan. In the afternoon, I visited Punakha Dzong, a beautiful building built in 1638 at the confluence of the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu rivers.



On my fourth day in Bhutan, I headed to Gangtey, a beautiful valley known for its Black Necked Cranes. This endangered species of cranes migrates from Tibet in late autumn and typically stay in Gangtey until mid-March. The wetland in the center of this valley provides the perfect nesting ground for the birds. I did not spot many birds there, but the 2-hour hiking trail to reach the place was really worth it. It's a really easy trail, and you can breathe the fresh Himalayan air and hear the sounds of the birds in the distance. I felt like I could hike there for hours. If you are going to Bhutan, you should go hiking there.

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I left Gangtey for Thimphu on the next day. It takes five hours to go there, but trust me, roadtripping through Bhutan's roads is also fantastic. Ganesha, the driver, was always keen to stop whenever I wanted to take a photo (aka: all the time). But hey, with views like these, could you blame me?

Upon arrival in Thimphu I had time to explore the National Textile Museum, the National Library, and of course, to stroll along the very interesting main street.



The next day was, as my tour guide Arun said, "a very exciting day for Bhutanese." December 17th is the National Day of Bhutan and marks the coronation of Ugyen Wangchuck as the first king of modern Bhutan. Arun tells me that thousands of Bhutanese across the kingdom come together to celebrate National Day and, as I'm in Thimphu, I'm going to watch the celebration at the National Stadium in Thimphu. As I have my breakfast, I see the National Stadium from my window. After the celebrations, I went to the **Voluntary Artists' Studio**, an NGO established in 1998 by a group of professional artists with the sole aim of providing an opportunity for Bhutanese youth to develop their potential talents.



The next morning, after an early breakfast, we drove to Haa Valley via Chele-la Pass. Do you think I spent a lot of time on the road? Well, remember it's Bhutan, not an urban city, so you'll get to see views like this along the way. Chelela Pass is one of Bhutan's most beautiful sights. It's 4,200 meters above sea level, it's windy, it's cold, it's beautiful. Next, I went to Haa Valley, a beautiful place with lovely people. This woman for example, was very kind and called her grandchildren to pose for a photo.



Next day, on the way back to Paro, my tour guide Arun took me to see an archery match. Archery declared the kingdom's national sport in 1971. It's also a way to socialize and develop relationships among people. After arriving at Paro, I took a stroll to discover more scenes of this amazing country. The next morning was the day to hike to the Tiger's Nest, Bhutan's most famous site. I woke up feeling a bit indisposed and decided it was not a good idea to take a 3-hour hike. Now I have one more reason to come back to Bhutan, but shouldn't I take a photo of the place? Well, the tour guide had everything covered and took me to the place where the hike starts.

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And now it was back to the hotel as my night would depart early the next morning. I left Bhutan with plans to come back: the country is beautiful, the people are friendly, the fresh air of the mountains is great. From Paro's tiny airport, I took Druk Air along a different route: instead of going back to Thailand, I headed to India. There are not many destination options when you are flying to or from Bhutan, but as I was going to give a photography workshop for kids in Rajasthan, India, I decided to take a direct flight from Paro to Delhi.

Was my Himalayan adventure over? Well, not really. I flew over the Himalayas. It's a fantastic view, so I still took photos. After a few minutes in the air, the pilot announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're flying over the Himalayan mountain range now and if you look out the left side of the plane, you'll see the highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest."

Can you imagine a better way to end this trip to Bhutan?



My personal tip: When entering or leaving Bhutan, try to take the Indian flight, and if you are leaving, sit on the left side of the plane!

This was a very brief description of my trip to Bhutan with Backyard Travel. The country is known as "The Land of Happiness" for a reason. And as much as I can try to explain it through photos and words, there's no better way to experience it than going there. You can check more Bhutan photos on my [website](#) or [Instagram](#) but hey, the trip isn't over! After India I am going to Cambodia, and that's what the next post will be all about!