



ADVENTURES IN HAPPINESS

One of the world's top travel secrets is a paragon of sustainable tourism, and hosts the 3rd Annual Adventure Travel and Responsible Tourism Conference and Mart

BY BERNIE ROSENBLOOM

How do you define a utopian, exclusive travel destination? One with a tourism policy grounded in sustainability that has little interest in mass tourism? A nation judging success by its quality of life and not its quantity of cash? A remote country that considers adventure travel as much a quest in nature as cultural immersion and uncovering historical sites?

Bhutan, with a population of around 700,000, fits that bill, which explains why PATA decided to hold the 3rd Annual Adventure Travel and Responsible Tourism Conference and Mart (AT&RTCM2012) in

Paro, Bhutan from 3-7 February 2012 at the Zhiwa Ling Hotel.

As PATA Senior Director – Marketing and Membership Services Stu Lloyd sums up the decision, “It would be hard to find a destination that screams – or whispers, actually – adventure and ecotourism as much as Bhutan. It is so pristine.”

Aside from an overland journey from India, access to this kingdom (roughly the size of Switzerland) situated in the distant Eastern Himalayas, is via the national carrier, Druk Air, to the country's lone airport in Paro. So, if remoteness characterises exclusivity,

Bhutan makes the grade.

Bhutan also sets itself apart with a policy of high-value, low-impact tourism underpinned by sustainable tourism development and managing the number of international visitors – 28,463 in 2010.

Bhutan charges a sizeable daily tariff, between US\$200 and US\$250 plus surcharges (AT&RTCM2012 delegates excluded). This doesn't mean Bhutan is reserved for well-heeled travellers. Rather, it should be viewed as a fine, pricey wine to be savoured by connoisseurs.

However, key to the Royal Government

of Bhutan tourism strategy is balancing its economy with “gross national happiness” (GNH), which was coined in 1972 by then King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who opened Bhutan to the modern age.

He believed that GNH posed the best indicator of progress as it measures “peoples’ sense of being well-governed, their relationship with the environment, satisfaction with the pace of economic development, and a sense of cultural and national

belonging.”

Crowned in 2008, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck continues along this progressive path, prompting the establishment of the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) that year.

While tying AT&RTCM2012 to the tiny country, Lloyd pointed out, “Bhutan has a certain badge of exclusivity and bragging rights...It's easy to get jaded about travel experiences working in the tourism industry, but I know there are a lot of



Bhutanese are known as the “Builders of the Himalayas”, and their distinctive, colourful architecture is visible everywhere



(Opposite page) Another nickname for the country is the “Land of the Thunder Dragon”. **(Top)** Buddhist stupas dot the hinterlands of this holy place. **(Left)** Trekking is the main attraction for visitors.



members keen on the event...So, if buyers are looking for really refreshing and innovative adventure travel and ecotourism options, this is where they will find them."

He went on to explain, "As Bhutan has positioned itself as the land of happiness, the theme of the conference [High Value Tourism – Low Impact Footprints] is geared towards that. Given its different market appeal, we also have a whole new buyer set attending."

Bookending AT&RTCM2012 is a taste of Bhutan's culture and

highlands. Prior to the show, delegates will be treated to a half-day tour, "Explore Paro Valley", and can sign up for a full-day experiential outing, "The Pursuit of Happiness". A half-day tour, "Explore Chelela Pass", caps the event.

HIGHLAND ADVENTURES

Eco-adventures are what lure quality tourists to Bhutan, and well-developed roads, though incredibly swerving, aid access to locales far from Paro, while unveiling the Himalayan landscape, rural villages, and historical sites.

Trekking tops the list with 24 multi-day hiking adventures on tour itineraries. Among the easiest are the three-day Bumthang Cultural Trek, Bumthang Owl Trek, and the four-day Punakha Winter Trek.

Longer excursions target special interests: the Dagala Thousand Lakes Trek, Duer Hot Spring Trek, and the Nabji Korphu Community-Based Trek. Snowbirds will find the easy four-day Samtengang Winter Trek and a pair of 25-day expeditions aimed at hardcore explorers.

Mountain biking is gaining ground in the popularity stakes, and though the terrain is rugged, specialty bikes and support vans help ease all the potential pitfalls trip on roads less travelled. Cycling tours traverse some well-paved byways while others hit dirt roads and trails meandering through rural villages.

Kayaking and rafting along Bhutan's six main rivers cut through a Himalayan wilderness of canyons and plains. The slate includes rafting over gentle passes for beginners and hair-raising runs over raging rapids for veterans. White water excursions are often combined with some scenic treks along the river banks.

A bit more sedate is Bhutan's bird watching, with more than 670 recorded species, 10 of which are in danger of extinction, including the rare, black-necked crane, white-bellied heron, and chestnut-bellied rock thrush.

HISTORIC WEALTH

Bhutanese are known as the "Builders of the Himalayas", and their distinctive, colourful architecture is visible everywhere. Massive *dzongs* (fortresses) stand out, having played significant historical, religious, and secular roles. Sacred Buddhist chortens (stupas) dot the landscape, and locals make merit by walking around them.

Bhutan's *lhakhangs* (temples) are generally small, single buildings with red bands painted on the upper walls and gilded copper donning the roofs, while *dratsangs* are temples located in *dzongs*.



(Opposite page) The 2011 wedding of King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck to the commoner Jetsun Pema made headlines around the world. (Above) Boasting a millennium-long pedigree, Bhutanese dances can be divided into three general categories: morality tales, protection from harmful spirits, and celebrations of Buddhist or the life of Guru Rinpoche, who journeyed here in the 8th century AD and is thought by some to be a second Buddha.

PATA ADVENTURE TRAVEL AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM CONFERENCE AND MART 2012

(AT&RTCM2012) is being held from 3-7 February at the Zhiwa Ling Hotel in Paro in southwest Bhutan. The event, themed 'High Value Tourism, Low Impact Footprints' aims to bring together people involved in adventure travel and responsible tourism to discuss new opportunities for promoting environmental protection and social sustainability.

AT&RTCM2012 kicks off in earnest on 5 February with Prime Minister HE Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley delivering the keynote address, followed by a plenary session, 'Challenges and Opportunities in Attracting and Retaining High Value, Low Impact Tourism'.

Three breakout sessions follow, focusing on a double-edged theme. 'Destinations' features Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness and New Zealand: 100% Pure. 'Managing Carrying Capacity' will discuss the success of Machu Picchu, Peru, and Jiu Zhai Gou in Sichuan, China. Jens Tharenhart then presents 'Private-Public Sector Successful Collaboration'.

After a summary of the breakout sessions, PATA CEO Martin Craigs will wrap up the plenary proceedings.

The Travel Mart commences on 6 February as does the 20 buyer-seller appointments, a first for the event.

To get to AT&RTCM2012, event cosponsor, Druk Air, flies from Bangkok, Delhi, Kolkata, Bodh Gaya, Dacca, Kathmandu, and Guwahati, while Zhiwa Ling Hotel is offering specials for delegates.

Websites

TCB: <http://www.tourism.gov.bt>
Zhiwa Ling Hotel: www.zhiwaling.com
Druk Air: www.drukair.com.bt
www.pata.org/events/pata-adventure-travel-and-responsible-tourism-conference-and-mart-2012-at-rtcm-2012



The famous Punakha Dzong served as Bhutan's capital from 1637-1907 and showcases some incredible woodwork. The fortress includes a coronation hall, and the Dzongchung, cantilever bridge over the Mo Chu River.

Built in 1692 around a cave overlooking Paro, the Taktsang Monastery is where Guru Padmasambhava, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, meditated in the 8th century. Another sacred site, Mebar Tsho near Tang, is where treasure hunter, Terton Pema Lingpa, discovered hidden riches in the late 15th century.

Located in Thimphu in a 19th century traditional house, the Folk Heritage Museum provides a glimpse of the Bhutanese lifestyle, and artefacts from rural households. It also organizes demonstrations of ancient traditions and customs and buffet meals offering a taste of spicy Bhutanese cuisine.



(Top) Children add splashes of local colour. (Above) Buddhist art dominates local aesthetics. (Left) Yaks are the cash cows of Bhutan. (Opposite page) Top-of-the-line Zhiwa Ling Hotel hosts AT&RTCM2012.

Bhutan abounds in festivals, known as *tshechus*, which are held throughout the kingdom at different times of the year. During the *tshechus*, dzongs come to life with colour, music and dancing as locals, dressed in their finest attire, gather to witness mask dances, rejoice in the arrival of spring or new harvest, celebrate Guru Padmasambhava, and receive blessings from lamas.

ACCOMMODATING LODGES

As Bhutan is a remote destination, there are few international standard hotels, but those outside urban centres are clean, basic, family-run lodges approved by TCB.

Top-of-the-line Zhiwa Ling Hotel, host of AT&RTCM2012, applies the principles of Bhutan's development philosophy of 'Gross National Happiness' to its operations through its 'GNH in Business' programme, according to its General Manager Brent Hyde. Three key concerns of the programme are donating to charities, sports, and religious events; empowering staff through a life-skills programme, and conducting an ethical and financially viable business.

Hyde said Zhiwa Ling targets higher value clients who are well travelled and want a unique experience. "A variety of methods are employed in marketing and raising the profile of the hotel. Visiting journalists, the Internet, engaging a marketing consultant outside the country, trade shows and key advertising through a network of overseas agents are all part of our marketing plan."

Though people should not get the wrong idea – that Bhutan is a puritan's paradise. As the GM said: "We serve alcohol. It is not prohibited and there are very good local

beers, gins, and whisky made in Bhutan."

To maintain its exclusivity and BNH policy, TCB requires visitors to book their holidays through licensed tour operators, who arrange visas, tariffs, transportation, guides, and accommodation on top of organising the itineraries. This ensures that your adventures in the land of happiness will be as memorable and glitch-free as possible.



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