

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon

Arriving in Bhutan after a scenic drive from **Darjeeling**, we found ourselves in the lively border town of Phuentsholing, a fascinating blend of Indian and Bhutanese cultures.

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Our first night was spent in a local hotel before setting off on our journey deeper into this beautiful and mystical country.

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Day 1: Phuentsholing to Paro - Scenery and Local Flavors

With an early start, we began our road trip into Bhutan's breathtaking mountains. The views were stunning at every turn, with clear skies accentuating the rugged beauty of the landscape. We paused frequently, not only to snap photos but to absorb the peace and grandeur of Bhutan's mountainous vistas.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Dragon
Our stop for lunch was in Paro, where we enjoyed the fresh, vibrant flavors of Bhutanese cuisine. The star of the meal was *Ema Datshi*, a spicy stew of chilies and cheese, Bhutan's national dish. Afterwards, we visited a local brewery for a beer tasting; the red rice lager was a standout, and we couldn't resist buying some to bring home.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
We even had the thrill of watching a plane
land at Paro Airport, considered one of the
world's most challenging due to its steep val-
ley approach!

The afternoon brought a stroll and souvenir
shopping excursion down Paro's charming
main street before checking in to the Tigers
Nest Resort, our home for the next two
nights.

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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Day 2: Conquering the Tiger's Nest Mo- nastery

Our day started with an early-morning trek to the iconic Tiger's Nest Monastery. Nestled on a cliffside, the 3-mile hike was challenging, with steep paths and high altitude, but the views and the monastery itself made every step worthwhile.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon

We took a break at a cafe mid-hike which eased the legs- the tea and biscuits hit the spot for sure before continuing uphill for another hour.



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Nothing could prepare us for the views when
we reached the highest viewpoint. Dragon

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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Our cafe stop halfway down capped off the trek with a refreshing beer on the way down—quickly named as the best beer this year!

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After lunch, we continued making our way
down to the trail start before making our way
back to the hotel for a quick freshen up.

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This girl was so cute, collecting our hiking
Dragon sticks!

Our afternoon was spent visiting Kyichu Lhakhang, one of Bhutan's oldest temples, steeped in history and spirituality. This ancient site is a peaceful retreat, resonating with Bhutan's deep Buddhist roots.



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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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After such a tiring and full on day, the best thing to do in the evening was indulge in a Bhutanese pastime; a traditional hot stone bath, a traditional wellness practice that combines the therapeutic benefits of heated stones, herbal-infused water, and Bhutan's natural environment. It is a revered healing method passed down through generations

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A
Journey Through the Land of Thunder
Dragon
and is deeply rooted in the country's cultural
and spiritual traditions.

A nearby fire is used to heat river stones,
known for their mineral content. Herbs, such
as Artemisia leaves, are added to the water
for their medicinal and aromatic properties.

Smooth river stones are placed in a fire until
they are red-hot.

These stones are then carefully transferred
into a compartment of the tub, separate from
the bathing area but in contact with the wa-
ter.

As the stones heat the water, they release
minerals believed to have healing properties.

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The herbs infuse the water with soothing and therapeutic aromas. The water's temperature is adjusted by adding more stones or cool water, ensuring the bath is comfortable.

The bath was deeply relaxing, with the combination of warmth, herbal infusions, and the sound of crackling stones enhancing the experience. A perfect end to our day!

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Day 3: From Paro to Punakha via the Dochula Pass

Before leaving Paro, we toured the National Museum, set in a former watchtower. The museum hosts a large display of items linked to Bhutanese culture and was very interesting (no photos allowed)

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Dragon
Next we went on to the impressive Rinpung Dzong, a fortress-monastery showcasing Bhutanese architecture. Built in 1644, this impressive site is now used both as a monastery and administrative centre. The intricate wooden decoration that adorn the area is typically Bhutanese and absolutely beautiful.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
There is also a very picturesque covered wooden bridge, used as a filming location for the film “Little Bhudda”. The views from here absolutely stole our hearts.



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Dragon
Just before lunch, we attended a sand mandala workshop which was very interesting.

A sand mandala is a detailed and intricate geometric design made using colored sand which represents the universe and is often associated with deities, especially in Tibetan Buddhism. The process of creating and dismantling a mandala embodies the core Buddhist concept of impermanence (Anicca). The creation of a sand mandala promotes wellness in both creators and observers by fostering:

- Mindfulness: The meticulous process requires intense concentration, fostering a meditative state.

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- Stress Reduction: Observing or participating in the creation of a mandala induces calm and reduces anxiety.

- Healing: The mandala's spiritual energy is believed to cleanse and heal environments and individuals.

- Balance: The symmetry and order of the mandala mirror harmony, encouraging balance in mind and body.

In Bhutan the practice is performed by monks as a sacred ritual and is accompanied by chanting and prayers but the man who we watched had trained for over 20 years to get his PHD and actually used to be a monk.

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Dragon
At the end of the ritual, the mandala is dismantled to signify impermanence. The sand is often scattered into a river or another natural body to bless the environment and spread positive energy.

We enjoyed having a go at our own mandala – which highlighted how difficult it is! Many of us really found it a very enlightening experience.

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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
As we waved a final goodbye to the Paro valley my heart felt sad. I'd absolutely adored our time in this remarkable valley. As a final treat, we were taken to a surprise picnic lunch beside the river. The location was beautiful and after lunch we poured the sand from our mandalas into the river. What a day.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
After lunch we embarked on another sensational roadtrip as we crossed the scenic Dochula Pass, stopping to take in panoramic Himalayan views—a sight that was nothing short of breathtaking. We were lucky to be able to watch sunset over the Himalaya. Absolutely no words for how spectacular this was.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Our accommodation for the night was the charming Green Resort in Punakha, surrounded by rice fields and tucked into a small, traditional village. It felt far off the beaten path, a peaceful retreat in the heart of rural Bhutan.

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Day 4: Discovering Punakha's Rich Traditions

In the morning, we strolled through the village and rice fields, giggling at the local phallic symbols adorning farmhouses—a symbol believed to bring fertility.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Dragon
We wandered through craft shops before
reaching Chimi Lhakhang, the renowned “Fer-
tility Temple.” Built by the eccentric Lama
Drukpa Kunley, this unique site attracts pil-
grims hoping to receive blessings for fertility.

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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
We visited Punakha Dzong, another very majestic and historically significant fortress located at the confluence of the Pho Chu (Male River) and Mo Chu (Female River). This Dzong was the site of Bhutan's National Assembly and served as the capital until the 1950s. More recently the present King married there. Like the Dzong we saw yesterday, it's adorned with wood panelling and intricate painting. So picturesque!

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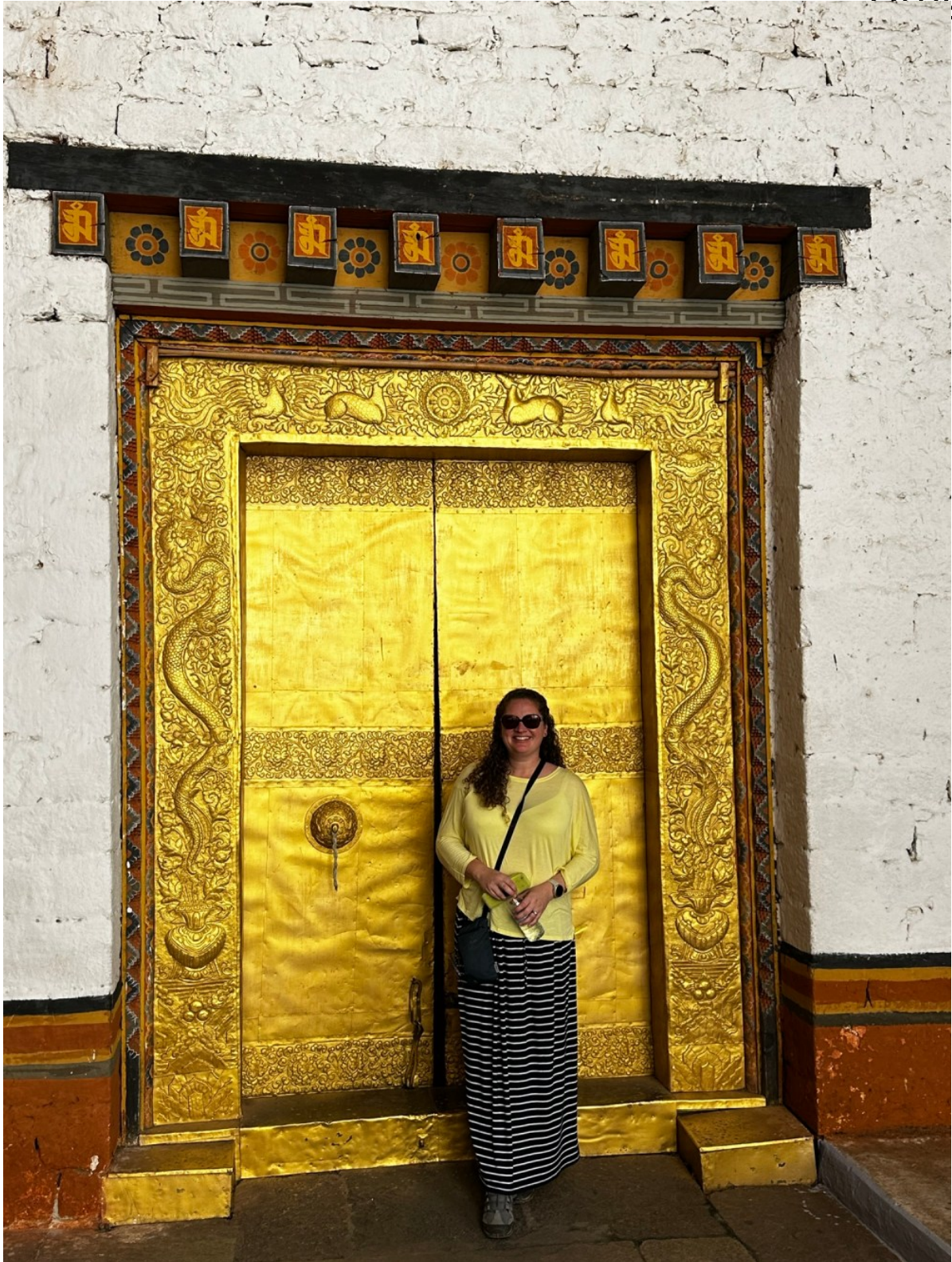
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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Dragon
Afterwards, we headed back over the Dochula Pass, stopping for lunch at a 400-year-old farmhouse. The meal, prepared by the farmer's granddaughter, included pumpkin soup, fresh vegetables, and rice wine—a true taste of Bhutanese hospitality. We were also treated to an archery demonstration, a highlight, as archery is Bhutan's national sport.

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The host and our tour guide

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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Our host posted a nice video compilation of ^{Dragon} our day!

Day 5: Bhutan's Capital, Thimphu

Arriving in Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, we noticed the city's unique charm—a bustling atmosphere but with all buildings reflecting traditional Bhutanese architecture. I'll be honest, I was missing rural Bhutan though. Our day in Thimphu was spent exploring the Memorial Chorten, a popular gathering place, the towering Buddha Point with its large golden Buddha statue, and the Royal Takin Preserve, where we saw the takin, Bhutan's national animal.

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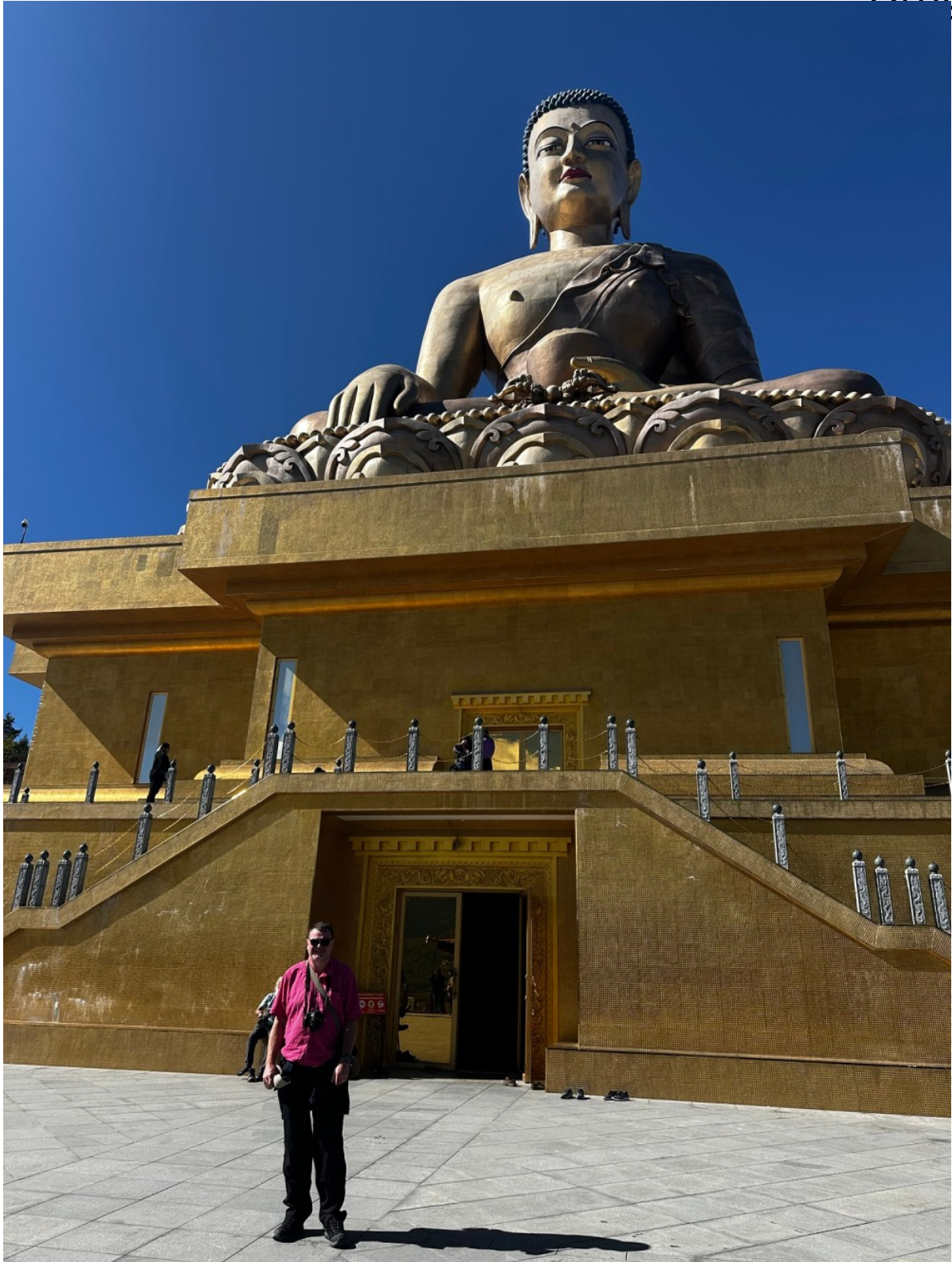
Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
Later, we visited the Zilukha Nunnery and witnessed a peaceful ceremony, a humbling experience in this beautiful sanctuary. We spent our last afternoon wandering Thimphu's streets, catching a local dance competition outside our hotel, and enjoyed a cultural performance in the evening featuring traditional music, instruments, and masked dances.



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Departure: Farewell to Bhutan

Our time in Bhutan had flown by, leaving us in awe of this incredible country's blend of natural beauty, rich culture, and profound spirituality. As our plane took off from Paro Airport, we were treated to a final view of Everest, bidding farewell to a land that had taken a top spot in our hearts.

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder Dragon



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Bhutan, you were unforgettable.

Notes:

We traveled to Bhutan on an escorted tour

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Journey Through the Land of Thunder
Dragon
with **Great Rail Journeys**. This is our 9th
trip with this company and every single one
has been superb. They use the best hotels
available and also the most exceptional local
guides there are. You have a tour manager
travel with you too and the whole experience
is extremely relaxed and well managed. This
itinerary was one of the most comprehensive
and busy with very little free time and lots of
early starts. Not a criticism- we adored it,
however if you like a holiday which has plen-
ty of time to relax, this is not for you!

To travel to Bhutan you need a visa which is
costly. The “Sustainable Development Fee”
charged to tourists (but paid for out of our
holiday price by GRJ) goes directly back into

Exploring the Magic of Bhutan: A Journey Through the Land of Thunder

Dragon
the country and as such education is free to everyone up to age 21, healthcare free, even electricity to those in the countryside is free and much more. Which felt a really great thing to contribute to.

Everywhere in Bhutan is spotlessly clean.

Most locals speak English as all schools teach lessons in English. However they loved it when we attempted to say hello in their language. “Koozambola”

Most of the time we were at altitude so drinking lots of water and moving slowly was key. We were breathless most of the time!

We were pre warned Alcohol was expensive.

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Dragon

Our experience was not this. On average a large can of Bhutanese lager was around £2 in restaurants and hotels. And therefore our hotel bills were approx £15-£20 per night for both of us! Gin wasn't always the easiest to come by (not available in Tigers nest resort or hotel Phuentsholing). We did find some Bhutanese gin later on. The Bhutanese red wine was rank!

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Found the Bhutanese gin!

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Journey Through the Land of Thunder
Dragon

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