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BHUTAN'S BITE BY BITE

SANDWICHED BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA AT THE EASTERN END OF THE HIMALAYAS, THE LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON BECKONS TRAVELERS WITH ITS SUBLIME SCENERY AND A PROFOUND SPIRITUALISM. BUT AS **CHRISTOPHER P. HILL** DISCOVERED ON A WEEKLONG SOJOURN, THERE'S A DISTINCT AND DELICIOUS FOOD CULTURE WORTH SAVORING AS WELL.

Photographs by **JASON MICHAEL LANG**



BOWLED OVER
A local lunch spread at Zhiwa Ling Heritage hotel in Paro.



HIGHER CALLING

Clockwise from above: A village woman in Bumthang's Chumey Valley; the communal dining table at Amankora Bumthang Lodge; the forests of Bhutan are filled with edible mushrooms like this dried brittlegrill.



TASTE MAKERS

Clockwise from above: Chef Choki Wangmo and her team at Paro's Zhiwa Ling Heritage hotel; sikam paa (air-dried pork with red chilies and daikon) at Babesa Village Restaurant; Six Senses Punakha's cantilevered lounge.



THE PLAN WAS TO START EATING

the moment we touched down in Bhutan — not just for the purposes of this story, mind you, but because by the time our 5 a.m. Drukair flight from Bangkok deposited us on the tarmac at Paro Airport, we were ravenous. Garab Dorji, however, had something else in mind. Breakfast would have to wait.

Our guide for the week explained that this was the first morning of the Paro Tshechu, a sacred dance festival held each spring on the grounds of the nearby fortress-monastery of Rinpung Dzong. "This you cannot miss," Garab said as he ushered my photographer companion Jason and I into a waiting minivan, our stomachs rumbling.

He wasn't wrong. Behind the *dzong* — an imposing pile of whitewashed masonry standing sentry above the glacier-fed Paro Chhu river — hundreds of people were already gathered around a flagstone plaza to watch the opening flurry of mask dances. Accompanied by the eerie din of horns, trumpets, and cymbals, the dancers were attired in fantastical costumes. Some wore deer masks crowned with antlers, others elaborate black hats and brocade robes that flared like the skirts of a dervish as they whirled. Almost as impressively turned out were the onlookers: a sea of women in bright silk jackets and long wrap-around dresses called *kira*, and men in their best *gho* — knee-length robes with long sleeves and broad white cuffs.

It was entrancing. But without a food stall in sight, we finally pulled ourselves away and headed up the Paro Valley for lunch at Zhiwa Ling Heritage. Overlooked by craggy hills, this four-hectare property prides itself in being the country's first wholly Bhutanese-owned five-star hotel, with a timber-trimmed main building that takes its architectural cues from classic dzong

architecture. The restaurant here is helmed by a jovial chef by the name of Choki Wangmo. She told me that while much of her career was spent overseas in such disparate places as the Bahamas and Mozambique, her heart was always in Bhutan.

For our meal, she selected a few of her favorite home-style recipes, garnishing them with fish mint, coriander, and spring onions plucked straight from her kitchen garden. There was a stir-fry of seaweed-like jelly fungus, a type of mushroom that grows on decaying tree trunks; chicken tossed with garlic, ginger, and Sichuan pepper; an earthy *goen hogay* (cucumber salad); and a trio of *datshi* (cheese) dishes: one with braised asparagus, one with butter-fried eggs and garlic, and one loaded with chopped dried chilies. The latter, *ema datshi*, is Bhutan's national dish, a gooey, fiery, and oft-maligned staple that we devoured between gulps of cooling iced tea. "Buddy" Jason said, wiping his brow. "The heat is on!"

ROUGHLY THE SIZE OF Switzerland and with a similarly mountainous topography, Bhutan — or Druk Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon), as it's known in the language of most of its almost 800,000 inhabitants — attracts travelers for different reasons. There are those who are drawn by the country's singular cultural heritage and seemingly palpable spirituality, made manifest in the innumerable Buddhist monasteries, temples, fluttering prayer flags, and stupa-like *chorten* that dot the landscape. Others come to marvel at nature. Some 70 percent of Bhutan is covered in forest — vast, primordial woodlands that harbor a diversity of rare flora and fauna, including red pandas and goat-like takin, Bhutan's national animal. And with the recent restoration of the Trans Bhutan Trail, an ancient footpath



INTO THE WOODS
A roadside foraging
stop below Dochu
La pass en route to
Phunaka Valley.
Opposite: Fiddlehead
ferns at the market
in Trongsa.





per adult to US\$200 a day; the levy is called a Sustainable Development Fee and is meant to stave off overtourism while funding social and infrastructural programs. It's also mandatory to hire a guide and driver for all journeys beyond Thimphu and Paro.

WHERE TO STAY

Amankora
Aman was the first international hotel brand to open in Bhutan almost 20 years ago. Its circuit of five lodges in the country's central and western valleys all offer superb locations and a paired-down aesthetic. Amankora Bumthang, the most easterly of the quintet, sits adjacent to the 19th-century Wangdicholing Palace in Jakar, with 16 wood-paneled suites equipped with *bukhari* wood-burning stoves and terrazzo-clad tubs (*doubles from US\$1,785 aman.com*).

Six Senses Bhutan

In the mold of Amankora, Six Senses also operates a five-lodge circuit in Bhutan. While all were designed along sustainable lines by Bangkok-based Habita Architects, each has its own distinct character. Six Senses Punakha, for example, has a rural vibe; its counterpart in Bumthang immerses guests in a pine forest setting; and high-perched Six Senses Thimphu comes with wide-angle views of its namesake valley (*sixsenses.com; doubles from US\$1,451*).

Zhiwa Ling Heritage

Awash in hand-carved woodwork and stonework, this Paro Valley hotel effortlessly blends Bhutanese heritage with 21st-century comforts (*zhiwalingheritage.com; doubles from US\$676*).

Le Méridien Thimphu

A solid choice for anyone looking to spend time exploring the restaurants, shops, and sites of Bhutan's capital (*marriott.com; doubles from US\$600*).

The Lowdown on the Land of the Thunder Dragon

GETTING THERE

Bhutan's sole international airport is in Paro. **Drukair** (*drukair.com.bt*), the national flag carrier, flies there from Singapore (via Guwahati, India) and Bangkok (via Dhaka or the West Bengal city of Bagdogra).

NEED TO KNOW

When it reopened after the pandemic last September, Bhutan more than tripled its long-standing tourism tax from US\$65 a day

that stretches 400 kilometers across the width of the country, trekking here has never been more appealing.

Food should be on the list as well. Despite having a reputation for being either too spicy or too bland — the American food critic Ruth Reichl once declared Bhutanese cuisine the worst in the world — the kingdom's culinary offerings range well beyond the ubiquity of chili peppers and cheese. Myriad root vegetables and herbs have found their way into the local larder, alongside wild forest mushrooms and all sorts of other obscure ingredients. Red rice — nutty and nutritious — accompanies most meals. So too does *ezay*, a glorious *sambal*-like condiment produced in infinite variations.

Garab, who goes by his initials GD (“Like God, but without the ‘o’,” he said with an impish grin), proved an invaluable and enthusiastic partner in our culinary adventures. Originally from Gelephu in the humid lowlands of southern Bhutan, he



RISE AND SHRINE

Clockwise from above: An altar inside Paro Dzong; the restaurant at Six Senses Bumthang; Amankora Bumthang's chef Tshering Phuntsho; Opposite: *Nakey dashi* (fiddlehead ferns with cheese) and other local dishes at Nobgang B&B.

has been guiding visitors for three decades, making him something of a legend in these parts. He counts Demi Moore and the late Anthony Bourdain among his celebrity clientele; he's also the founder of the Guide Association of Bhutan, a nonprofit that works to empower and professionalize its members.

As we traversed the kingdom's western and central valleys, GD would ask our driver — a quiet young man with a fondness for betel leaf — to pull over at roadside stalls for snacks like *maykhu* (puffed rice crackers) and *chugo*, cubes of hard, air-dried yak cheese that you're meant to suck rather than chew (they're virtually tasteless, but at least you get a good jaw workout). Longer drives would see us stop at delightfully dingy eateries for *momo* dumplings and slugs of local malt whiskey, like K5, an unexpectedly smooth drink whose name is an ode to the fifth and current king of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. And on our way from Thimphu, the capital, to the neighboring district of Punakha, there was even an impromptu foraging session. This occurred somewhere below the fog-wreathed chortens of Dochu La pass, where, after a spirited discussion about the culinary virtues of fiddlehead ferns, GD proposed we venture into a boggy forest glade to find some. We did — a single furred frond — but only at the cost of muddying our shoes.

“Bucolic” is an overused word, but Punakha is just that: a jewel-green valley of terraced rice paddies, fruit gardens, and sturdy rammed-earth farmhouses. Apart from the scenery, the district's main attractions are the majestic riverside Punakha Dzong, seat of the Bhutanese government until 1955 and the winter residence of the Je Khenpo, the country's highest-ranking abbot; and Chimi Lhakhang, a fertility temple dedicated to a libidinous Tibetan lama popularly known as “the Divine



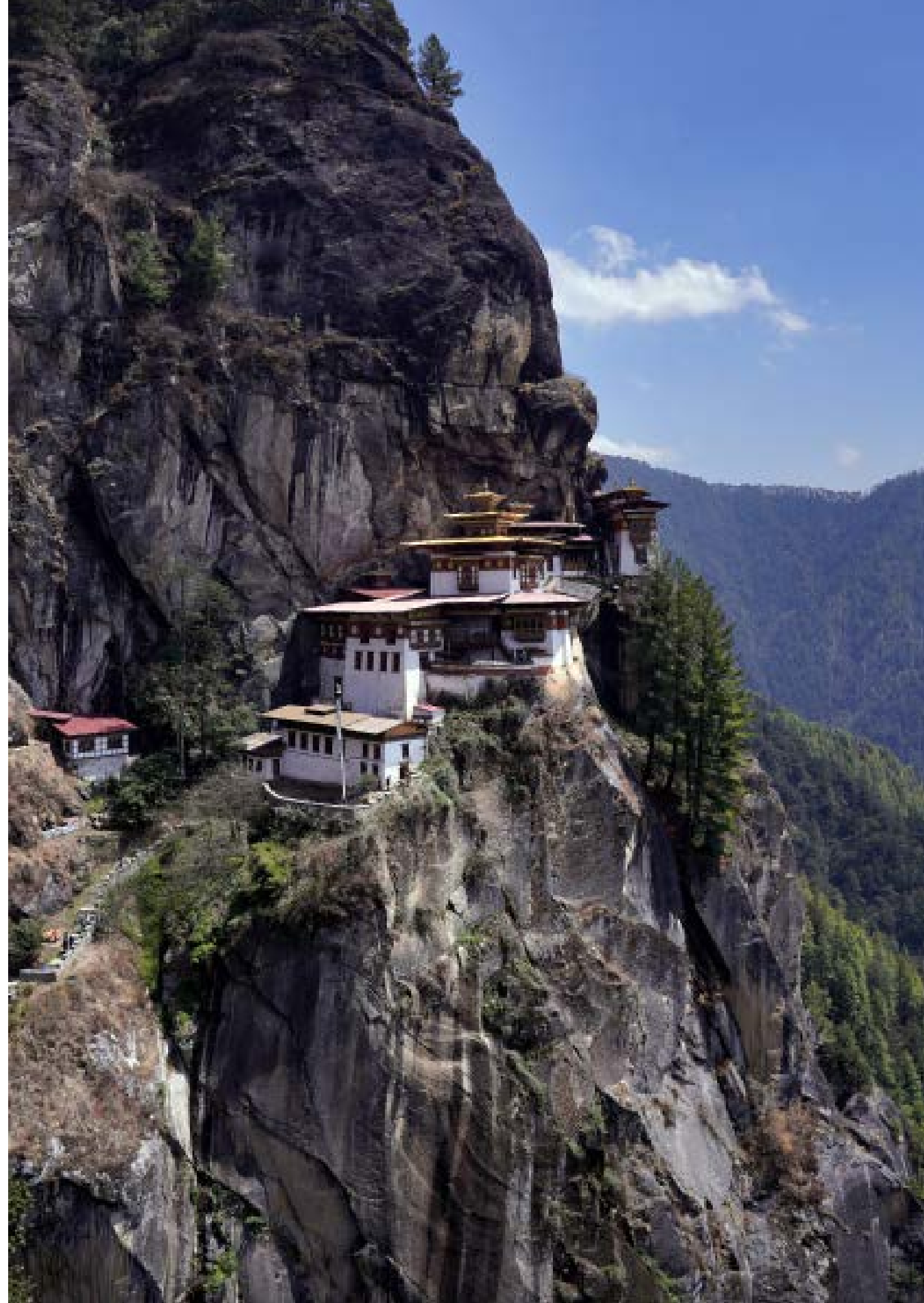
BHUTANESE BOUNTY
Aged cheese and other ingredients on display at Thimpu's Folk Heritage Restaurant.
Opposite: Rinzin Dema making buckwheat noodles at her farmhouse in Phurjoen village, Bumthang.





ABOVE AND BEYOND

Clockwise from above: Veteran guide Garab Dorji; the cliff-side Tiger's Nest Monastery is perched high above the Paro Valley; the guest wing at Amankora Bumthang Lodge. Opposite: Amankora's particularly pungent *ema datshi*.



Madman," who crossed the mountains into Bhutan in the 15th century and proceeded to subdue demons with his magical penis. He's also credited with introducing the practice of painting phalluses — in blushing graphic detail — on the walls of houses to ward off evil and bring good luck.

We needed a bit of luck ourselves navigating the windy mountain lane to Nobgang, a ridgetop hamlet set high above the valley. Our destination was an 18th-century house originally built as a hermitage; now, freshly restored as part of a government-sponsored village revitalization project, it operates as the Nobgang B&B, a guesthouse and kitchen committed to preserving traditional cooking techniques. An obscure location for such an endeavor, perhaps, but not an insignificant one: Bhutan's Queen Mother, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, was born just up the road.

Two village women were already laboring over an outdoor hearth when we arrived, stirring dried chilies in an iron wok, tending pots on an earthen stove, and pounding ingredients in a wooden mortar with pole-like pestles. Lunch was finally served at a low table in the house's little upstairs dining room, accessed via a near-vertical staircase made all the more treacherous by our stocking feet. But at least there was no danger of going hungry. Apart from a milk-based spinach soup called *jaju* that I found too bitter, it was all delicious, from a piquant stir-fry of pork and rice noodles to a luscious *nakey datshi* — fiddle-head ferns with cheese. The real star of the show, though, was a quickly emptied bowl of *ezay nyergum*, a complex chili paste made with nine different ingredients, including perilla seeds and fish mint. "This recipe is more than a hundred years old," says our host, Wongchuk, between sips

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BHUTAN

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of salty yak butter tea. “It was served to kings when Punakha was Bhutan’s capital. The Queen Mother loves it.” Me too.

Jason and I spent the night farther up the valley at Six Senses Punakha, one of the brand’s five high-end lodges in Bhutan. With just 19 suites and villas awash in honey-toned woods, the hillside hideaway had a romantic, rustic feel that couldn’t have melded better with the surrounding countryside. Its signature feature is a farmhouse-inspired lounge that cantilevers over an infinity pool, the curving shape of which echoes the gentle contours of the rice terraces below. After a dinner of seared local trout in the lodge’s quietly humming restaurant, we walked back to our rooms through the cool night air. I was delighted to find my bed sheets warmed by hot-water bottle.

“*HA GYELLO!*” GD taught us to shout this invocation whenever we crested a mountain pass on the way to Bumthang, a six-hour drive to the east. It means “mighty are the gods,” and at the 3,420-meter pass of Pele La, gazing out at a line of snow-capped Himalayan peaks, we bellowed the words with all sincerity.

Bhutan’s winding mountain roads induced silent prayers, too, with every perilous curve. Signs imploring NO HURRY NO WORRY AND DRIVING FASTER CAUSES DISASTER brought little comfort. But the scenery did. We passed waterfalls and swaths of virgin forest; rushing rivers and slopes confettied with magnolia blooms; deep gorges and verdant patchworks of farmland.

After a quick stop at Trongsa to stretch our legs at the town’s massive dzong, it was time for some home cooking. Bumthang, the district we were about to enter, is famous for its buckwheat dishes, and GD had arranged for us to have lunch at his wife’s mother’s village.

As the two-lane highway zigzagged down into Chumey, the southernmost the Bumthang’s four valleys, steep pine forests gave way to fields of buckwheat and millet. “This is the straightest road in Bhutan!” GD proclaimed as we hit a kilometer-long stretch of flat, unbending asphalt. Eventually, we pulled up to a farmhouse and were introduced to two

of GD’s cousins-in-law, both named Rinzin. With cows lowing outside, the ladies showed us how to make *puta* (buckwheat noodles) using a traditional wooden press — a levered contraption that you sit on to squeeze the dough through a perforated mold. Once cooked, the noodles were served with a stew of dried pumpkin, chilies, and cheese, alongside fluffy buckwheat pancakes known as *khuley*. We washed it all down with a couple of bottles of the local moonshine, *ara* — one infused with saffron root, the other, musty and stronger, with cordyceps, a parasitic fungus that grows on insect larva. (One might blanch at the description, but cordyceps, a respiratory and energy booster whose purported aphrodisiacal properties have earned it a reputation as the Viagra of the Himalayas, is big business in Bhutan, where it sells for upwards of US\$140 a gram.)

Buckwheat noodles also featured on the menu at Amankora Bumthang in Jakar, the district capital. The discreet 16-suite lodge sits adjacent to the Wangduechoeling Palace, a masterpiece of 19th-century Bhutanese architecture revered as the birthplace of the country’s first king. Currently closed for restoration, the building’s elaborately carved and painted woodwork nevertheless dominate the views from the banquette window seats in each of the serene guest rooms. Amankora’s other ace in the hole is chef Tshering Phuntscho, who describes himself as a onetime “cowboy” from Mongar in eastern Bhutan. While he lays on both Western and Bhutanese dishes (and some that fall some-

where in between, such as a toothsome yak carpaccio), I was most taken by his renditions of Bumthang specialties like *khari*, a gnocchi-like wheat pasta sprinkled with poppy seeds. And for those who like their flavors robust, Tshering’s ema datshi could well be the country’s finest. He makes it with whole sun-dried white chilies (*shur kam*) and a well-aged yak cheese — as strong as any Roquefort — acquired from nomadic herders in the country’s far east. Each mouthful was burning and wincingly pungent at the same time, and I couldn’t stop eating.

BACK IN THIMPHU, Jason and I spent an afternoon poking around craft stores and tailor shops near the city’s clock-towered central square. At a bustling dumpling joint called Zombala 2, we snacked on

the best momos of our trip — one portion pan-fried and stuffed with minced pork, the other steamed and filled with shredded cabbage — which we doused with ezay from a squeeze bottle.

There were two more local specialties that I had yet to try, and for those, we headed to Babesa Village Restaurant on the outskirts of town. Housed in 700-year-old heritage home off the Paro-Thimphu highway, the decade-old establishment is among the city’s best bets for authentic Bhutanese cooking, and the dishes I’d come for didn’t disappoint: *sikam paa*, dried but still fatty pork belly fried up with red chilies and daikon; and *shakam maru*, a stew of jerked beef, potatoes, tomatoes, onion leaf, and rice noodles. Not a scrap was left in the bowls.

Conveniently, Babesa Village was also positioned at the base of the corkscrew



SNACK TIME
Right: Momo dumplings at Thimphu’s Zombala 2 restaurant.

road that leads up to Six Senses Thimphu, arguably the most majestic of the brand’s quintet of Bhutanese lodges. Conceived as a “palace in the sky,” it sits high on a mountainside above the capital, with a lofty glass-walled lounge that capitalizes on the views.

Tomorrow, we would head back to Paro for one last adventure: the climb up to the cliff-hugging Taksang (“Tiger’s Nest”) Monastery, where legend has it that Guru Rinpoche, a revered eighth-century Buddhist master, landed on the back of a flying tigress. But for now, we were content to laze on the stone terrace of our two-bedroom villa, taking in the sweeping vista of the Thimphu Valley.

“Dinner?” Jason suggested once the sun had dipped behind the mountains.

But of course. 🍷