

TatlerX

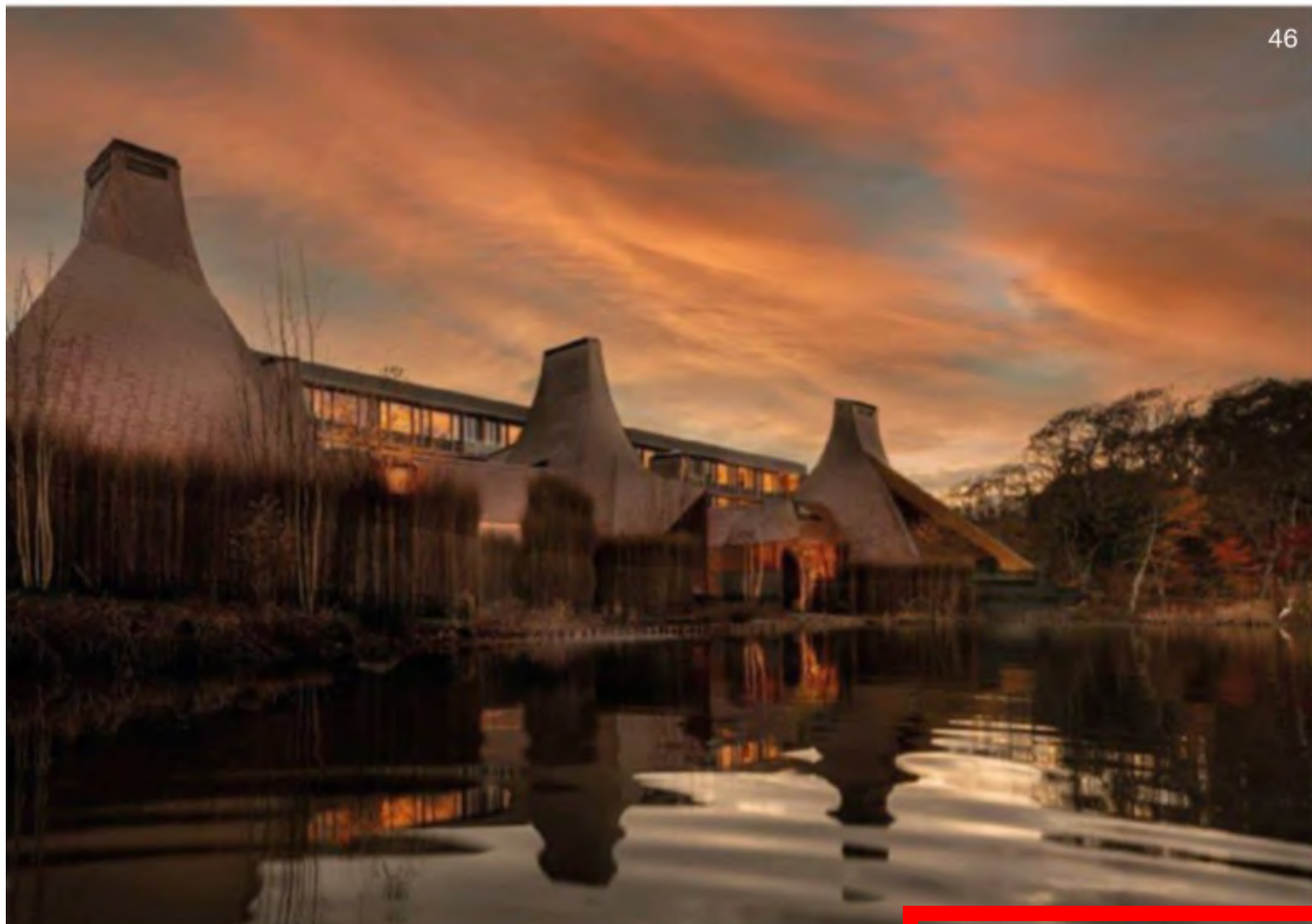
TRANSFORMATIVE TRAVEL

WILD AND WANDERFUL

Life looks different in the depths of the Mongolian wilderness, which is drawing curious travellers in search of new perspectives



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ABOVE THE CLOUDS

The rough and rugged ridges of the Himalayan mountains are met with the gentle spirituality of Buddhist teachings in Bhutan *By Coco Marett*

“I have lived 20 years, four times,” an elderly monk tells us with a bold grin. *Tatler* had asked his age when our group stopped for a break on the Trans Bhutan Trail.

Encounters with monks are common in “The Land of the Thunder Dragon”. Mahayana Buddhism is Bhutan’s official religion, and around 75 per cent of the population is Buddhist. As such, the principles of humility and happiness so deeply entrenched in the religion are felt in the warmth of the country’s people and the simplicity of everyday life.

Truly unlike anywhere else on Earth, Bhutan’s mystery and allure have placed the destination at the top of many travellers’ bucket lists. And since the country reduced its “Sustainable Development Fee”—a daily fee implemented in an attempt to reduce the carbon footprint that travellers bring to Bhutan—from US\$200 to US\$100 in September this year, all eyes are on the Himalayan kingdom for its otherworldly landscapes and unique spiritual experiences.

“Many of our Aman guests seek spiritual experiences when they visit Bhutan,” says Jonathan Lithgow, general manager of Amankora, where *Tatler* stayed during our visit. Inspired by the Bhutanese custom of offering a place to rest for weary travellers traversing the country—roads were only introduced there in 1962—Amankora has five lodges, giving guests the opportunity to experience the diverse and fascinating range of landscapes, cultures and communities that make up Bhutan.

Just a short drive from the laidback capital, Thimphu, Amankora Thimphu is a fine example of what is now one of our favourite architectural styles: Brutalist Bhutanese farmhouse. Taking notes from and adding a hint of drama to the local architectural language of sloping roofs and traditional rammed-earth walls, the sheer scale of Amankora Thimphu’s buildings is awe-inspiring.

Amankora Punakha is accessed by a suspension bridge over the Mo Chhu River, lined with prayer flags. The property is built around a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse built by a former *Je Khenpo*, or chief abbot of Bhutan. Outside the farmhouse is a stone courtyard, where drinks are served in the evenings. Further down the hill is a heated infinity pool surrounded by views of rice terraces that line Punakha Valley.

Meanwhile, Amankora Paro, the property closest to Bhutan’s iconic Tiger’s Nest Monastery, is set in a pine forest where a sprawling garden features a sunken fire pit surrounded by ancient trees, and a spectacular view of a temple perched high in the mountains. On request, guests can arrange a one-on-one session with a monk from this temple, which includes guided meditation and Buddhist teachings.

“We offer private guided tours of the kingdom’s numerous temples and monasteries as well as classes on traditional prayer flag or *torma* making,” says Lithgow. “There are also opportunities to learn about Buddhism, and the importance of National Happiness within our country.”

One of Bhutan’s biggest claims to fame is that it is the birthplace of the “Gross National Happiness” index—a term coined in 1972 by the country’s fourth king, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, when he declared, “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product.”

Knowing this, I came to Bhutan, expecting perhaps naively, a land of beaming smiles and externalised enthusiasm. Instead, what I came to find was a quiet but consistent undertone of contentment; a confidence that comes with being nurtured in an environment that values strength of spirit over what one spends or owns.

It was humbling, coming from the western world, where happiness is often something to be outwardly displayed. In Bhutan, one’s happiness is fiercely protected.



Approximately 75 per cent of Bhutan's population are practising Buddhists



Amankora Paro's garden features a sunken fire pit surrounded by ancient trees. **Opposite page:** Amankora's properties take inspiration from traditional Bhutanese design.



“There are opportunities to learn about Buddhism and the importance of National Happiness within our country”

— JONATHAN LITHGOW

Here, happiness—genuine happiness—is simply a state of being. “All beings, even the smallest insects, don’t like suffering. We all want happiness,” Sherub Wangchuk, principal of the Nalanda Buddhist Institute, a Buddhist monastic school in western Punakha, tells me. “If you want [to be] happy according to Buddhist thought, it is achieved through interdependence and understanding that all beings are connected.”

More than 160 monks from as young as six years old come to the institute to study religious texts, learn to perform Buddhist ceremonies, and take part in philosophical debates for one to two hours per day.

“Is the sky permanent or impermanent? These are the kinds of topics that we discuss, analyse and explore different perspectives,” the principal explains.

All seriousness aside, Wangchuk says boys will be boys, and the young monks have been known to sneak a

game of football on television from time to time. “They love football,” Wangchuk tells me with a laugh. “When there are big matches on, they sometimes sneak to watch them in the TV room, since the games air during night time in Bhutan. They think they are being very sneaky, but we know.”

It’s a misty, overcast Tuesday morning, and we are in the monastery’s sitting room where Wangchuk has invited us in for a cup of *saja*, or yak butter tea. “When the sky is happy, it’s even more beautiful here,” Wangchuk says softly.

The institute is located high in the Himalayan mountains, accessible only by a cliffside path. You can either drive to its opening, but the harrowingly narrow path must be walked by foot.

It is deeply, and intentionally, isolated.

Despite this, Wangchuk says Bhutan’s lockdown



Clockwise, from far left: Many Bhutanese boys and men dedicate their lives to serving as monks; Amankora Punakha is accessed by a bridge lined with traditional prayer flags; ritual offerings are an important part of daily life; a monk prays at Paro Taktsang, better known as Tiger's Nest





Clockwise, from left: Peaceful mornings in Bhutan; suites at Amankora's properties provide room for contemplation; Amankora Thimpu takes inspiration from the local architectural language of sloping roofs and traditional rammed-earth walls



“If you want to be happy, you have to help others be happy. As beings, we rely on each other” — SHERUB WANGCHUK

during the Covid-19 pandemic took a toll on its students, who spend ten months of the year living on site.

“We are accustomed to isolation, but even for us, things felt strange,” he says, adding that it only emphasised the importance of Buddhist values such as compassion and selflessness. “If you want to be happy, you have to help others be happy. As beings, we rely on each other. The sooner you realise that your happiness

depends on the wellbeing of others—not just other people, but also plants and animals—you will be less likely to hurt others or destroy the environment.”

The sentiment is simple, yet succinct.

“Sorry my English maybe isn’t enough to explain,” he says. “Maybe in my next life, I will speak better English.”

As we leave Nalanda, driving down the mountain, a young monk is walking down the mountain, smartphone in hand, smiling to himself. I wondered to myself what monks might follow or search for on the internet—besides the latest football updates, of course.

A joke came to mind once told by a Hindu priest named Dandapani, about someone who asked him whether it was appropriate for monks to use email. He replied, “Yes, as long as there are no attachments.”