

Dancers perform the Dance of the Drum from Dramitse, during the Paro Tsechu. The dance originated in the eastern Bhutanese town of Dramitse in the early 13th century.

BHUTAN

DANCES WITH DEITIES

Witness the celebrations in honour of the guru who gave Buddhism to Bhutan

Text **Ian Seldrup**

Wedged between the world's two great giants, India and China, the landlocked mountain kingdom of Bhutan resisted the encroachment of globalisation for longer than most, beginning to pave its serpentine roads only in the 1960s and lifting its ban on television barely more than a decade ago. Today, even as getting from A to B is now a much simpler proposition, and "Bhutan Star" (the local version of *Idol*) has the citizenry rapt, the traditions of this once-insular Himalayan nation have remained as proud and vibrant as ever. In fact, if you're one of the comparatively few foreigners that pay a visit to the Land of the Thunder Dragon, you're almost certain to find the Bhutanese in festive spirits.



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Blaine Harrington III/Corbis



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AN audience many hundred strong has squeezed into every inch of available space surrounding the courtyard. Senior monks and their families have secured the best seats – indeed the *only* seats – and observe the action from galleries above. The sky is awash in the pale blues of spring and hints of juniper and roasted barley incense hang on the crisp, thin air. Few foreign faces are present. The spectacle unfolding isn't laid on for tourists: it's a joyous religious affair that has been taking place here for centuries.

As slow, steady drumbeats and blaring trumpets envelop the crowd and an intermittent sharp chime rings out, a troupe of colourful creatures streams into the sun-drenched arena. Spinning, twisting and leaping gracefully in unison, the elaborately garbed and masked dancers – monks specially trained at the government's prestigious Royal Academy of Performing Arts – are the focal points of Bhutan's lively, spiritually charged festivals, or *tsechus*. For the devoutly Buddhist Bhutanese, viewing the rituals is an important occasion to gain merit for the next life. For inquisitive travellers, it represents an enlightening opportunity to understand this mystical kingdom's inner workings.

The history of these *chaam* dances revolves around Guru Rinpoche, who is said to have brought Buddhism to the country in the eighth century, arriving astride a flying tigress at the site of Bhutan's famous Tiger's Nest Monastery on a dramatic ledge overlooking the Paro Valley. According to Bhutanese belief, this venerated "second Buddha" performed the dances to subdue evil spirits and restore the health of an ailing local king, who subsequently converted and set about spreading Buddhism throughout Bhutan. Guru Rinpoche is said to have held the first *tsechu* in the district of Bumthang, presenting eight dance forms depicting his different manifestations.

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Today's *tsechu* also involves a series of spiritually significant dances employing a bewildering array of complex movements, each inspired by tales of Guru Rinpoche's exploits or legends filled with demons and demigods. But for visiting observers, understanding all of the intricate layers of meaning behind every dance isn't necessary to gain an appreciation for the beauty of these bewitching dramas.

As festivals typically run over three to five days, there's plenty of opportunity to witness the various performances. Names like "Dance of the Stags and Hounds" and "Dance of the Terrifying Deities" evoke tantalising images of Bhutan's animist past, but some have more brutal undertones. The mesmerising "Black Hat Dance", with its whirling dancers attired in colourful flowing robes, celebrates the assassination of an anti-Buddhist Tibetan king by a monk dressed in black who hid a bow and arrow in the folds of his sleeves.

Fortunately for modern visitors taking an interest in Bhutanese culture, the locals harbour no such distaste for those with non-Buddhist persuasions. Tourists are permitted to enter the majestic

Above: The magnificent Trashie Chhoe Dzong, north of the capital Thimphu, comes alive during the autumn *tsechu*. **Opposite:** A masked dancer cuts a striking figure in the dramatic Dance of the Judgement of the Dead.



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Above: Women wear colourful traditional dress for an evening procession. Right: Young monks watch the Punakha Tsechu from a vantage point inside the monastery. Opposite (Top): Bhutan's expressive festival masks are intricate works of art. Opposite (Bottom): A monk performs the traditional Black Hat dance at the Paro Tsechu.

12 UPCOMING FESTIVALS

The dates of Bhutan's tsechus are based on the lunar calendar, so the corresponding periods on the Western calendar vary from year to year. Here are the dates for just some of the festivals coming up.

2012

Wangdue Tsechu, Wangdue Phodrang, Sep 23-25

Thimphu Tsechu, Thimphu, Sep 25-27

Prakhar Tsechu, Bumthang, Oct 30-Nov 1

Crane Festival, Wangdue Phodrang, Nov 11

Nalakar Tsechu, Bumthang, Nov 28-30

Trongsa Festival, Trongsa, Dec 21-23

2013

Punakha Dromche and Tsechu, Punakha, Feb 15-22

Gomkora Tsechu, Trashigang, Mar 20-22

Paro Tsechu, Paro, Mar 23-27

Ura Yakchoe, Bumthang, Apr 21-25

Nimalung Tsechu, Bumthang, Jun 16-18

Kurjey Festival, Bumthang, Jun 18

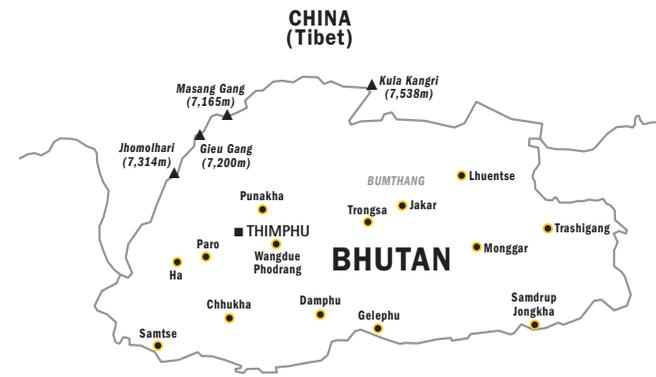
fortress-monasteries, or *dzongs*, where the festivals take place (only the inner sanctuaries are off-limits), and photography – when undertaken discreetly and respectfully – is often tolerated with an impassive smile.

On the final day of the *tsechu*, early risers are rewarded with a rare sight and the religious high point of the festival: the unfurling of the *thongdrel*, an enormous brocaded tapestry typically depicting a seated Guru Rinpoche flanked by other spiritual beings. The Bhutanese believe that merely beholding the holy painting cleanses the soul of sin and assures the viewer of a good rebirth, and they file past the giant canvas in their hundreds with offerings of fruit and grains and generous bows. The ceremony lasts only a few hours, since sunlight must not be allowed to strike the sacred *thongdrel* directly, and as dawn breaks it is rolled back up and not unveiled again until next year.

Astonishingly, this elaborate annual festival is not a singular event. *Tsechu* literally means “day ten”, and on the tenth day of

each month in the Bhutanese calendar, different districts in the kingdom will hold a festival within the confines of their respective *dzongs*. The most popular and most accessible festivals are the springtime Paro Tsechu and the Thimphu Tsechu in the autumn, with attendees numbering in the thousands. But smaller, more intimate celebrations can be found elsewhere in the country at various times of year.

With visiting tourists numbering in the mere tens of thousands a year, Bhutan remains an enigmatic kingdom perched on the roof of the world, its deeply religious people spread far and wide across its dramatic landscape. But every so often the yak herders come down from their mountain villages to join their valley-dwelling neighbours – and a handful of adventurous travellers – and their tranquil monasteries are filled with the excitement and melodrama of one of South Asia’s most striking spectacles. Perhaps it takes a nation that measures its success in terms of *gross national happiness* to really put on a great show. **AGP**



A long line of monks helps to unroll a giant *thongdrel* as the Punakha Tsechu comes to a spectacular spiritual conclusion.



Christophe Boisteaux/Corbis



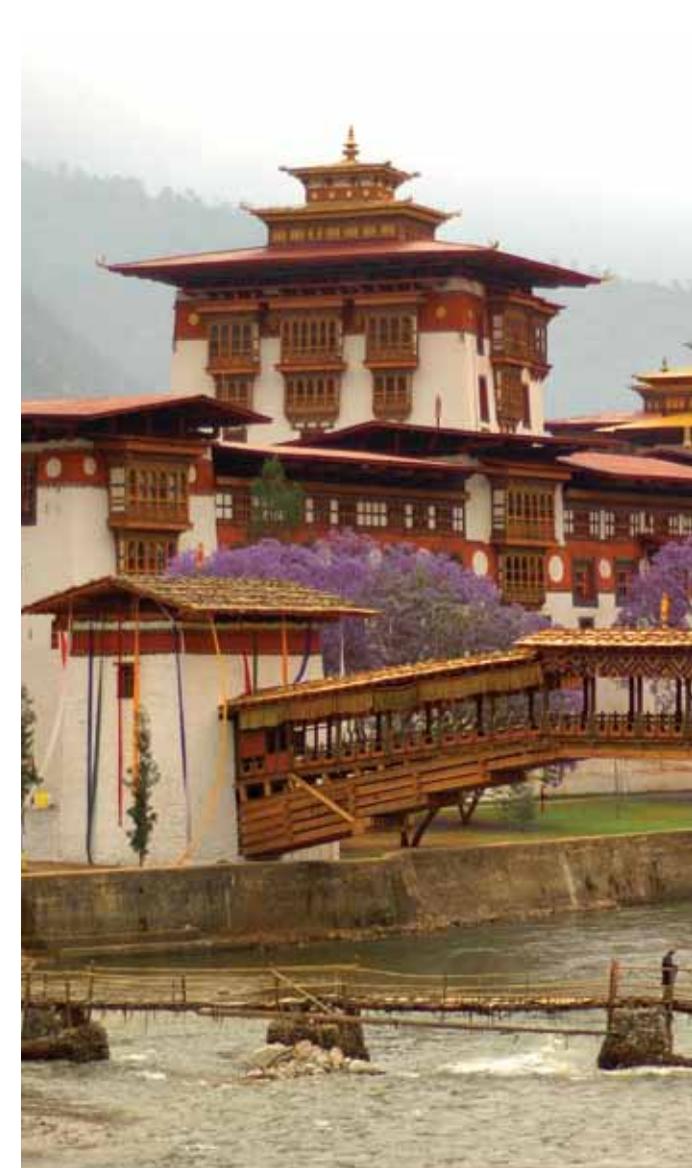
ESSENTIALS

HOW TO GET THERE: Paro Airport, in the west of the country, is Bhutan’s only international airport. The national flag carrier, Druk Air (drukair.com.bt), flies direct from Bangkok, Kathmandu, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Dhaka and others, and direct flights from Singapore are planned to begin in September 2012. Buses and hired cars ferry travellers around the country via a network of reasonable roads, but be prepared for long, slow rides and stomach-churning bends tempered only by the astonishingly beautiful scenery.

WHEN TO GO: Autumn (late September to late November) and Spring (March to May), respectively the best and second best time for trekking, coincide with two of Bhutan’s favourite festivals – Thimphu Tsechu and Paro Tsechu – but these are also the busiest times in terms of tourist numbers. Monsoonal rains dump half a metre of rain on Thimphu during the three months of summer (June to August), but it’s still an interesting time to visit if trekking isn’t a major part of your itinerary. Bhutan’s tropical south is worth visiting in winter (December to February) when snow and chilly temperatures make the higher regions less palatable.

WHERE TO STAY: Upmarket options include the breathtaking Uma Paro (uma.paro.como.bz) and the five classy lodgings of Amankora (amanresorts.com) at Thimphu, Paro, Punakha, Gangtey and Bumthang. Good mid-range options in the Paro valley are the Nak Sel Hotel and Spa (naksel.com), Tiger’s Nest Resort (tigernest.bt) and Gangtey Palace Hotel (gangteypalace.net), while the Yangkhil Resort (yangkhil.bt) offers lovely views of Trongsa Dzong.

WHERE TO EAT: In Thimphu, grab some authentic Bhutanese food at the cosy Bhutan Orchid Restaurant (Chang Lam) or some decent *momos* (Tibetan-style dumplings) at Zombala (Hong Kong Market). For a great coffee in the capital, head to Karma’s Coffee (Zhamling Building). In Paro, there’s good coffee and cake on offer at Tshernyoen’s Café (Bhutan Telecom Road), and Soechey Restaurant is a nice family-run place worth checking out in the town square. If you’re after authentic Bhutanese red rice, where better to go in Paro than Red Rice (Jangsa Hilltop).



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