

Asia

High of the Tiger

A hike to one of Bhutan's most sacred monasteries challenges mind and body, writes Lynn Gail

Questions stream through my mind like empty carts on a rollercoaster as I stare upwards, transfixed by Paro Taktsang, Bhutan's most dramatic Buddhist monastery. Also called the Tiger's Nest, it clings to a sheer cliff face some 3100m above sea level. Its high, whitewashed walls appear unreachable behind clusters of low-lying clouds. With an estimated six-hour-round hike ahead, I ask myself three things. Will I be able to complete the arduous uphill ascent? Will predicted rain turn dry mud to sludge? And, more importantly, will the pilgrimage be more life-changing than enduro-training?

The day before, it seemed unlikely I'd be standing here in awe, about to embark on the tiny country's landmark pilgrimage, the final leg to a deeply spiritual week. Being March, and springtime, there are usually pure blue horizons, but late heavy snowfall had blocked our mountain pass en route. Mountain gods roaming the encircling Himalayas had, thankfully, worked some snow-clearing wizardry, and the "Christmas card" stop was soon behind us.

Laden with water, snacks and a camera I set off, passing a water-powered prayer wheel and imagine its chimes are a good-luck charm for all who embark on the steep ascent. Mules are carrying people to a midway point, but their bony legs look precarious as they navigate uneven, rocky inclines and seem better suited to enjoying life in pastured paddocks.

No longer a springy 20-something, I pace myself, stopping not only because my breathing shallows as the air thins, but also to absorb the panoramic Paro Valley below. Petticoated by towering pine trees, the pretty quilted landscape reappears each time I round switchback tracks. Like a staccato beat, it's stop-start, stop-start. Others scoot forwards in the same rhythm.

"You need to exercise every day to reach the end," an elderly Indian woman leaning on a hiking stick says as I pass. "You're nearly halfway there!" A German chap chips in on his descent. There's a camaraderie with passersby who share the vision for embarking on the slow strenuous climb – it's a rite of passage, the gateway to purification and longevity.

I wander on, wondering about great Indian master Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche. Legend claims he flew in from Tibet on the back of a tigress in the eighth century, landing in one of the cliff's caves where he meditated for three years, three months and three days, thus initiating Buddhism in Bhutan. It wasn't until the late 17th century that Bhutan's then leader, Gyalsey Tenzin Rabgye, built the ethereal temple around Guru Rinpoche's sacred cave.

At the midway point I lay under fluttering flags that represent Earth's five elements: white for air, red for fire, green for water, yellow for earth, and blue for sky and space. Prayer flags with the mantra "Om mani padme hum" swirl above, willing me to sign up, to chant the spiritual practice on loop. Feeling the pull of Buddhism, I spin rows of prayer wheels, quietly attempting the meditative mantra.

Mountains edged by ever more prayer flags billowing in the breeze lead to a touted photo-op lookout. In the distance the Tiger's Nest tumbles over a sheer overhang like a treasured tapestry. It is

Bhutan



Above: Paro Taktsang monastery, aka the Tiger's Nest. Left: Visitors on a hike to the dramatic monastery. Below: Mules carry people halfway.





ESCAPE ROUTE

GETTING THERE

Most international airlines fly from Australia's major cities to Bangkok or Singapore from where Drukair – Royal Bhutan Airlines has scheduled weekly flights to Paro, Bhutan. drukair.com.bt

STAY THERE

Six Senses Paro. sixsenses.com

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Australians need a visa to enter Bhutan. doi.gov.bt

VISITOR GUIDE

Visitors can travel independently in the capital, Thimphu, and in Paro city. All other locations require a guide. Plus they need to pay a daily tourist fee of \$US100. bhutan.travel



From top: Prayer flags flutter along the route of the pilgrimage; Lynn at the top; flag colours painted onto rock along the trek.

magnificent in its magnetism. Seven hundred stone steps lay before me – the final hurdle to the sacred entrance. “I’m almost there” thoughts urge me on as I carefully tread down each narrow step, pausing briefly at a bridge where a cool cascade of water shimmers down a rock face. Then it’s up again, up more steps clinging to a gaping gully. And suddenly, like the flying tigress from Tibet, I arrive at the entrance after two and a half hours – tired, emotional, hungry and open to any blessings ready to be bestowed.

Shoes removed, camera and phone locked in a locker (rules of entering), I clamber up ice-cold steps. At a large rock reputed to have mystical powers, I close my eyes, stick my thumb out, say a prayer for an ailing family member, then blindly step forwards attempting to touch a small indentation; if you hit the hole, your wish comes true. I peep once, hoping my prayer is answered. A final, steep laddered staircase leads to one of the monastery’s eight ornate temples where larger-than-life golden Buddha statues line the walls. A head monk sitting in the lotus position lightly touches my forehead and chants in a language I can’t understand, but it doesn’t matter – his powerful blessing is felt deep within.

Exhausted, I begin the descent, though my body feels lighter. There’s a spring in my step and I sing aloud to the heavens. My mind is clear, calm, focused. I overhear a hiker chatting with his friend: “When you travel to a new place, you come back a different person.” My heart nods. Travel opens us to life-changing experiences, those we talk about when home to cultivate inspiration in others to escape the ordinary and explore the extraordinary.

The writer was supported by Bhutan Tourism.



Travel writer and photographer Lynn Gail was intent on exploring the eight temples of the Tiger’s Nest and receive a blessing – time had run out on a previous journey.

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