

**Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon  
(Plus Nepal, Taj Mahal, and Stonehenge)**

**by**

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In the Fall of 1994, I attended an Explorer's Club dinner in San Antonio, Texas. While there, I heard Catherine Nixon Cooke talk about leading an expedition to Bhutan to learn about Buddhist Philosophy. Until then, I had never ever heard of the place. The timing was not right for me to go on her trip, but I promised myself that I would go there sometime. This small country, about the size of Switzerland, is East of Nepal, South of Tibet, West of China, North of Burma, and shares India's Northeastern border. King Jigme Sinhye Wangchuk rules the Kingdom of Bhutan. He is married to four sisters. And you think you have problems!

While Wintering-over in McMurdo, Antarctica in 1996, I decided that when I left the ice I would travel to Bhutan. Antarctica is isolated, but the Internet has long fingers. By the first of August, I had made e-mail contact with Christopher Post, the United States representative of Yod Sel Tours and Treks Ltd., whose office is in Bhutan's capitol of Thimphu.

There were no planes in or out of McMurdo for six months. During the last week of August, three flights came in at WinFly. Among the many items of mail that I received was a visa application for Bhutan, which left on the next flight out a couple of days later. When the main body of flights began on October 1<sup>st</sup>, I received confirmation of an approved visa.

Finally, on November 1st, I left the Ice. After enjoying the green trees and fresh fruit and flying over Mt. Cook and traveling around New Zealand's South Island for a week, I departed on an Air New Zealand flight to Bangkok, Thailand, with an hour stopover in Brisbane, Australia, on November 9th. After over-nighting in Bangkok, I departed to Paro, Bhutan on Druk Air, Royal Bhutan Airlines. The first hop was to Calcutta, India. Enroute to Calcutta, I sat on the right side of the plane, next to a window. A small, brilliantly colored circular rainbow about the size of a quarter flickered off the back of the seat in front of me. For most of this flight segment, I cupped the rainbow in my hands, which gave me a spiritual feeling, so intense that I ignored the sun glimmering off the rice paddies 30,000 feet below and declined the airline food so as not to lose the rainbow dancing in my palms.

In Calcutta I stayed on board, and moved to the left side for a better view of the Himalayan Mountains, which I knew would be visible from that side during the flight to Paro. While waiting for the next group of passengers to board, the plane's Captain, George DeSerres, walked down the aisle and greeted the people already seated. He stopped and chatted with me a few minutes. While in Antarctica, I read a travel story about Bhutan. In the article, the

author made mention of Captain George. So I told him that I had read about him in the magazine. We talked about flying in Bhutan, and he told me that he was only one of twelve pilots checked out to fly into Paro. I told him that I was a private pilot and asked him if there were any opportunities for private pilots to fly into Bhutan, and he told me no. Just before he went back into the cockpit, he said he would have me come up for a little while. A few minutes later, the flight engineer came back to me and said I was invited into the cockpit. I thought I would be up there just a few minutes, but must admit it was a pleasant surprise to be allowed to fly on the jump seat all the way from engine start in Calcutta to engine stop in Paro, with Captain George pointing out Mt. Everest and some of the other 8000-meter mountains in the Himalayan Range. I listened on a spare headset as he talked with the Indian flight controllers.



Druk Air at Paro Airport

Just prior to landing in Paro, George told the passengers that the landing would be somewhat different than what they normally experienced. He said, "Don't be alarmed at the close proximity of the trees and mountains as we spiral our way in," or similar words, grinning at me as he made this announcement to the passengers. As a pilot, I am used to flying the pattern for landings. You fly parallel to the landing strip, and then make two distinct right or left turns (depending upon whether you are flying right or left pattern), and then fly the final approach onto the runway. Generally, there isn't a mountain blocking the final. So we flew around the mountain, and then George expertly slipped the British-built BAe 146-100 jet to align his approach. This was the most spectacular landing I have ever witnessed! Welcome to Paro, Bhutan. A month later, a friend asked me what airline was my favorite. Without hesitation, I responded, "Druk Air."

As in any country, one has to clear customs. While the hand-printed sign saying "Detention" over a wooden door shows that the custom agents are alert to smugglers, their attitude was relaxed as they waved me pass rickety-old tables. There were no Hertz rentals available, and the Druk Air jet was the only flight of the day. The rest rooms were outside, and more consistent with outdoor toilets. Although this was November, and the base altitude is about

8000 feet, the temperatures were in the 70's (F.), and the sky was the deep blue that one sees in unpolluted places.

Bhutan has restricted the number of visitors entering into the country. Only about 4000 to 5000 tourists are permitted each year. Prior to issuing a visa, the visitor must sign up with a tour group, and have the cost of the tour paid in full, which runs at least \$200.00 per day per person. My wife Karoline had to transfer money to a bank in New York where the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan has an account. Even though I was traveling by myself, I still had to have a tour guide. Not too many visitors have baseball hats with penguin pins on them, or perhaps my visa photograph had been circulated to Yod Sel Tours (and I wonder to whom else), but at any rate, my guide, Ugyen Tshering, soon identified me. While the driver (whose name I think is Dennis) loaded my bag into the Toyota, Ugyen asked me if I would mind if another traveler rode with us to Thimphu.

Jane Burrell is a British lady who lives in Hong Kong with her husband, but travels extensively on her own. She had also booked her tour through Yod Sel, but except for a couple of times, we traveled separately. Our paths crossed several times during the next few days. She is a few years older than I am, but makes my travels look like I sit home in a rocking chair. Nonetheless, sharing the sixty-kilometer ride from Paro to Thimphu was fun. Many of the photographs I have probably would not have been taken had she not been along, often asking the driver to stop and look at the red peppers drying on roofs made of straw. Before traveling anywhere, Jane thoroughly reads the guidebooks and studies the heritage and habits of the people, and therefore, knew of the Bhutanese growing red chili peppers, which they dry on top of their homes. Traveling unhurriedly in a private car gave us many opportunities to stop and take photos of the red peppers, the houses, the monasteries, the people gathering rice, the children, and the many Buddhist monks wearing the traditional maroon colored robes.



Red peppers drying on homes

About thirty minutes into the journey, we had to stop at a district check station, which was located along the Thimphu River, and is on the major

highway that leads to India. At this check station, many Indian or Nepalese families toiled as highway construction workers. Throughout Bhutan, these families camped along the roads they worked, living in tents or thatched huts. Campfires warmed the workers. Grandmothers in brightly colored shawls and small children helped move smaller rocks or fill potholes. While waiting for our papers to be checked, an Indian truck/bus stopped. People riding in back of the brightly colored truck waved, oblivious to the paintings of Bengal tigers that adorned it. I took photographs of three Buddhist monuments called “stupas” which were near the edge of the river.

We crammed the nominal one-hour drive into three. All the houses looked ancient, but I found later that many modern houses are built with the older style of architecture. Monasteries are of similar designs, but generally are much larger, and have a wide red horizontal stripe near the top. Symbols of male fertility were painted on some houses. The Himalayans form Bhutan’s Northern border. Between Paro and Thimphu, evidence of massive geological formations and upheaval would make any geologist’s heart go pitter-pat. Families cut and sifted the rice by hand over multi-layered terraces. Other farmers tilled their fields with plows led by two oxen. Three-wheeled rota-tillers pulled hay wagons, doubling as the family vehicle. Children in brightly colored clothes waved. In Nepal, the children beg for money if you take their photograph; in Bhutan, they were excited to have their photographs taken. Near Thimphu teams of archers competed in this national sport. Traffic increased, motor scooters darted in and out, basketball courts gave young men something to do on a Sunday afternoon. Thin cattle walked on the road, and didn’t care if the traffic had to avoid them.



Archers near Thimphu



Wangchuk Hotel in Thimphu

Overlooking a soccer field, the four-story Wangchuk Hotel in Thimphu was built in 1974, when the country allowed the entry of tourists for the historic coronation of young King Wangchuk. It is clean, and each room has a western style bathroom. After checking in, Ugyen took me to the office of Yod Sel Tours where I met one of the owners, Mrs. Dawa Penjore, and after that, it was time for dinner in the hotel. A group of Japanese tourists filled the dining room. I sat by one of them, and since I can speak a little Japanese, found he had been a victim of the Kyoto earthquake. His house had been destroyed. Still, he could

laugh heartedly. Our meal consisted of very thin spaghetti, rice, soup, and some type of meat - I think it may have been lamb or chicken but don't remember. During the next few days, while eating in official tourist places, the menu varied little.

The next day was November 11<sup>th</sup>, King Wangchuk's 41<sup>st</sup> birthday. He wasn't in Thimphu for his birthday, but that didn't stop the people from celebrating. This is a national holiday, and it seemed like the entire city of Bhutan came to the soccer field across the street from my hotel. Initially, I walked over to the field to see the activities, but I was still in culture shock after leaving the ice, and just couldn't handle the crowds. But my third-floor hotel room overlooked the field, so I just opened my window and took three rolls of film of the many groups who performed dances in brilliantly colored costumes. The women in the crowd wore Kira's of many beautiful colors, and many of the men were dressed in their better Ghos. To me, the Kira is similar to the Japanese Kimono, only without the Obi (the parachute-looking thing). The Gho is like a robe that goes to the knees, and while Western tennis shoes and jeans are creeping into the culture, the traditional style of clothes predominate.



Dancers forming Bhutan flag



Girls walking to their place in ceremonies

The day before I had a rainbow dancing in my palm. On this day the dancers wore the colors of the rainbow. The group of dancers that I really remember is the one that wore the yellow and orange colors of the Bhutanese flag and danced themselves into a flag formation, while other dancers dressed in white diagonally cut across the bottom left and upper right corners to make a dragon, for Bhutan is called the Land of the Thunder Dragon, and proudly has a fire breathing white dragon on the national flag.

That afternoon Jane and I stopped the car to "chat" and photograph Bhutanese children and old people. Ugyen translated conversations now long forgotten, and gave me their rudimentary addresses, so I could send copies of the photos to them. I hope they received them, but I never heard back. Our destination was the Cherri Monastery, about an hour's drive from Thimphu. Cheri is my daughter's name, so I liked the sound of the name of that place. Children playing in their stone and wood house watched us as we left our car.



People along the way to the Cherri Monastery, and monks at the monastery

After crossing an ancient bridge, we walked about a kilometer over trails centuries old to the monastery. Two young monks, both about 17, greeted us along the trail. Their smiles showed teeth red as their robes. (Many of the people chew a narcotic called betel nut that leaves a red stain in their mouths. The betel nut is covered with some type of powder mix of limestone and wrapped in leaves. I may not be remembering the details correctly. Several times I was offered betel nut during my stay, but as the risk of offending the local people, I always declined.) Multi-colored Buddhists painted on rocks benignly looked upon us, a slight smile of contentment reflecting the inner peace of the unknown artist. Rows of sun-bleached prayer flags, each on a pole about twenty feet high, danced to the rhythm of the wind. As if a watchtower, a stupa overlooked the valley. Hidden inside the four sealed walls are monuments or bodies that are only known by the monks. I am not well versed in Buddhism to know the purpose of stupas. Intricate carvings of Buddhas on slate served as shutters to these closed walls. Worshippers left small seashell-like shrines on the sills of these covered windows. On another wall sat a smiling Buddha recessed into a small rainbow painted cave.

We walked up narrow and steep steps on a circular staircase near the monastery's outside wall. An ornate gold bell in the middle of a roof with the four corners curled towards the sky caught my curiosity - is this the equivalent of a church steeple? A couple of monks scampered quietly out of sight; a red box of Colgate toothpaste stood in a glass next to a blue towel attached to an

old wooden door. Prayer wheels half the size of Volkswagens hung behind wooden frames with red and blue hand-painted flowers.



**Cherri Monastery**

Two stone gargoyles in the shape of dogs silently prepared to lunge as they guarded the doors going into main part of the monastery. In Japan, similar dogs sit near temple doors to ward off evil spirits. According to what I have read, Buddhism in Bhutan originated from Tibet from the “Drukpa Kagyu” sect, and is the state religion. I don’t know how it is different from the Buddhism practiced in Japan, but I found it interesting to see the temple dogs in both countries.



Returning to the car, our paths crossed with Lam Wangchuk, one of the chief Lamas in Bhutan. Wearing the maroon robe, which was more illustrious than those worn by most of the monks encountered, and his body somewhat more stout, his gentle bearing spoke, "Dignity". Ugyen introduced him to me. He gave me a warm smile as he shook my hand, and then was kind enough to pose for a photograph.



Upper: Temple Dogs  
Left: Lam Wangchuk

Since it was only about 4 PM when we arrived back at the hotel, Jane and I decided to walk through some of the shops. I bought some coins, and she bought some type of fabric. Ugyen took me into a shop so I could buy a small Bhutanese flag, which I glued to the front of my photo album. Dinner that night was similar to that of the previous evening – rice, chicken, noodles, and vegetables. I think it was on this day that I met the only beggar I encountered during my entire stay, and he was a monk. I gave him some money, but forgot how much. Ugyen told me that since the monks support themselves, it is a good thing to give them money.

After dinner that night I walked to the bar of a hotel where George had told me to visit him. He wasn't there, but I paid the bartender enough money to buy George a few bottles of beer, which was my way of saying thanks for the ride in the front of the plane.

My best days in Bhutan were Tuesday – Thursday, Nov. 12 – 14<sup>th</sup>. While making travel arrangements in Antarctica, I had requested that I see a Buddhist monastery. I have strong Christian beliefs, so it wasn't a spiritual thing, but I

guess just gaining an insight to this different religion is what prompted my action. Yod Sel Tours arranged to have Ugyen take me to a monastery near Paro. Once again, we drove the winding roads, passing the rice terraces and the dirt homes with the drying red peppers on the roofs, while dodging cattle, motor scooters, and women wearing nose rings nursing their small babies. Our car's horn seemed to have been connected to the accelerator pedal.



#### People of Bhutan

Our driver dropped Ugyen and me off at a place where two packhorses waited, along with his owner, and a cook. My sleeping bag and a few personal

items were loaded onto one of the horses while little children stared at me. I was not expecting packhorses nor a personal cook, but I think the tourist industry in Bhutan is designed to benefit many people. Off at a distance we could see the Tiger Nest Monastery built among the rocks on the side of a mountain. This is a famous monastery in Bhutan, and may be considered the most sacred among the Buddhists of Bhutan. Ugyen pointed out another monastery even further away, saying we would be heading to this one. It sure looked far away.



Shortly after leaving the horse owner's home, we crossed a well-constructed thatched swing bridge, with the owner leading one horse, and the cook leading the other one. On the other side of the bridge, we passed young children carrying bundles of straw on their backs; soon after, I saw a scarecrow in the fields. By Bhutan and Nepal and even Colorado standards, we were not very high, but my sea-level lungs had their own way of letting me know that I should be and could be in better shape. After several hours of hiking and panting in the forests, and a brief stop for lunch, we finally reached the monastery located near the top of a mountain, perhaps only 8000 or 9000 feet high.



Prayer flags at Lhukhaug Monastery, right



Three stupas stood in front of the Lhukhaug Monastery, and near the center one there was a washtub filled with lime to paint the building white. Several prayer flags fluttered nearby. Above the main monastery was where the head monk lived. In front of his quarters were three prayer flags; a small

horizontal bar near the top of each flagpole reminded me of the three Crosses on Calvary. The monastery overlooked several beautiful mountains. I couldn't see any of the snow-capped Himalayans, but still appreciated the beauty.

Lopen Pasang Dendup, the head monk, is a man about forty. He welcomed Ugyen, the cook, the horseman, and me into his living quarters. We climbed up a rickety staircase that looked like it could collapse any day. The three rooms of the Spartan interior were ornate, functional, comical, and a paradox between the old and the new. Newspapers from India, printed in both English and in Indian script, lined the walls of the main room. One full-sized color newspaper page advertised the movie "Xamaana Deewana", "Releasing on 28<sup>th</sup> July all over"; another had the Sunday comics, also in color, of "Blondie", which was near a fashion page. On another wall a black-and-white paper had the headline, "A tale of two panchayafs" (or the word may be spelled "panchayats"), as the "f" or "t" were blocked by a Thermos bottle standing on a shelf. Beneath this shelf there was a homemade straw broom. The deteriorated condition of the broom and the cleanliness of the place indicated that the broom had been used often. The toilet was simply a hole in some wooden planks on the outside of the house.



In this same room, each of the walls had blue sections with hand-painted flowers in the center. Some of the sections doubled as sliding shutters for the glass-less windows. A calendar consisting of four animal posters adorned one wall. These posters may have been made for advertising purposes; each one had "Dolly Tshonkkhang" and "Thimphu, Bhutan" printed on the bottom. Under the photograph of a yawning tiger, the caption read, "I'm allergic to studying, I break out in yawns". Next came the elephant poster, saying, "Trust in God who is our comfort and our strength". In the third poster, a droopy long-ear rabbit starring into the camera said, "You're no bunny 'til some bunny loves you". Finally, a male lion sitting in a tree and daring others to argue, admonished, "What I want is the power and none of the responsibility"!

Inside the "kitchen" were two stoves. A propane burner was used to heat water for tea, but the stove that caught my attention was made of stone, and had openings for the wood. This particular cooking stove may have been

centuries old. The “refrigerator” consisted of wooden pegs holding up plucked chicken halves – the claws had not been cut off. We ate the chicken on the second evening there, and it tasted very good. During the two days I was there, we ate meat (probably lamb), eggs, potatoes, tomatoes, cheeses, peppers, and onions. And we drank tea. Always tea. After eating, the others chewed betel nut.



Previous page: Comics and calendar posters  
 Upper: Stoves and “Refrigerator”  
 Right: Homemade broom

Each night after dinner we all sat around the “Blue Room” and chit-chatted. Ugyen translated. Lopen (Lama) Dendup asked me questions about my life, and was interested in the space program, and the penguins in Antarctica. We discussed religion and spirituality. There was no way I could convert him to Christianity, and there was no way he could convert me to Buddhism, but we respected each other. After listening to some of my views about life, he paid me a compliment, saying that I would have made a good Buddhist, because my thoughts about spirituality mirrored much of their philosophy. My favorite photo of the entire trip is of this Buddhist Monk sitting between two doorposts, each with a gold painted dragon. He was grinning as he wore my South Pole hat, the one with the hatpin in the shape of a Cross, with a mustard seed inside it. This Cross has much meaning to me. Jesus said in Matthew 17:20, “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.” The Cross is representative of my belief in the Risen Lord; the mustard seed is symbolic of my faith that before I die, I

will be traveling to space. Right now I am just trying to reach the foot of the mountain; the peak is approximately 260 miles high.



Lopen Pasang Dendup, the head monk of the Lhukhaug Monastery

I had other hatpins on that hat, which I shared with Lopen Dendup and the others. I gave Ugyen one of the space shuttle, don't remember what I gave to the other two men, and gave Lopen Dendup the one of Apollo 11, telling him that the crew left a plaque on the moon which says in part, "We came in peace for all mankind". He has few material possessions, but told me he would treasure this pin. I treasure the time and opportunity I had to spend with this man. He wanted to give me his knife, and I would have liked to have taken it, but I could see that he used it all the time, and it would have been a greater hardship for him to be without it than for me to have it just sitting on a shelf.

Although there was no snow on the ground, this was mid November, and we were at an altitude over 8000 feet. After dark, it became cold. On the second night we were there, one of the guys lit a fire in a five-gallon sized can. Soon it became smoky inside – I don't think it would have gone over well had we burned his place down.

Each night we blew out the candles and lanterns and turned in about 9 or 10 PM. Lopen Dendup went into the monastery to sleep, and insisted that I use his bed, which was really nothing more than a wooden box on the floor, with a thin mattress. I was glad to have a warm sleeping bag with me. Beside

this bed stood an ornate ancient chest, over 300 years old. It has small paintings of Buddha riding an elephant, and a horse.



Monk's Bunk



300 year old chest



Prayer Flags



Woodcutting by young monks



Lhukhaug Monastery

The same week I was there, thirteen young monks had finished four years of monastery training. Apparently, they are allowed to speak to each other, but not to outsiders. They are taught to work hard. Right outside of this monastery two monks about 15 years old hand-sawed a square piece of timber for planks. On the second day one monk wearing a maroon ski jacket over his traditional robes gave Ugyen and me a tour of the monastery.

The monastery itself is two stories high. I had to take my hat and boots off, and was not allowed to take photographs. From the outside, one could not guess at the opulence. Upstairs, eight woven tapestries depicted eight different manifestations of Buddha. There was a statue of Buddha over three hundred years old that stood about eight feet tall. Two ancient elephant tusks stood in

front of the Buddha. Ugyen prostrated himself three times in front of this Buddha. Incense burned on the lower level, where three Buddha statues stood, representing the past, the presence, and the future. Ugyen rolled three dice for good luck, and prostrated himself again, if I remember correctly. Three centuries of use by the monks had polished the wooden floor to a gleam. Tapestries adorned the walls and a big colorful prayer wheel showed it had also been used often.

Ugyen took me to another monastery located about fifteen minutes away. This one had three levels to it; stone temple dogs also guarded it. I can't remember what was on the top level, but the bottom level had three similar statues for the past, presence, and future, and on the second floor there was a single statue that had eight sides to it, showing the eight manifestations of Buddha. I don't know what these are, but one showed Buddha with a woman that was quite sexual in nature.





**Tiger's Nest Monastery**

Sometimes, you know that you will later regret making a decision, and you still make it. Such was the case of me visiting the Tiger's Nest Monastery. Lopen Dendup made arrangements for me to visit this place. However, when we left on Thursday, November 14<sup>th</sup>, I decided not to go, and I do regret it. We hiked down the mountain near it, but in order to reach it, we would have had to descend into a steep canyon, and climb narrow stairs cut in tree logs to reach it. Normally, I would have jumped at the chance to visit a place that allows very few Westerners in, but my legs and ankles were in agonizing pain due to using muscles that hadn't been used to hike in mountains for several years.

We hiked about three hours to Paro. Once there, we ate lunch in a small restaurant that catered to foreigners, and then drove to a Dzong (monastery) that had burned down. From here, we could see one of the snow-capped Himalayan Mountains, but for some reason, I don't have a photo in my album. That night I slept in the Wangchuk Hotel again in Thimphu.

Initially, my plans were to leave Bhutan and head to Bali in Indonesia, and then go back to New Zealand to use my return ticket back to the United States that I had from the Antarctic trip. But I was so close to Nepal, and Druk Airlines flew there, and New Delhi, India wasn't too far from Agra, where the Taj Mahal is located. While at the monastery, I decided to spend more time in Nepal and go on down to India. But to go into India, I need a visa. Fortunately, an Indian Embassy was in Thimphu. So on Friday, I asked Ugyen to take me there. He seemed somewhat incredulous that I could change my mind so

quickly about travel. He just doesn't know the real Matt Nelson! I had to wait a few hours to pick up the visa, so we just toured around Thimphu for a few hours, and saw the outside of the King Wangchuk's Palace. We ate lunch at the very nice Swiss bakery and restaurant, designed for the tourist. I don't remember what we ate, but I had to laugh when I used the restroom. Just like Turkey: Sandpaper, two footpads and a hole in the floor and you better not slip! Glad I didn't have to put myself into that position.



King Wangchuk's Palace and outskirts of Thimphu

Another thing we did that morning was to go to the Ministry of Telecommunications. I had noticed two large satellite dishes near this office, so I wanted to see about the possibility of doing satellite communications work in Thimphu. I obtained a visit with the Director of Telecommunications. He told me that some other company already had an extensive contract, but asked me if I would be interested in working with some satellite remote sensing of lakes in the northern part of Bhutan that are prone to flooding. After I arrived back home I found some information about other companies performing remote sensing work, and gave them the director's name. I didn't know enough about it nor did I have the assets to take on this job, but now that four-and-a-half years have gone by, I regret not pursuing it further.

Once I had my Indian visa, it was time to go to Punaka, where there is another famous monastery. On the winding road there, we passed many Indian road workers and their families. The workers just camped along side the road, their tents often made of beautiful tapestries. One memory is of seeing two women wearing beautiful sarongs, each carrying one end of a stick with hanging water buckets between them. The manual laborers used only picks and shovels to repair the roads. Once again, I saw three-wheeled rota-tillers pulling trailers – their version of SUV's. Indian workers stood up in the back of trucks serving as busses, passing terraced fields of rice-bundled haystacks tended by men plowing with oxen. Sometimes archers could be seen, other times there were rocks painted with a Buddha. The road to Punaka was really quite scenic.



Our driver, Jane, and Ugyen



Except for the fact that the Punaka Hotel did not have warm water the next day, it was a modern and pleasant place to stay. In my room a nice wooden dragon hung on the wall. One of the king's four wives owned the hotel, and I was told that she would be visiting the same evening I stayed. Perhaps she did, but she didn't invite me down into lobby to chitchat and ask me what Antarctica was like. Darn, these royalty people are all alike!

Between the town of Punaka, and the Punaka Dzong, there were houses made of woven mats. Young girls standing in front of one of these houses smiled as I took their photo. Reminiscent of Japan, one place had five colorful quilts hanging out to dry. Other houses were built of stone, wood, and mortar, some which were three stories high. Hay was stored on the top floor, living quarters were on the second, and the bottom often served as a barn.



Upper: Dragon in Punaka Hotel  
Right: Old man at Punaka  
Bottom: Punaka Dugong



Of all the monasteries that I saw, the Punaka Dzong was the largest. Since the Tiger's Nest was built on the side of a mountain, it was probably more impressive to look at, but the Punaka Dzong certainly made me stand back and utter a WOW! Located next to a river, the Punaka Dzong has three main buildings that stretch about 100 meters. On the opposite side of the river many red poinsettia plants were in bloom. Ugyen led me through the gates at one end of the complex. We didn't enter the actual monastery building, but I saw a massive courtyard where many young monks were being summoned. Boys start training to become monks around the age of six. There was an old master monk with a whip popping the younger boys, while the older ones, perhaps twelve to fourteen years old, stood around and laughed at him. That made him mad, so he started popping them with the whip, but they were fast enough and easily maneuvered out of his way, taunting him with more laughs. From the gate we could see a long line of these youthful monks walking away. Ugyen told me that they were going to a crematorium. Near the gate three young soldiers or policemen allowed me to take their photograph. They were polite to me, and curious. Ugyen translated questions for a few minutes, but

they were more of the nature about what I thought of Bhutan, if I remember correctly.



Guards at Punaka Dzong



Children near Punaka, notice woven house

That afternoon we drove back to Thimphu. Along the way we passed one of the monks that we had seen at the Cherri Monastery a few days earlier, so Ugyen asked if I would mind if we gave him a ride. Of course not. In Thimphu, I had the rest of the evening to myself. I ran into George DeSerres, and his friend, an American woman who was a lawyer in Washington D. C. George asked me if I wanted to go to a club with them. Why not? We went back into the Seventies, where a new discotheque had just opened, complete with the rotating mirrored ball. We weren't there very long, when George, a former pilot in Viet Nam, said it was time to leave, because he sensed serious trouble. I had no reason to doubt him. So the three of us ended up at his place, which was a modern house. His houseboy made some popcorn. We visited for a while, and then I went back to my hotel.

The next day was my last full day in Bhutan. Ugyen took me around Thimphu. One of the things we visited was a large Stupa near the center of the city. Since Karoline is a nurse, and I had thoughts of working in Bhutan, I asked to visit the local hospital. It may be a very good hospital, but if I need to be a patient in one, it would not be my first choice.

Near the outskirts of Thimphu is the oldest monastery called the Simtokha Dzong. It was built in 1626. We didn't visit it, but Ugyen pointed it out to me on our way back to Paro. On the way we passed one boy, perhaps ten years old, wearing shorts, tennis shoes, a baseball cap, and chewing gum as he herded cattle. Somehow, I wished that Western culture did not spread so fast. The rock formations, shear cliffs, anticlines and synclines (geology terms) intrigued me. I wish I knew more about geology to understand the changing scenery.



Upper: Museum in Paro (top of photo)  
Left: Matt Nelson at stupa in Thimphu  
Bottom Left: Old man with prayer wheel  
Bottom Right: Ugyen at Paro monastery

Near the Paro airport is a national museum in a building that very much looks like another monastery. Inside, there is a dungeon that made my skin crawl just by walking through it. Given my choice of staying there for one hour with the lights out, or staying in the hospital for a year, I think I know what my choice would be. We visited the outside of another monastery, where I took a photo of an old man walking with his own personal prayer wheel.



The Otanlang Hotel is the best hotel I stayed in Bhutan. Obviously, it is a tourist hotel, but I went ahead and enjoyed it, anyway. Each guest stayed in log cabins; mine had two rooms, and it was a place I could easily call home. For dinner that night I ate the thin but good noodles, chicken curry, rice, and a fruit desert of melons and ice cream.

Ugyen picked me up the next morning and took me to the airport. He told me that he was applying to work there as an air traffic controller. Later, I heard from him and he said he did start working there, after a training session in

Singapore. Yod Sel Tours lost a great tour guide, but passengers flying in and out of Paro, especially with Captain George at the controls, and Ugyen working as the controller, are certainly in the best of hands. It so happened that George was my pilot to Katmandu. This time I managed to sit in Business Class, as opposed to the jump seat in front, but that was OK. I made sure I was on the right side of the plane, to look at the majestic Himalayan Mountains, including Mt. Everest. My thanks go to George DeSerres, Ugyen Tshering, Mr. and Mrs. Dawa Penjore of Yod Sel Tours, Lopen Pasang Dendup, and all the other wonderful people I met in the beautiful country of Bhutan.

After landing in Katmandu George and I shook hands goodbye, and then I entered into chaos. Swarms of people descended upon me asking to carry my bag. Many beggars targeted tourists. I picked out one driver and asked him to take me to a fairly cheap hotel. It was cheap enough that the owner's apparently could not afford hot running water. Soon, I wandered downtown. Tour offices offered cheap flights to Lhasa, Tibet, and I seriously thought about going, but decided to go there some other time. I found the Druk Airlines office and bought a ticket to New Delhi, India, but still had three days to kill. British Airways had a decent fare between New Delhi and Houston, allowing a stopover in London. I came close to going to Eastern Nepal to see Mt. Everest, but decided not to spend the \$430 it would have cost. After the first night at the cheap hotel, I decided to spurge and spend two nights at the Yak and Yedi Hotel. I should have gone to see Mt. Everest, for it really would have not been much more expensive. Live and learn.

One thing that intrigued me was a book I wished that I bought from a bookstore near the Yak and Yedi. The book cover said that Jesus may have gone into this area of the world and learned meditation and the workings of the inner self between the time He threw the money exchangers out of the temple at age twelve, and the time He started his ministry around age thirty, for the Bible doesn't say much about those in-between years. Who knows, it may have happened?

I wandered around the city, but much of it has faded from memory. I didn't take hardly any photographs, and I have no idea why not. But I did take a hot air balloon ride one morning. The owner-pilot was from Australia, and I thoroughly enjoyed the airborne portion of the ride. Off in the distance we could see the Himalayan Mountains. The houses in Katmandu are made of mud and dirt, poverty is everywhere, and the fumes from thousands of cars using leaded gasoline produced smog that rivaled L.A. in the Seventies. Our landing attracted about one hundred people, most of whom were children. While the balloon was being deflated, I tried to take a photograph of these kids. Like a swarm of bees they crowded around me, demanding money. I reached into my camera bag to change film, but so many hands pushed me to the ground that I felt fear. One small hand pushing you has no affect; a hundred hands create quite a force. Finally, in desperation, I reached into a side pocket of my camera

bag and grabbed a handful of coins that I had been collecting from my travels. When I threw the coins into the air, the kids dispersed.



Upper: Nepalese women at balloon launch  
Right: Hot air balloon that I rode in  
Bottom: Taj Mahal



On Thursday, November 21<sup>st</sup>, I flew to New Delhi. This time George wasn't flying the plane, so I had no special treatment. I arrived in the morning and had about fifteen hours before my flight to London, so I found a tourist booth in the terminal that offered rides to Agra for \$100. In terms of adventure, I

certainly received my money's worth. A narrative just isn't the correct format to describe the ride, so I'm copying my notes just as I wrote them:

### **Ride to the Taj Mahal**

Beep Beep  
 Honk de honk  
 Camel Carts. Ox Carts  
 Donkey Carts, Horse Carts  
 Buses, Trucks  
 Please Honk  
 5 women carrying baskets  
 On heads, in fields, wearing  
 Pastel colored sarongs  
 Roasted peanuts  
 Oranges, bananas  
 Men carrying closets  
 On backs, propane jugs,  
 Bundles of straw, old woven rugs  
 Bus coming straight at us at night,  
 Headlights aiming right at me  
 Honk Honk  
 Relax, driver is still alive  
 Naked kids  
 Kid about six carrying kid about one on back  
 Open stretch 100 miles/hour  
 Brass teapots, brass big pots  
 Bands with electric lights for a marriage ceremony  
 Near truck stop man taking shower with garden hose  
 Other people - When you gotta go you gotta go  
 3 wheelers, pedicabs, tricycles, all carrying somebody  
 somewhere  
 Cattle, elephants, barking dogs,  
 Whole families cooking on side of road  
 Smells good  
 See men with turbans, black beards, white beards  
 Might be wearing tennis shoes, or barefoot,  
 or have sandals on  
 And women with red mark on foreheads, looks  
 Like they were shot between the eyes  
 Trains with jillions of people standing in flatcars  
 Now, we can go another mile and see more  
 Sights of humanity  
 Finally make it to Taj Mahal,  
 Rushed through it, little time to take photos  
 Driver knows a guide who showed me marble interior  
 Had to pay to have boots covered,  
 Guide more interested in taking me  
 To his shop to sell marble plates  
 With colored stone inlays  
 Have to go back sometime when I have more time.

Back at the New Delhi airport, my passport, tickets, and departure card must have been checked six times by guards armed with sub-machine guns. My flight to London left about midnight, and I slept most of the eight hours.



Stonehenge

Stonehenge. What a fantastic place. I spent about an hour there taking photographs, and don't think I have enough. Sounds like another trip someday. That same evening I walked around Picadilly Circus, enchanted by all the neon lights, ate a steak, and watched the play, "Dial M for Murder".

The next day I crossed the English Channel into Belgium and rode a train to Luxembourg, where I spent a couple of days. From there I went to Strasbourg, France, where I investigated the International Space University. Strasbourg is another city where I wouldn't mind living, but the \$25,000 tuition at the University is why I now have a master's degree in Space Studies from the University of North Dakota. Zurich, Switzerland was my last stop before heading back to England. During these days in Europe I hardly did anything but ride the train. I didn't go into cathedrals, museums, nor to any other tourist attractions. But I enjoyed riding the trains through the countries. Three French custom agents questioned me and searched my bags right on the train after entering France from Switzerland. One kept telling the others that I had been to Bangkok. Once they looked at the marble items I had bought from India they walked away. Even though I had not done anything wrong, I always feel intimidated by custom agents.

Once back in London, I called Karoline from Victoria Train Station and told her I would be home on Thanksgiving Day. I had last seen her and Michelle and Cheri on January 8<sup>th</sup>, when I left for New Zealand, heading for the Ice. It was time to go home. I would have gone home sooner, but I needed to stay out of the United States until November 28<sup>th</sup> in order to have the money I made in Antarctica be considered tax free. My round-the-world odyssey ended when Michelle picked me up at Houston's Intercontinental Airport on November 28<sup>th</sup>. Karoline, Cheri, Michelle, and I celebrated Thanksgiving Dinner at home. It had been quite a year. I thank God for the opportunity for my travels, and for my good family.