

Bhutan's splendid landscapes, traditional architecture, and hospitable locals offer a welcoming canvas for a getaway in the Himalayas, and there's no better season than summer to experience the country in all its picturesque glory. Photographs and text by Kunal Bhatia and Shuvajit Payne



Also known as the "Palace of Great Happiness", Punakha Dzong was built in 1638 CE and served as the seat of the Bhutanese Government until the capital moved to Thimphu in 1955. It is quite magical to cross the *bazam* (cantilevered bridge), climb the steep stairs, and explore the *dzong's* three colourful *docheys* (courtyards).



Clockwise from left:
Inside Gangteng Monastery's richly decorated main assembly hall, monks chant rhythmically from traditional *pechas* (loose-leaf scriptures). Enshrined within the hall are several statues, including a gilded figure of Guru Rinpoche, the 8th-century Buddhist master revered for establishing Vajrayana Buddhism across the Himalayan region; a highlight of the festive *tshechu* celebrations, *chams* are sacred dances performed by masked dancers in striking costumes. The masks, representing both wrathful and protective deities and spirits, are made from papier-mâché, wood or metal, and painted in vibrant colours; the colourful buildings of Gangteng Monastery rise above the Phobjikha Valley, built in classical Bhutanese architectural style. They are characterised by protruding roofs, whitewashed walls, prayer wheels, and intricately carved wooden rabsei (balconies and viewing galleries). The monastery's courtyard serves as the stage for the annual Gangteng Tshechu.

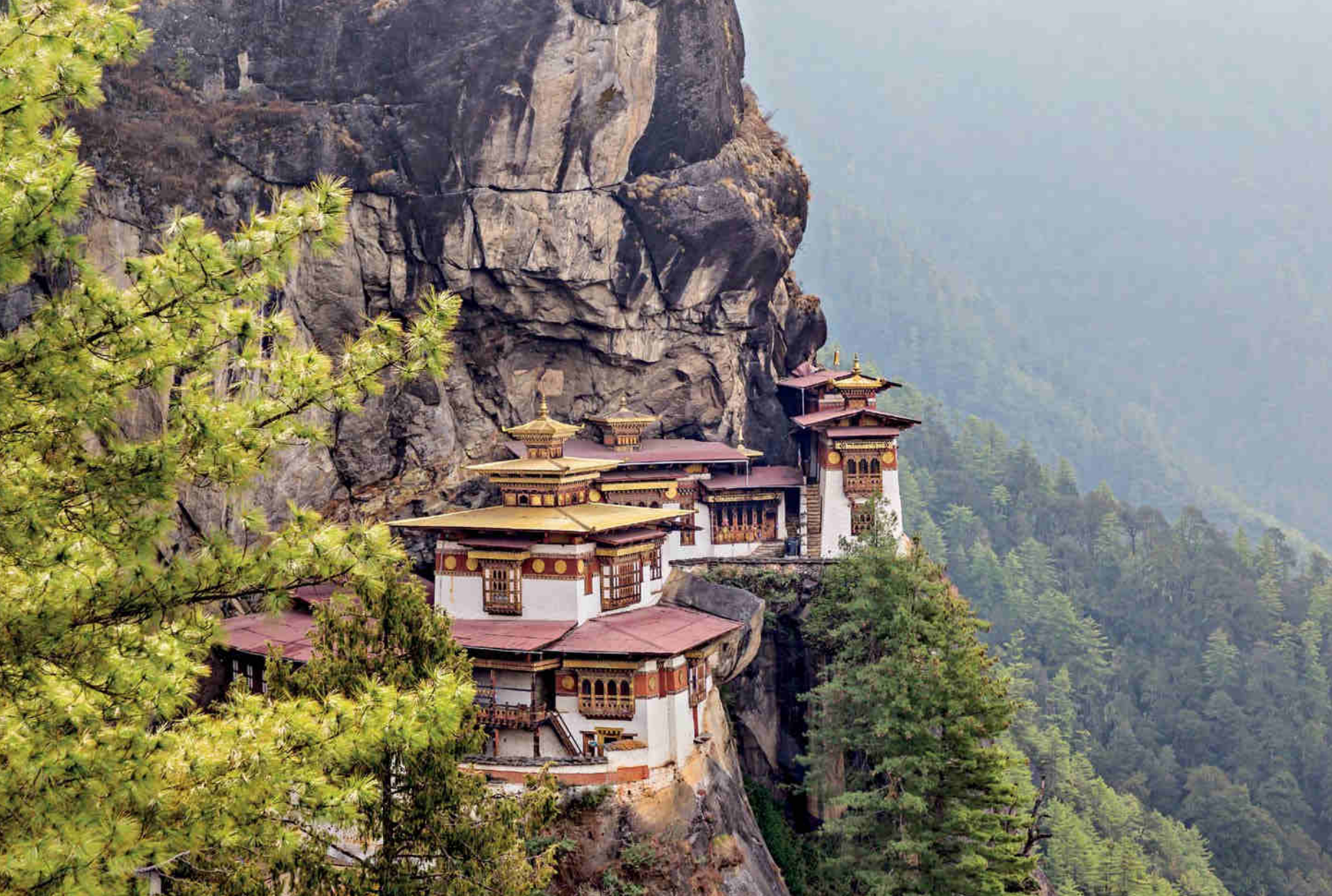




From top: Young monks often enter Bhutanese monasteries in early childhood, beginning a life of discipline and religious study. Their maroon robes, the *chögu* (upper robe) and *shamthab* (lower garment), signify the renunciation of worldly life and entry into Buddhist monastic training; the five colours of Bhutanese prayer flags represent the five elements: blue for the sky, white for air, red for fire, green for water, and yellow for the earth. These square-shaped flags (*lungta*) are often strung across mountain passes so that the wind may carry their embedded prayers far and wide.



Bhutan's traditional sport of archery requires participants to aim at a target 140 metres away, double the length of the Olympic range. While players shoot each arrow with intense concentration, the rounds are punctuated by playful howling from both teams. Curiously, a shot or two of local alcohol before the game is considered *de rigueur*.



Clockwise from top: The colourful Paro Taktsang, popularly known as the Tiger's Nest Monastery, was built towards the end of the 17th century around the cave where Guru Rinpoche once meditated. Clinging to a craggy cliffside, the monastery's dramatic setting makes the hike up richly rewarding; the *kemar* (a red wrap-around band) at Druk Wangyal Chorten enshrines a sacred image of the Buddha in *dhyana mudra* (meditation posture); *thagzo* (weaving) is one of Bhutan's thirteen traditional arts, bringing a profusion of colour into daily life, with yarns typically dyed using natural pigments. The National Textile Museum and Choki Art School, both in Thimphu, are must-visit institutions for witnessing this art form.



THE MOMENT WE SET foot in Bhutan, the first thing we notice is colour. Surreal green valleys, ridges and high mountain passes form the backdrop across which prayer flags in primary hues are strung in long, fluttering lines. Every structure we see, be it a home, monastery or government building, speaks the same visual language: whitewashed walls, dark timber frames, roofs edged in gold, and intricate motifs everywhere.

This architectural harmony is no accident. It is guided by traditional design codes that reflect balance and uniformity. Before these façades, everyday life unfolds: monks move about in deep maroon robes, while locals in beautifully woven *gho* (traditional Bhutanese attire for men) and *kira* (for women) go about their routines or pause to banter over a game of archery, the national sport. A country-wide obsession, it offers a revealing glimpse into the social fabric. Played year-round, from formal tournaments to casual neighbourhood matches, the sport blends intense concentration with theatrical flair. The stillness of an archer taking aim contrasts sharply with the ritualised jeers, howls and songs that accompany each round, as integral to the contest as the arrows themselves.

Summer in this Himalayan nation brings these traditions joyfully to life through a calendar filled with festivals. Annual *tshechus*, or festivals, are celebrated across regions, with the much-anticipated Paro Tshechu held in late March or early April. Masked dancers perform sacred *cham* dances, their elaborate costumes and vividly painted masks narrating Buddhist teachings, moral choices and the triumph of good over evil. The beat of ceremonial drums, the swirl of silk brocade, groups of locals dressed in their

finest traditional attire, and the celebratory food and wine create an atmosphere that lifts the spirit.

The Bhutanese aesthetic composes distinct frames that imprint themselves on the mind. Punakha Dzong, a mammoth 16th-century monastery complex, rises above a mist-filled valley at the confluence of two rivers like a vision from a folktale. Crossing its wooden cantilever bridge into sunlit courtyards reveals murals, carved pillars and flowering jacaranda trees. The *dzong's* castle-like appearance makes it especially engaging for children, and an ideal setting for families to explore local heritage and culture.

Higher in the mountains, at an elevation of 3,100 metres, Dochula Pass cradles drifting clouds. Surrounded by yellow wildflowers, the 108 whitewashed chortens of Druk Wangyal offer a peaceful refuge along winding mountain roads. Chortens symbolise the five elements, earth, water, fire, air and ether, and serve as spiritual sentinels. And then there is the 17th-century Tiger's Nest, perhaps the kingdom's most iconic sight. Clinging to a near-vertical cliff face, its colourful shrines seem almost impossibly placed, as if painted onto the mountainside itself. With patience, the moderate climb is manageable for most visitors. The trail winds through pine forests, where prayer wheels and prayer flags mark the way, and sudden clearings reveal the monastery dramatically suspended above the valley.

Bhutan's palette also has a quietly meditative effect. The profusion of rich reds and yellows is offset by deep blue skies, lush green landscapes and pristine white walls, creating a visual rhythm that lingers long after the journey ends. The country instils a sense of order and continuity—a gentle respite from the daily chaos to which we are accustomed. 🌍