

DH on Sunday

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The Power of Good



**Arbitration
no mere tool
to unclog
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Peak happiness

From stunning backdrops to ancient monasteries and its mindfulness culture, Bhutan is a land of many wonders

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Notes on the big cat

Sarod brothers Amaan and Ayaan have tuned into India's wilderness for their new album

Travel

Arts that engage you and unravel many stories, a culture that stays authentic, and the quiet magic of a nation where conversations and people both feel close – head to Bhutan for reasons beyond the obvious, write **Kunal Bhatia** and **Shuvajit Payne**

Mindfulness, Gross National Happiness, and the viral Ema Datshi (Bhutanese stew) — this familiar shorthand for Bhutan misses the far richer bouquet of experiences the country offers. For Indian travellers in particular, even those accustomed to dramatic Himalayan backdrops and ancient monasteries within our own borders, Bhutan still feels unmistakably different from the moment you arrive.

Magic of small numbers

Flying into Paro is the first revelation. The airport itself is modest, almost quaint, adorned with traditional Bhutanese architectural elements, including hand-painted motifs and wooden carvings. But it is the approach that delivers the theatre. The aircraft weaves through steep Himalayan valleys, descending sharply between mountains. The landing is so technically demanding that only a few dozen pilots worldwide are certified to attempt it.

This idea of “only a few” recurs everywhere in Bhutan and leads to unexpected delights. With fewer people than in Chennai and a population density nearly 24 times lower than what we are used to in India, institutions remain personal here and systems operate at a human scale. Nowhere is this clearer than at the Bhutan Postal Museum in the capital Thimphu,

where you discover that Tashi Wangchuck is the country's sole stamp designer.

With a grin on his face, he is happy to tell you of his modest beginnings — how, at a time when no

graphic design courses were offered in the country, he picked up design techniques online and landed this job. Wangchuck enthusiastically explains his artworks on the stamps displayed along the museum walls, some of which take curious forms and have become globally coveted philatelic collectables that have kept pace with time. There are stamps with 3D holograms, scents, QR-codes, and even those that take the form of playable vinyl records, CDs, and NFTs!

The Zorig Chusum

The curiosity for art that underlies Bhutan's commitment to cultural preservation finds vivid expression in the country's art schools. Amongst them, the Choki Traditional Art School offers



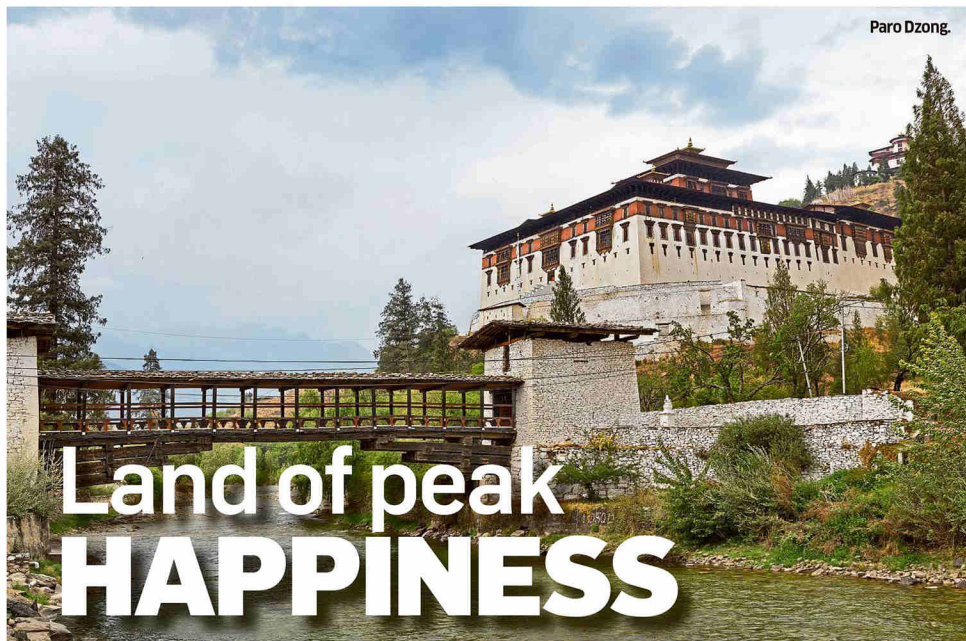
The Choki Art School.

an immersive experience for visitors. Founded for children unable to access formal art education, the school provides free training in Bhutan's zorig chusum, the thirteen traditional arts

QUICK FACTS

- April is a good time to visit; it marks the beginning of spring and the weather is generally pleasant. June to September are the monsoon months, while October is ideal for trekking.
- Bhutan's Gross National Happiness is a concept introduced in the Seventies, and coined by the then King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck.
- One of the most popular dishes that Bhutan is famous for is the Ema Datshi, a sweet and spicy stew made of cheese and chilli peppers.

and crafts that form the backbone of the country's identity. Students, many from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, live and train here full-time under master artisans.



Paro Dzong.

Land of peak HAPPINESS



Wall paintings and prayer wheel at Punakha Dzong. (PHOTOS BY AUTHORS)

Their instruction spans disciplines such as lhadrî (painting), patra (woodcarving), tshemdrup (embroidery), thagzo (weaving), and tshemzo (tailoring).

What makes a visit distinctive is how students chaperone you through a living museum housed in a centuries-old farmhouse. Under patient guidance, you can try block printing, paint traditional motifs, learn to write your name in Bhutanese script in brushstrokes, or even churn suja (the local salted butter tea) in a long cylindrical wooden dongmo.

Wonderland of stories

A rich narrative universe forms the foundation for Bhutan's kaleidoscope of arts. This is most evident during tshachus — the annual religious festivals held across the country. Amid the visual spectacle of swirling masks, elaborate costumes, and the rhythmic drumbats of the sacred cham dances, it is easy to miss the layered stories being told.

Each dance encodes strands of Buddhist philosophy. Characters represent deities, protective spirits, demons, and saints, their exaggerated masks and movements designed to communicate moral lessons. Temple walls reinforce these narratives through vast murals depicting cosmic realms, the cycle of rebirth, and the deeds of revered figures.

It is a story lover's para-

disse. Consider the tales of the 15th-century mystic popularly known as the “Divine Madman.” His unconventional methods — often humorous and sometimes deliberately shocking — were intended to jolt people out of spiritual complacency. The ubiquitous phallic symbols painted on homes and temples across Bhutan trace back to his legacy. Far from being crude, they are believed to ward off evil and promote fertility.

Everyday conversations

Bhutan reveals itself through such stories and interactions. Perhaps India's politest neighbour, the warmth with which locals receive visitors naturally opens up space for dialogue. Experienced this way, a visit to a dzong (fortified monastery complexes) can turn into an impromptu exchange with a young monk about his aspirations for monastic life. A morning in a homestay might wake you to the rhythms of daily prayer.

There is much to notice and discuss: office-goers and schoolchildren alike routinely wearing the national dress — the gho for men and the kira for women; or the ritualised banter of competing archery teams, charged by a shared obsession for the national sport. Bhutan's cultural identity is deeply embedded in everyday life, revealing its layers only if you are paying attention.

Cham dance.

