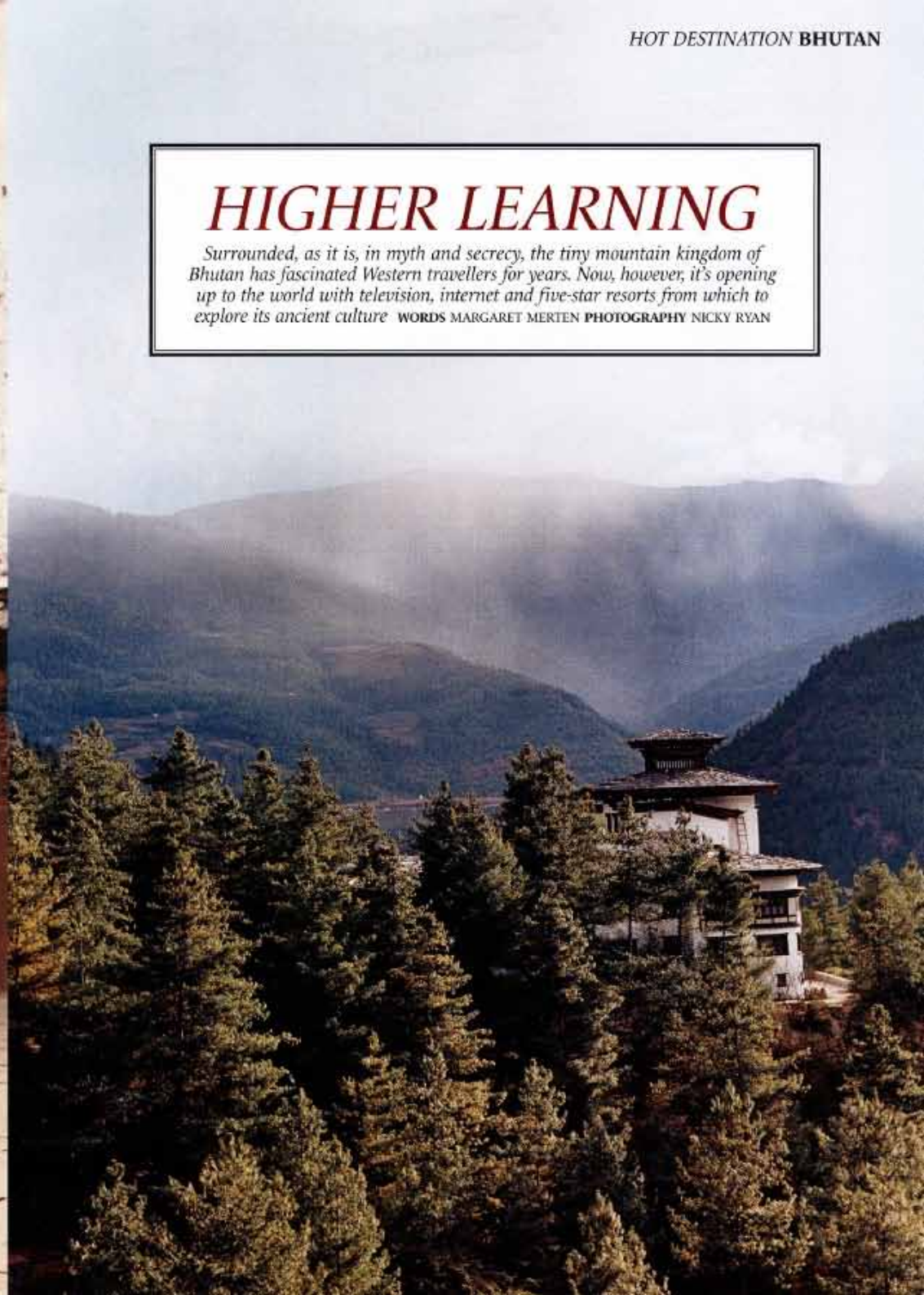


HIGHER LEARNING

Surrounded, as it is, in myth and secrecy, the tiny mountain kingdom of Bhutan has fascinated Western travellers for years. Now, however, it's opening up to the world with television, internet and five-star resorts from which to explore its ancient culture WORDS MARGARET MERTEN PHOTOGRAPHY NICKY RYAN



Young monks leave the temple at Paro Dzong after prayers. They are on their way to the Khathe, where they eat their communal meals. It was once tradition for a son from each family to join the monastery from as early as the age of 10. Today, most boys choose to enter the order. **OPPOSITE**, Uma Paro resort is set in 15 hectares of blue pine forest above Bhutan's Paro Valley.





THE INTERNAL COURTYARD IS
A BEAUTIFUL EXAMPLE OF THE
PAINTED, CARVED DECORATION
THAT CHARACTERISES THE
ARCHITECTURE OF THE NATION

This young monk was in charge of blessing threads; for a small donation to the monastery, fine yellow or blue threads are tied around the wrist to bestow good fortune upon the wearer. **OPPOSITE**, intricately carved and decorated door frames are a feature of both private houses and dzongs.

In the Buddhist faith it is important to pray for a good reincarnation. The elderly are often seen chanting, spinning prayer wheels or using prayer beads to ensure a good rebirth.

OPPOSITE, on the way to Taktsang Monastery on a mountain peak overlooking the Paro Valley is a prayer wheel along with masses of fluttering prayer flags where the wind carries the blessings as a sort of constant prayer.



tHERE ARE THREE improbable things that you hear about Bhutan before going there. One: the King has decreed his nation's guiding principle is that of Gross National Happiness (as opposed to the Western emphasis on GDP). Two: Bhutan is the most isolated kingdom in the entire world. Three: in Bhutan, marijuana grows wild by the roadside.

In the short time we are there, we find all these things are entirely true. But we also discover a fourth surprising fact that in Bhutan it's absolutely de rigueur to have a painting of a huge penis, with a ribbon tied around it, on either side of your front door. And that it's a good idea to hang wooden penises from the four corners of your roof to ward off evil female demons and to ensure excellent fertility. The penis symbol comes courtesy of Bhutan's favourite saint, Lama Drukpa Kunley. Born in Tibet in 1455, he travelled through Bhutan preaching outrageous behaviour in order to shake up the rules of the then clergy. Famously, when he received a blessing thread that is traditionally tied around the neck, he wrapped it around his penis instead in the hope that he would have better luck with the ladies. In yet another instance of the total otherness of Bhutan, it is clear that they liked their monks more earthy than some of the celibacy-obsessed manifestations of spirituality in the West. The flying phalluses are the Lama's quirky legacy.

Bhutan is bordered by India, Tibet, China and Bangladesh. Legend

DESPITE THE INTRODUCTION OF TV, BHUTAN REMAINS DEFINED BY ITS OTHERNESS TO THE WEST

has it that the monk Shabdrung created the tiny kingdom in 1616 as a Buddhist sanctuary or *bey-yul*, deliberately isolating it from the rest of the world. It was James Hilton's novel from the 1930s, *Lost Horizon*, that popularised Bhutan, describing a lost "Shangri-la" where time stood still and people lived forever. Until the 1960s Bhutan had no electricity, no national currency, schools, telephones, hospitals and no diplomatic relations with any country. Today, it still doesn't have traffic lights. Anywhere. It's a Buddhist kingdom with a monarchy that was established only in the 20th century. It was 1974 before foreign diplomats were invited in for the coronation of the present Dragon King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Soon after, small numbers of paying tourists were allowed in with the government charging hefty sums of money (US\$200 per day) in order to keep numbers down. For many years it has been an in-the-know destination for intrepid Westerners who fall in love with its isolation. Often referred to as a 'living museum' it is one of the last untouched places on earth. But not for much longer.

Today, the kingdom is really a benevolent dictatorship, with King Wangchuck revered by his people, who regard him as a kind of living god. And while the King has continued the policy of measured isolation, with tourist numbers kept low (last year recorded the highest number at roughly 7,000), he created more change in the country than ever before with one decision: in 1999 he allowed television into Bhutan. What, everyone wondered, would be the effect of 46 channels, including broadcasts of the cult World Wrestling Federation (wrestling is a national sport in Bhutan), on this unique, sheltered country?

A story from some fellow travellers goes part way to answering this question. Apparently, their guide was a huge WWF fan and was asking whether they watched it too. Without thinking they revealed it was all fake. Their guide was devastated, finding it incomprehensible that the wrestling wasn't real. "But what about the blood," he asked plaintively.



The couple then had to explain blood capsules to the astonished man.

Despite the introduction of TV, Bhutan remains a country that can only be defined by its almost complete otherness to the Western world. There are aspects that are very familiar – most people speak good English, conversations about television programs and the news of the world are quite possible – but then the traveller is presented with ideas and experiences that cause lasting cognitive dissonance. The national dish springs to mind. Called *ema datse*, it's a combination of chillis and cheese. "It puts the intestines on fire," we are told. Why that's a good idea is anybody's guess, but it's a truly vile dish that should be avoided. Other things, such as long, bloody strips of yak meat hanging over clothes lines in backyards and butcher's shops where strangled chickens lie on a bench, are sure to transport the traveller to another world where Styrofoam packaging seems like something from the moon.

But concessions to creating a high-end tourist experience are being made. Until recently there were no five-star resorts, and accommodation, most of which was government-run, was basic. Late last year saw the opening of Christina Ong's latest five-star resort, Uma Paro. Ong was invited by the Royal family to create this haven and it's the second luxury option to open in the kingdom. Already it's attracted celebrities such as Cameron Diaz, who visited with entourage.

With its architecture based on traditional designs the aim of the resort is to tread lightly on its surroundings. The Royal family chose the Uma group for its dedication to slipping seamlessly into the environment. The resort itself has a ringside position, perched above the town of Paro. A total of 29 rooms make up the accommodation and nine new villas were near completion when we were there, as was the bathhouse where guests can luxuriate in wooden tubs heated by lava-hot river stones. Each guest is given a personal guide who organises the many available treks into an appealing timetable of activities that gives a substantial glimpse into the impossible physical beauty of Bhutan. ▶



trees that are shedding their yellow leaves and carpeting the ground in autumn colours. Extraordinarily, this town was built in 1985 but looks as if it has been here for hundreds of years. Paro is really only one main street bordered by a row of wooden-fronted shops that are beautifully carved and decorated with painted flowers and patterns. Most shops are called general stores and are crammed with a colourful array of goods from brown bananas to packets of old-fashioned lollies, chips, clothing and a generally chaotic array of cheap goods. The shops have a strange design – usually a series of windows with a ladder you climb up to get into the store. When I ask Stuart Campbell, general manager of Uma Paro, why the ladders are there, he replies, deadpan, “To keep the dogs out.”

Now the dogs really do need to be mentioned. Whether it's another consequence of not killing any living thing, or because this is a nation of dog-lovers, I have never seen so many stray mutts in one place. Some are the mangiest mongrels you've ever been unlucky enough to meet, others are the cutest little puppies imaginable, while even more have obviously tangled with some of the large pieces of farm machinery that regularly grind down the main street. These unlucky creatures are now optimistically operating on only three legs. They're not aggressive at all and are a constant feature of every part of Bhutan.

The main street bustles with people (and dogs), most of whom wear national dress. It's illegal not to wear it, but you see gangs of young men

SHOPS HAVE A STRANGE DESIGN: A SERIES OF WINDOWS WITH A LADDER YOU CLIMB TO ENTER

For Bhutan is an extraordinarily beautiful place. This dawns on you during the flight, where, after flying over the endless flat, brown plains of India, you are suddenly at eye level with snow-capped Himalayan peaks. As the jet glides between the mountains, whose perfect outlines resemble a child's drawing, there is a sense that this really is a hidden paradise. That's until the pilot banks hard and makes for the shortest runway imaginable, the wings of the plane appearing to scrape the sides of the cliffs. We arrive in late November, after the rice harvest and just before the snow begins to fall (it officially falls in the first week of December but we see snow falling on the highest peaks almost daily). The mountains are covered in blue pine trees, birch and juniper, and on mountain treks, the fallen pine leaves create a soft blanket that cushions a visitor's footsteps. On the peaks all you hear is the susurrant wind through the fir trees. Bhutan is also home to a collection of rare and exotic animals such as snow leopards, elephants, tigers and bears. The government is protective of the wildlife and hunting is unheard of, as Buddhist law prohibits the killing of living things. Even scary ones.

This simple rule proves to present the ubiquitous travel experience of having to make a decision between observing the rules of the host country or sticking with the way of doing things back home. In a classic spiritual dilemma that my Catholic education had not prepared me for (thank you Sister Josephine), a spider is discovered in the photographer's bathroom. A very large, black spider. We debate the fact that in a Buddhist country we probably shouldn't kill it. But when it starts to run towards us we end its existence in a decisive Western manner and then feel uncomfortable about it all night. The next day we ask our guide what we should have done. He confirms that we shouldn't have destroyed it and takes us directly to the town's largest prayer wheel for “some lucks”, as he puts it.

On the way we explore the town of Paro, which is 10 minutes' drive from the Uma Paro resort. The streets into town are lined with willow

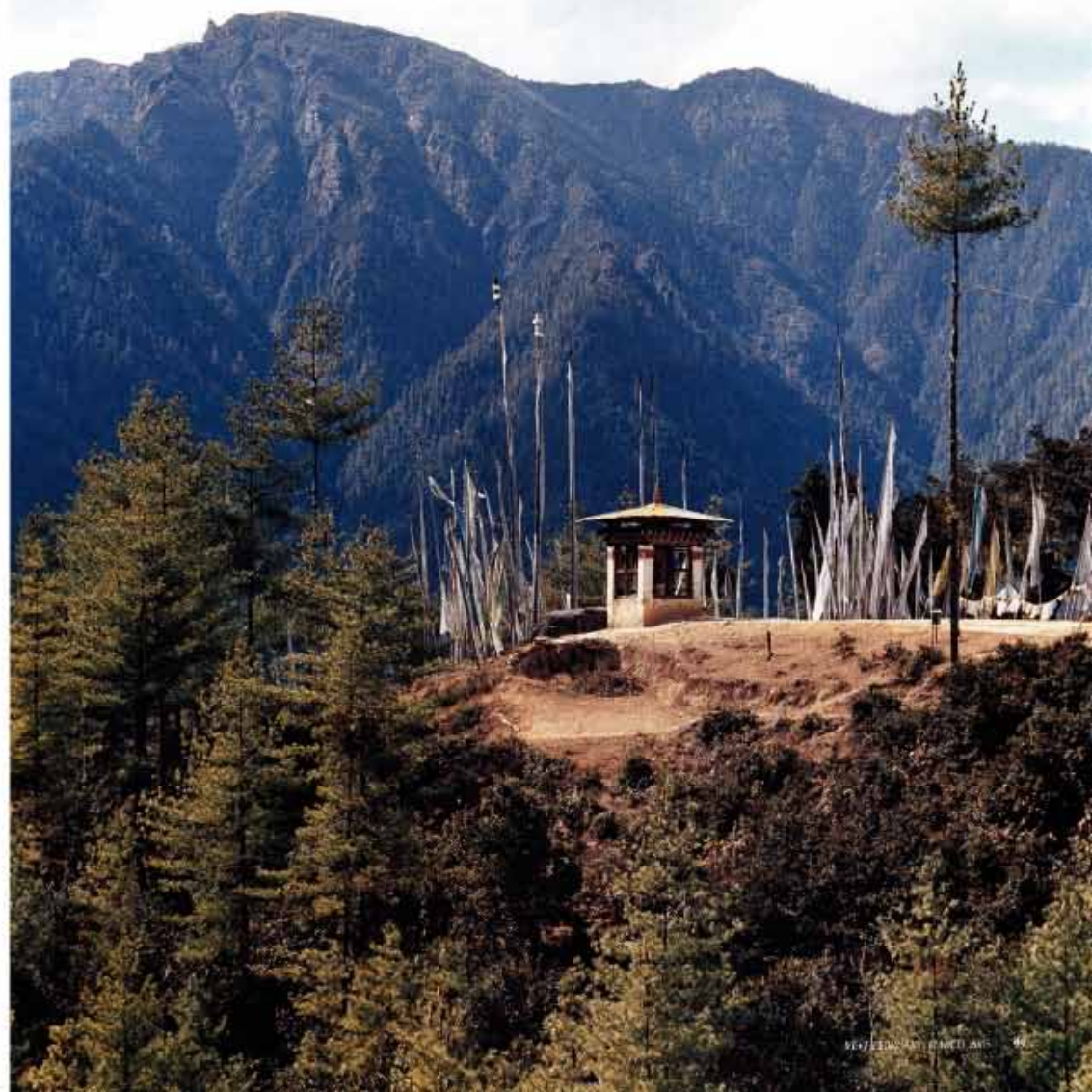
wearing Western clothes who scatter when the police arrive in order to avoid a fine (in the late 1980s, to preserve Bhutanese culture, the government introduced a policy that all Bhutanese must wear national dress). I see one young man, the very picture of a Western slacker, wearing baggy jeans, black beanie and, in a sort of seventies throwback, an enamelled marijuana leaf pendant around his neck. He's even perfected the slightly glazed, bored expression of a “boy from the hood”, or perhaps he's been imbibing the wild marijuana that really does grow by the roadside (though it's weak and is usually fed to pigs).

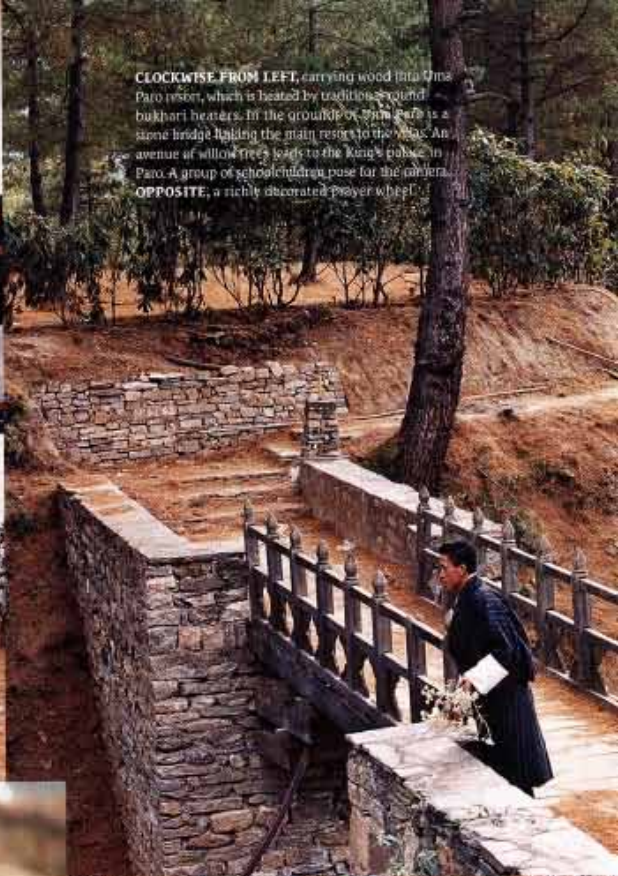
The local people are incredibly friendly in a genuinely unself-conscious way. From the very old to the very young, they wave when you pass them on the road. Bright-eyed children with huge grins on their faces race up and ask us, “How are you? What's your name?” They are warm and welcoming and at no point do we feel unsafe or out of our depth in any exchanges we have with strangers.

To atone for stealing the soul of an aggressive spider, our guide stops just outside Paro, at what appears at first glance to be a brightly decorated bus stop. On closer inspection, it turns out to be an enormous prayer wheel housed in a shelter beside a picturesque bend in the river. Prayer wheels are everywhere in Bhutan – on mountain tops, beside roads, outside temples, even outside shops. Their positions are decided by holy men who bless the site. A bell jangles when the wheel is pulled, always clockwise, and each round conveys a blessing. It's not uncommon to see locals pull up beside the roadside wheels, hop out of their cars, give a few spins and continue on their way, safe in the knowledge that they are blessed. And in the case of driving, they need it because the roads in Bhutan are little more than goat tracks.

Ironically, it is a car full of monks that delivers my first real fright in Bhutan. Screaming around the ledges that the Bhutanese call roads, they come toward us head-on, swerving at the very last minute. ▶

THE MOUNTAINS OF THE PARO VALLEY ARE COVERED IN BLUE PINE TREES, BIRCH AND JUNIPER. ON THE PEAKS, ALL YOU CAN HEAR IS THE SUSURRANT WIND THROUGH THE FIR TREES





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, carrying wood into Uma Paro resort, which is heated by traditional round bukharl heaters. In the grounds of Uma Paro is a stone bridge leading the main resort to the river. An avenue of willow trees leads to the King's palace in Paro. A group of schoolchildren pose for the camera. OPPOSITE, a richly decorated prayer wheel.

ABOVE LEFT, the owner of the teashop at the Taktsang Monastery lookout. ABOVE RIGHT, the foyer of Uma Paro where timber and traditional fabrics create a comfortable ambience at the resort. OPPOSITE, a bedroom at Uma Paro, decorated with paintings of lotus flowers to represent purity of the mind.

a crazy blur of scarlet and purple robes as the car roars past. I could wear they are laughing. It's all very well to drive like that when you believe in destiny and reincarnation, I think, but for an unbeliever such as myself, the thought of bouncing down a shockingly vertiginous mountain with no prospect of an afterlife leaves me pretty cold.

The afterlife features large in local life. We constantly see elderly people sitting in monasteries or outside shops twisting their own prayer wheels in order to ensure a good rebirth. Our guide explains that, as they get older and death draws near, they prepare even more with constant prayers and blessings. It's small things such as this that remind the traveller that they are in a country where everything, from the landscape to social practices, is imbued with spiritual meaning.

Bhutan is a country where there is no distinction between past and present and cold, hard facts are not the whole story. Most 'historical' stories about the Bhutanese past are fables or religious tales. Take for example our guide informing me in all seriousness that the Tiger's Nest monastery was founded because, in the eighth century, Guru Rinpoche flew to the mountain site on the back of a tigress. Apparently he meditated there for a period of time and decided it was a sacred site. Forget about questioning this further, or seeking the facts, as you will be met with a repeated version of the same story and a quiet sense that you're a little bit stupid for not getting it.

But when you see Tiger's Nest or Taktsang Monastery for the first time it's almost possible to abandon any rational thoughts about how it got there. This is Bhutan's most famous attraction. It appears to be hewn from the sheer cliff-face, rising 900 metres above the Paro Valley.

It's an improbable place to even contemplate constructing a temple, let alone achieving it, and the building delivers a true moment of awestruck admiration for its impossibility. But then it is this kind of thing that inspires and fosters faith, sending the message that faith makes the impossible possible. Not even fires, of which there have been several over the centuries, have destroyed the structure's rock solid permanence. For a religion that bases its fundamental core on the concept of life being a thing of impermanence, this famous monastery delivers a powerful reminder that some things appear to last forever.

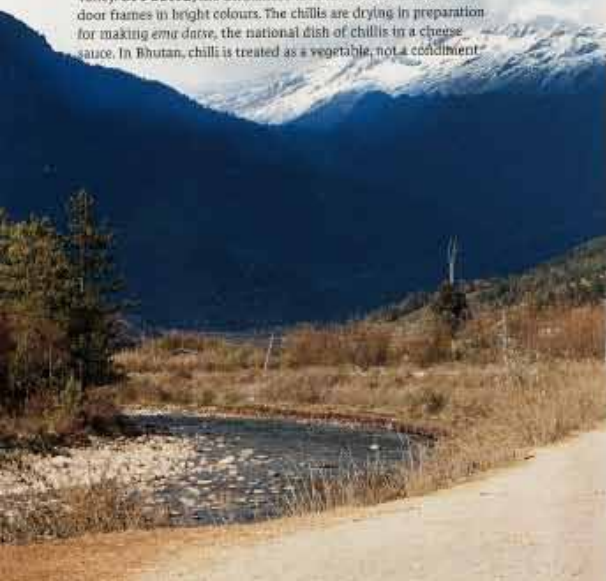
One of the things that gives Bhutan its otherworldliness is the way its Buddhist beliefs are so completely entwined with everyday life. There is no real separation of the religious realm from the state and nothing conveys this more clearly than the local dzongs. These are the imposing buildings that house both the regional bureaucracy and the monastery. The Paro Dzong, one of the most famous, is an extraordinary building. Dominating the town landscape, it is considered one of the finest examples of Bhutanese architecture.

The internal courtyard is a beautiful example of the painted and carved decoration that characterises the nation's architecture. Three levels of wooden balconies embellished with flowers and religious symbols surround the open space. Men in national dress hurry in and out of decorated door frames with signs announcing this is the general court. Downstairs, the monastery houses around 200 monks. As we are photographing the square, a bell rings. Suddenly doors fly open and out rush scores of tiny monks, no older than 10, scarlet robes fluttering as they run into the temple. *Story continues page 134*





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, horses wait to carry travellers up the steep trek to Taktsang Monastery. The elaborately carved entrance to the court complex at Paro Dzong. An elderly woman outside her house on the way to Taktsang Monastery; many homes are decorated with paintings on the outside walls. The river Paro Chhu winds through the town of Paro. In November, the mountains are snow-capped and by December snow begins to fall in the Paro Valley. OPPOSITE, the Bhutanese love to decorate window and door frames in bright colours. The chillis are drying in preparation for making *ema datsé*, the national dish of chillis in a cheese sauce. In Bhutan, chilli is treated as a vegetable, not a condiment.



UMA PARO

It's the second five-star resort to open in Bhutan and Uma Paro bears all the hallmarks of a Christina Ong resort. Famous for her Como Hotels and Resorts around the world – Parrot Cay in the Turks and Caicos and the cool Metropolitan hotels in Bangkok and London – Ong brings a level of luxury to the wilds of Bhutan with Uma Paro, striking the perfect balance of Western comfort while respecting the cultural context of the surroundings. The site of the resort is 15 hectares overlooking the Paro Valley. Spectacular rocky peaks rise behind it and there are treks straight from the hotel grounds. The rooms are beautifully designed. Many have large bathrooms with separate bath and showers. The restaurant, Bukhari, serves excellent Indian-inspired cuisine, as well as Western-style dishes, in a warm, round wood-panelled room with views of the valley and gardens. A standout feature of the resort is the world-class Como Shambala Retreat. Established by Tracy Largent, a respected massage therapist, it offers a range of treatments from shiatsu to reflexology, Ayurveda and facials. Book in for a treatment after a long day hiking up mountains and relax afterwards with rejuvenating ginger tea. You'll think you've died and gone to heaven. There's even an infinity pool that opens out onto a paved courtyard for lazy summer afternoons. The activities desk is run by the intrepid Phil Bowen who oversees the Uma Paro guides, all of whom are locals. Individual programs with an emphasis on trekking, cultural tours, camping and mountain biking are happily, and expertly, designed. For reservations, +975 2 326 254; uma.como.bz; info.paro@uma.como.bz.

TRAVEL NOTES Thai Airways International flies to Bangkok twice a day and will organise flights with Druk Air, Bhutan's national carrier. Call 1300 651 960; www.thaiairways.com. For Druk Air reservations, (02) 9299 4430; www.drukair.com.bt. Flight timings necessitate overnight stays in Bangkok on either side of a Bhutan visit. Como Hotels and Resorts' Metropolitan is chic, with luxe oriental touches and the acclaimed Cy'an restaurant. Call +800 3746 8557; www.metropolitian.como.bz. Visas are required for Bhutan and Como Hotels and Resorts, the group of hotels and resorts to which Uma Paro belongs, will assist with documents.



WITH ITS ARCHITECTURE BASED ON TRADITIONAL DESIGN, THE AIM OF THE UMA PARO RESORT IS TO TREAD LIGHTLY ON ITS SURROUNDINGS