

Understand Bhutan

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A past steeped in myth and mysticism has helped Bhutan keep its identity and independence despite influences from Tibet.

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Buddhism permeates the lives of most Bhutanese, who still maintain their unique dress, lifestyle and traditional world view.

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Bhutan's Buddhist culture has an innate reverence for nature and the country has set aside a world-beating percentage of the country to conserve it.

Bhutan Today

Bhutan remains a unique and special country, but for better or worse, it has opened its doors and hearts to the outside world and joined the global community. There is now almost one mobile phone for every Bhutanese and there are more than 75,000 registered vehicles (though there are still no traffic lights). The challenge ahead for the government is to bring the benefits of globalisation and capitalism to Bhutan without undermining the very things that Bhutanese cherish about their unique culture.

Best on Film

Travellers & Magicians (Khyentse Norbu) Whimsical tale tackling the conflict of new and old, set along twisting mountain roads and in mysterious dark forests.

The Other Final (Johan Kramer) Nicely crafted record of what happens when the world's bottom football (soccer) team, Montserrat, meets second from bottom, Bhutan.

Best in Print

The Raven Crown (Michael Aris) Definitive history of Bhutan's monarchy, lavishly illustrated with rare photographs.

The Hero with a Thousand Eyes (Karma Ura) Historical novel based on the life of Shingkar Lam, a retainer who served in the court of the second, third and fourth kings of Bhutan.

The Circle of Karma (Kunzang Choden) Story of a young woman's journey across Bhutan to find her destiny, revealing the rich detail of everyday life and ritual.

Bhutan: The Land of Serenity (Matthieu Ricard) Superb coffee-table book that sensitively and strikingly reveals Bhutan at its most picturesque.

A Field Guide to Happiness (Linda Leaming) Engaging account of an American adjusting to life in Bhutan.

Democracy & Parliament

Bhutan's parliament consists of the king (Druk Gyalpo), the National Council (upper house) and the National Assembly. The National Council consists of 25 members, 20 of whom each represent one of the *dzongkhags* (political districts) and there are five additional members nominated by the king. Interestingly, candidates for the National Council must not be members of a political party.

For the first (2008) and second (2013) elections, the National Assembly had 47 seats across the 20 *dzongkhags*. The constitution allows for adjustments to be made to the National Assembly as the population increases (to a maximum of 55 seats), and as the distribution of voters across *dzongkhags* changes.

Modernisation & Gross National Happiness

Despite the rapid uptake of technology, democracy and global trends, Bhutan is very aware of the dangers of modernisation and the government continues to assume a protective role in Bhutanese society. Bhutan was the first country to ban not only smoking in public places but also the sale of tobacco. Also banned are Western-style advertising billboards and plastic bags.

Issues of sustainable development, education and health care, and environmental and cultural preservation are therefore at the forefront of policy making; as are the tenets of Buddhism, which form the base of Bhutan's legal code. Every development project is scrutinised for its impact on the local population, religion, faith and the environment. Bhutan's strict adherence to high-value, low-impact tourism is a perfect example of this. Bhutan is one of the few places on Earth where compassion is favoured over capitalism and wellbeing is measured alongside productivity. This unique ap-