



**PHOTO  
ADVENTURES**  
*By Pete Adams*

# BHUTAN

Travel photographer Pete Adams reveals how on his recent trip to Bhutan, he fell in love with the beautiful landscape and the wonderful people of a country that has remained virtually unaffected by globalisation



**W**HEN I'M DECIDING WHERE TO TRAVEL next, I am looking for somewhere that is a far cry from our western culture – to leave the McDonald's and Starbucks behind, for somewhere more disparate and off-beat. Bhutan ticked all the boxes – there isn't a single set of traffic lights in the whole country, let alone any global brands, and all the buildings are built to traditional styles. Until recently, the law forced men and women to wear traditional clothes – an ankle length dress known as a 'Kira' for a woman and the 'Gho' for a man, (a knee-length dress or robe). Nevertheless, the price of visiting a country set on preserving its ancient ways, is that it doesn't want its culture to be diluted by the influence of western travellers and backpackers. No dope smoking hippies here, which is just as well, considering that marijuana grows freely by the side of the road. The locals appear naturally high on the clean, clear mountain air and choose to feed the weed to their pigs, who then get 'the munchies', resulting in happy, well-fed pigs.

"In order to do their best to preserve a traditional way of life, the government charges a hefty, daily visitors' fee. Although the fee usually includes a guide, a car, lodging and food, it does mean using an official tour company.

"On my tour, I was travelling with five women, my 'five wives' as they became known by my guide. I'm not used to travelling in groups, but we were split into two cars and this meant that I could dawdle behind should any unique photo opportunities arise. Not that anyone was in a hurry, we were blissfully cut off from the economic woes consuming the outside world, and soon adopted a slow, laid-back approach, often stopping for long picnics at lunchtime and putting into practise the government's official policy of 'Gross National Happiness'.

"Flying in through a narrow mountain pass, our plane landed in The Paro Valley, in which we spent our first night. So as not to waste any photographic opportunities, I arranged for one of the drivers to drive me down the valley at sunrise. It would take a while for the sun to climb over the mountains and I wasn't sure when it would kiss the valley itself, but I allowed plenty of time. I decided to head to the large Paro Dzong monastery, hoping it might provide some activity early in the morning. We set off as arranged and passed a smaller monastery with large crowds of people outside. It transpired that it was being blessed by an important Lama, so I changed my plans and investigated, reminding me of one of my own rules of photography: 'If you are not there, you can't shoot it'. With this in mind, I always try to get out at every opportunity when travelling, even if I have nowhere specific in mind. Tired from jet-lag, it would have been easier to stay under the covers that particular morning.

"In the monastery, people were circling in prayer. I immediately got a buzz from taking the first pictures of the trip, relieved that Bhutan might actually live up to my

**OPENING IMAGE:** "Tigers' Nest, or the Taktsang Dzong Monastery, was built in the Eight Century, but re-built on more than one occasion due to fire. This was shot late afternoon using the Canon 24-70mm lens and polariser."

**BELOW LEFT:** "This is the entrance to the monastery. The guy on the right was our driver and I shot the group walking towards and away from the camera."

**BELOW CENTRE:** "I spotted this young monk at a monastery window. He was amused by my efforts and made a relaxed and natural model."

**BELOW RIGHT:** "I asked this masked performer to stand as still as possible, allowing me to take several shots to make sure I captured a sharp image in the low light."

**Factfile**

The Kingdom of Bhutan is known locally as Druk Gyalkhap, (or Druk Yul), which can be translated as 'Land of the thunder dragon'. The word Bhutan itself is believed to either come from the Sanskrit Bhu-Uttan, meaning 'highlands', or possibly Bhoti-anta, meaning 'at the end of Tibet'.



"This girl is on her way to school. We'd walked this way the day before and I returned the following morning, staking out the bridge and waiting for people to cross."





"I immediately got a buzz from taking the first pictures of the trip, relieved that Bhutan might actually live up to my high expectations"

high expectations. After a while, I took a walk around the building. Behind it, I found a few young lads, dressed in their Ghos and playing football. I decided it would make a more arresting image if I shot directly into the sun, despite the high contrast and possibility of lens flare. I was largely ignored as I got to work and begin to relax as I realised that it was going to be a joy taking pictures of the people of Bhutan.

"After a hearty breakfast, we made the one hour journey to Thimpu – the capital and our base for the night. Close by, one of Bhutan's many festivals was taking place. One of my main motivations for the trip was to visit the colourful festivals that occur throughout the year in the monasteries. Energetic dancers, usually monks, wear colourful wooden face masks and costumes depicting heroes, demons, gods and caricatures of common people, making an intoxicating, heady, and photogenic mix. My pre-trip research had revealed plenty of images of the dancers themselves, but not much else, so I was hoping to explore the details and quieter moments of the festival – the preparations, dressing up and audience reaction. For this reason, rather than charging around, grabbing shots of the dancers, I decided to take a more leisurely and considered approach.

"Leaving our luggage at the Thimpu hotel, we immediately headed out to the festival. On arrival, I was relieved to discover that with some help from my guide, it would be possible to wander around at will, including behind the scenes. Working alone, it was possible to be unobtrusive, and problems only arose when a group of flash-firing tourists also gathered backstage, and we were asked to leave. Other than a few shots taken with my 70-200mm lens of the masked dancers twirling and strutting their stuff, I mainly shot close-in with my 24-105mm lens attached to the Canon EOS-1Ds Mk III

**ABOVE:** "Young monks playing tag in the monastery courtyard, shot from a balcony above. The slow shutter speed added some movement to the monks."

**RIGHT:** "A girl at a window during a festival – there was a balcony opposite at the same height. A candid portrait, taken when the young girl looked across at me".

**Factfile**

Bhutan has one of the world's smallest economies, and despite new jobs being created in the (carefully controlled) tourist industry and a recent hydropower deal with India, over 60 percent of the population still works in either forestry or (mainly subsistence) farming.

body. I knew the interiors of the monasteries would be pretty dark so had also packed my Canon Speedlite 580EX flashgun. However, I wanted to use ambient light as much as possible, so as to obtain natural-looking pictures without drawing any unwanted attention to myself. It wouldn't be easy using a tripod with so many people milling around, so I used my tripod as a monopod when I could, to take up less space. For the low-light backstage shots, I set the ISO rating between 200 and 400, but I still felt comfortable with these speeds, as noise wouldn't be an issue in the shadow areas. I became rather obsessed with an area behind a large curtain, where people kept going to peek through at the dancing in the courtyard below. There was a lovely soft light there, and I asked a masked man to pose for me, staying as still as possible. I was pushing things a bit with a shutter speed of 1/8sec, but I didn't want to shoot with my lens wide open, as digital is so unforgiving with depth-of-field. I focused on one of his eyes with single-point autofocus, but my main concern remained – the movement of the subject's head, so I shot as much as I could at various settings to ensure a sharp-looking mask. Later, I asked an interesting looking unmasked participant to repeat the exercise, giving me a second bite of the cherry.

"On our journey the next day to Punakha, we travelled over the magnificent Dochu La pass with its spectacular views of the snow-capped Himalayas to the north. With its 108 small stupas and array of prayer flags, it's a wonderful and photogenic spot. I worked hard to try and frame the mountains and stupas with the flags, using a tripod and slow shutter speed to blur the flags, adding some movement. I then added a polariser, which allowed me an even slower shutter speed, while enhancing the rich blue sky in the clear mountain light. Further down the valley, we happened upon an inter-village archery ▶





**FAR LEFT:** "Early morning, father & son. On entering the monastery, I set up with a tripod, shooting people as they went through this doorway. This first, handheld shot was best."

**LEFT:** "I shot this archer from a low angle to provide a clean backdrop and avoid the buildings in the valley below."

**INSET ABOVE:** "Layap girls, shot against a neutral wall in the capital Thimphu."

contest – a sporting passion in Bhutan, with much tradition and ceremony attached to it, and it was quite a spectacle. The targets were much smaller than Western ones and the distances longer – usually with two targets some 100m apart, and the teams shooting from one end of the field to the other. Albeit a social occasion, the teams were trying to distract their opponents by standing around the target & hurling insults at the opposition. I tried standing behind the archers with the target in the far distance, but eventually decided on a low viewpoint, shooting from side-on. This enabled a strong graphic composition with the sky as a backdrop and cropped out the clutter of the overhead telegraph wires. There was no problem taking pictures, other than staying well out of the way of the arrows!

"At the end of the trip, we climbed up to Bhutan's best known landmark, the Taktshang, or Tigers' Nest as it's best known. Taktshang is a monastery, hanging on a cliff some 700 metres (2,300ft) above the bottom of the valley and a spectacular location. After a quick recce, I decided to let the driver off another early start as it looked as if the sun wouldn't reach the monastery until mid-morning, and it was a strenuous one and a half hour's climb up. It was another beautiful day, without a cloud in the sky, as we tramped up the well marked trail. I heard an alluring singing voice and before I knew it, a striking looking Tibetan woman rounded the corner with her two daughters. After visiting the monastery, the others decided to descend, whilst I worked out the best viewpoints for late afternoon shots. Once again I decided to use the colourful prayer flags as focal lines, leading into the monastery. I reached the bottom of the mountain in darkness, tired but elated to find a concerned looking driver waiting patiently for me.

"The day before we left, we were back in the capital, Thimphu. I was doing some last minute shopping, when

"I'm awed at having met this friendly group of people who live in such a remote location, these Layaps who now face a four day walk home"

our guide grabbed me out of a shop and pointed out two distinctive looking women wearing pointed hats and traditional clothing just across the road. They were Layaps, an indigenous people, ethnically Tibetan, who live in the high mountains of the north west in the village of Laya at 3,850m. I'd been intrigued after seeing some pictures of them and here they were, several days' walk from their home. I was very lucky as they were in Thimphu for the crowning of the new King, and were there to perform. I asked if I could pay to take their pictures and ushered them across the road to find a quieter, more suitable location. Fortunately, I found a plain light-blue wall, off the main road, to use as a neutral background and got shooting. I had to work quickly, as the two Layap

guys with them were anxious about catching a bus. I went for some simple portraits of them, both together and separately, and when we had a rapport going, demonstrated some poses they could take up together. By then, they were relaxed and we shared a few laughs. I was after some interaction between them and asked one to stand behind the other and put her arms around her friend. The light levels were

getting low, so I couldn't get both girls in focus at the wider apertures I was having to use. I focused on the leading girl's eyes, drawing attention to her. Afterwards, I was awed at having met this friendly group of people who live in such a remote location, these Layaps who now face a four-day walk home. The next day, I was due to leave Bhutan, but vowed to return to this magical country and make that same journey myself."

**Peter is currently planning a photographic workshop tour to Bhutan later this year. Numbers will be limited to ensure personal instruction, and the visit will include a visit to at least one festival. To find out more, contact Peter at [info@padamsphoto.com](mailto:info@padamsphoto.com). More of his work can be seen at [www.padamsphoto.com](http://www.padamsphoto.com)**

**Pete's kit**

Two Canon EOS 1Ds Mk III bodies, with 70-200mm f/4, 24-70mm f/4 and 17-40mm f/4 lenses. Canon Speedlite 580EX flashgun. Manfrotto 190 Pro tripod with Arca Swiss ball-head & RRS camera plates. "The 24-70mm is my standard lens, as I can use it in situations that demand wide-angle to portrait situations. It's very versatile. I changed from the f/2.8 70-200mm lens to the f/4 one, as the latter is much lighter for travel. I also carry the compact and light 17-40mm for the odd time that I need a more extreme wide-angle."