

*Druk*Asia

BHUTAN

Travelog

A Bhutan travel guide with over
250 picturesque images of the world's
most exclusive kingdom

ASHLEY CHEN & JONI HERISON



DrukAsia

BHUTAN

Travelog

A Bhutan travel guide with over
250 picturesque images of the world's
most exclusive kingdom

ASHLEY CHEN & JONI HERISON

BHUTAN

Travelog

Published by Druk Asia Publishing

ISBN 978-981-18-1355-9

©Druk Asia 2021

Printed by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

To reach out to the publisher, email hello@bhutantravelog.com.

The resources in this book have been provided for informational purposes only. Although the authors have made every effort and taken reasonable care in preparing the book, we cannot warrant the accuracy, adequacy or completeness of the content, and disclaim all liability arising from the use of any of the information.

Front cover image by Scott A. Woodward

Book design by Steve Lim Seng Hee

Edited by Lee Chow Ping

Illustrations by Defry

Photography by Andrew Chun, Ashley Chen, Bhupen Ghimiray, Derek Low, Dorji Dradhul, Inez Bratahalim, Joni Herison, Karma Dorji, Kencho Wangdi, Lester V. Ledesma, Sathya Parthasarathi, Scott A. Woodward, Stephen Gollan, Tian Chad, Tom White, Ugyen Dema, Wiris William, Zahariz Khuzaimah, Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary, Royal Office for Media and Tourism Council of Bhutan.

Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt appreciation to the many individuals who have helped make this book possible. First and foremost, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the honourable Prime Minister of Bhutan, DASHO DR LOTAY TSHERING for taking his time to pen his sincere thoughts for the readers while he was in the quarantine facility.

Special thanks to those who gave their time to share their Bhutan experiences, including Lester V. Ledesma, Karen Lim, Scott A. Woodward, Josephine Sim, the Chan family, Tian Chad, Dato Darren and Datin Kate, Robin Yap, and Baki Zainal. Their personal experiences added tremendous value to the book.

We are immensely grateful to the many talented photographers who have journeyed with us and contributed their beautiful photographs towards the book including Andrew Chun, Bhupen Ghimiray, Derek Low, Dorji Dhradhul, Inez Bratahalim, Karma Dorji, Kencho Wangdi, Lester V. Ledesma, Sathya Parthasarathi, Scott A. Woodward, Stephen Gollan, Tian Chad, Tom White, Ugyen Dema, Wiris William, and Zahariz Khuzaimah.

We are very grateful to our illustrator, Defry, for all the lovely illustrations. Thank you very much to our editor, Chow Ping, for her insightful feedback, comments and suggestions. Our utmost gratitude to our designer, Steve Lim, for his hard work and dedication throughout the creative process.

We greatly appreciate DASHO KINLEY DORJI and PEK SIOKSIAN for helping us to proofread and edit parts of the book. Their experience and valuable insights have been extremely enriching for us.

We would also like to thank all our friends in Bhutan including DAMCHO RINZIN and the Tourism Council of Bhutan who have provided support and encouragement throughout the years. Your friendship and generosity propelled us to continue sharing the beauty of the kingdom with the world.

Last but not least, thank you for picking up this book and supporting our humble efforts in showing you a glimpse of this enchanting country called Bhutan, a special place that is very close to our hearts.

Foreword by the Prime Minister of Bhutan

The request to be a part of this book came my way as I remain comfortably hedged in a room for almost a week now. I am undergoing the 21-day mandatory quarantine at a local hotel in Thimphu, upon return to the country from an official trip.

The state-sponsored quarantine is one of the critical measures to trace and treat COVID-19 cases that have swamped the world in an unprecedented way.

Remaining indoors for three weeks at a stretch contrasts my routine of engaging in duties almost round the clock, a habit I picked up from my two decades as a surgeon.

Easier said than done, but the experience also comes with a dividend to divert some thoughts inward. Therefore, I take this opportunity to share my thoughts from the quarantine facility.

I look around and see that it is a beautiful structure built with aspirations to harbour guests who come to Bhutan for varying reasons. But the pandemic turned the tide and changed the face of tourism altogether. It forced all of us to stay put, shelve our travel plans and let our curiosities rest for a while.

Hotels such as the one I am putting up in are either closed or converted into units to trace, treat or isolate COVID-19 cases.

It also means that now is the time to redefine tourism. For one, our visionary monarchs always believed that tourism in Bhutan should be about discovering and enriching experiences that are exclusive and fundamental in life. It should be about “value” and not “volume”.

This wisdom gets reiterated around this time when uncertainties rock the tourism sector across the world. It is time to slow down and contemplate on what one seeks in life. **And this is when your destination matters.**

In this, Bhutan might have the answers. Our kings pioneered the concept of Gross National Happiness, which insists on a unique development framework, a mindful endeavour of securing collective happiness as a nation. Regardless of how we pursue modern development, we are anchored on important pillars that define humanity. Which is why Bhutan will never look at tourism through the lens of money-making. It will not be a destination for ‘tourists’. Instead, it will be a place for travellers to

experience and find meaning. If you prefer trees to towering buildings, or if you wish to sip water from a flowing river and not plastic bottles, maybe you could consider Bhutan.

Our strength is the leadership we have in His Majesty the King. The unity under the benevolent leader is our fortitude to endure all hardships. With this pandemic, too, His Majesty is spearheading the battle.

The stories of hardship and sacrifices to protect the country and the people will resound for generations.

Confined in this room, my thoughts wander, and I get reminded of a comment a foreign journalist made, *"The world would be a different place if all countries had a His Majesty each."* This makes Bhutan all the more special.

As I write this note, the region reels under stronger waves of COVID-19. Bhutan is safe and secured for now, but the battle is far from over. We also know that like all crises, we will emerge more percipient. We will have more stories to tell, more experiences to share.

As we do so, we will be happy to offer what you don't find in other parts of the world: **simplicity** and **contentment**. Because this is what Bhutan is about. We will always ensure that the essence of inner peace remains non-compromised and preserved for our next generation as we seek economic development.

Finally, I congratulate Ashley Chen and Joni Herison for putting together this travelogue, which sketches a great view of Bhutan through the colours and features. Through this publication, I hope my thoughts find you with more courage to see through this pandemic, and I pray that we emerge from this stronger and as better human beings.



Drukpa Dr. Lotay Tshering
Prime Minister
Royal Government of Bhutan

“

For now, if you ever seek to find answers to some of the fundamental questions in life, please know that there is a country somewhere in the Himalayas that could offer you the answers.

”

Discover the Magic of Bhutan

“Oh! You are going to Bhutan! Isn’t that the happiest country in the world?” a question often posed at the mention of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Until recently, Bhutan has been relatively unknown. In many minds, it is a mystical secluded place. Nonetheless, thanks to the publicity on social media, more and more people are learning about this enigmatic country for its unique philosophy of development that focuses on happiness, vibrant spiritual presence, and its pristine natural environment. Bhutan is also gaining popularity as a travel destination, owing to the credits of international media features and Bhutan’s skilful management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past fifty years, Bhutan has gradually emerged from centuries- long self-isolation to meet modernisation demands. It has been careful with its choices and decisions on the road of development and progression. While Bhutan has opened its doors to the world, a ‘High value, Low volume’ tourism policy still guides the country to ensure that its unique culture, identity and natural environment will continue to be protected from external influence. To enter the country, you are required to book your tour through a licensed tour operator. The tour agency will manage your trip from end-to-end — from VISA application to your departure from Bhutan.

Bhutan Travelog aims to provide you with insights into the country’s history, values, customs, as well as travel tips and recommendations. This book also includes **9 exclusive first-hand stories** from diverse travellers who have been to Bhutan to provide you with a glimpse into this idyllic country. We hope that their journeys will spark your curiosity and inspire your own journey to this breathtaking kingdom.



Special Feature

The stunning photo on the book cover was beautifully captured by Scott A. Woodward, a Canada-born, Singapore- based highly distinguished photographer. His unique and sensitive photographic style has resulted in him being honoured by Luerzer's Archive as one of the "200 Best Advertising Photographers Worldwide" twice. Nikon also named him "One of Asia's Finest Photographers".

His photographs are featured regularly in a wide variety of publications including *National Geographic Magazine*, *Condé Nast Traveller*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Monocle*, *Esquire*, *Vogue*, *GQ*, *The Washington Post*, *The Financial Times* and *The New York Times*.





Keep a lookout for these icons!

The icons are here to help you navigate your reading.



Tips

Tips are important information for tourists who are new to Bhutan. These are things that you should take note of when you're planning a trip to Bhutan.



General Sightseeing

These places are for general sightseeing. It's where you get your camera ready for action. Even if you are not a shutterbug, you can simply relax and drink in the stunning landscapes and architecture of the sites.



Religious Sites

When you see the stupa icon, it means that the place is a sacred site. It can either be a nunnery, a temple, or a place with great religious significance.



Ancient Fortresses

This icon represents the great majestic dzong (ancient fortresses) of Bhutan. Each district has at least one dzong that serves as the district monastic body and government administrative centre.



Activities (Booking required)

If you come across a calendar icon, note that there are activities available on-site. Prior booking is often required. Discuss with your tour operator to make arrangements in advance.



Myths and Legends

Bhutan is a country steeped in mythology and folktales. The mystical dragon icon means that the particular site has intriguing myths or legends associated with it. Be sure to delve deeper into it with your tour guide when you are in Bhutan.



Bridges

Due to the mountainous terrains, Bhutanese rely on either suspension bridges or traditional cantilever bridges to get across the crystal-clear rivers. In fact, suspension bridges in Europe were influenced by the iron chain bridges in Bhutan, built by Thangthong Gyalpo.



Arts and Crafts

There are 13 traditional *zorig chusum* (arts and crafts) in Bhutan, categorised during the reign of the fourth secular ruler, Tenzin Rabgye. These arts and crafts are integral to Bhutanese culture. The flower icon indicates that the location is popular for Bhutanese traditional arts and crafts.



Festivals

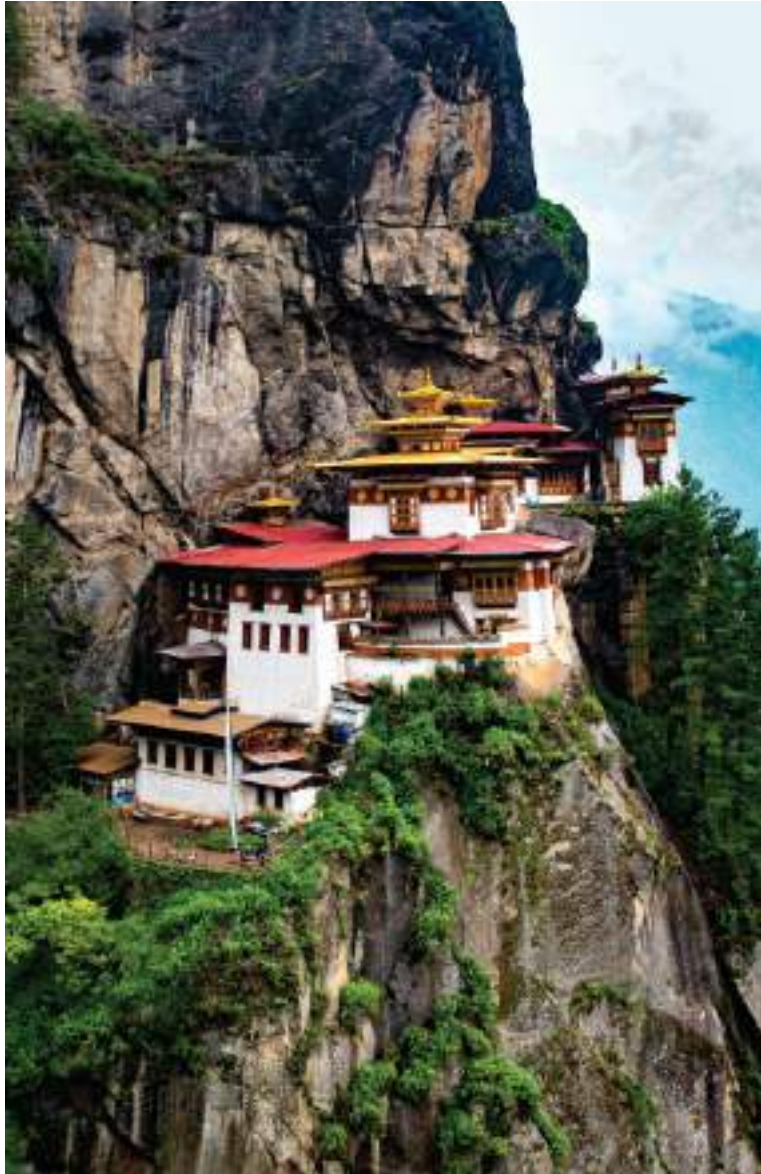
Festivals are very significant in Bhutanese culture. The dancer icon means that the site is a venue for certain festivals in Bhutan. However, the festival dates vary from year to year. For updated information on festival dates, check out www.bhutantravelog.com.



Proverbs

Bhutanese are generally witty and you're bound to find nuggets of wisdom from the locals that you interact with. Their sense of humour is evident from their fun road signs. Thus, to spice up your reading, we have also inserted some interesting Bhutanese proverbs through the pages.

<i>Proverb</i> 	འཇིག་ཏེན་མ་ཅི་དམ་ཅོས་མ་ཉ། <i>Jig ten ma chi; dam chi ma ha.</i> Do not start your worldly life too late; do not start your religious life too early.
---	---



Contents

Foreword

About Bhutan

- National symbols
- History of Bhutan
- Kings of Bhutan

People and National Identity

- Demography of Bhutan
- Livelihood
- Houses and architecture
- Food and drink
- Religions, customs and traditions

Economy of Bhutan

- Currency
- Tourism
- Education
- Technology and healthcare
- Gross National Happiness

Festivals of Bhutan

Trekking in Bhutan

Travel Tips

- Travel by air
- Travel by land
- Best time to visit Bhutan
- Cost of travelling to Bhutan
- Accommodation recommendations
- Climate and temperature

Places of Interest

Western Bhutan

- Thimphu
- Punakha
- Paro
- Haa
- Dagana
- Chhukha
- Samtse

[Tsirang](#)

[Wangdue Phodrang](#)

[Gasa](#)

Central Bhutan

[Bumthang](#)

[Trongsa](#)

[Sarpang](#)

[Zhemgang](#)

Eastern Bhutan

[Samdrup Jongkhar](#)

[Trashigang](#)

[Trashiyangtse](#)

[Mongar](#)

[Lhuentse](#)

[Pemagatshel](#)

[Itinerary recommendations](#)

Bhutan Essentials

[Shopping in Bhutan](#)

[FAQs](#)

[Travel checklist](#)

[Useful websites and information](#)

[Basic conversational phrases in Dzongkha](#)

Travellers' Tales

Bhutan in a Nutshell

Glossary

About the Authors

About Bhutan

The first part of the book features the important symbols, history, and governance system of Bhutan. It serves as a glimpse into the kingdom and provides basic understanding of the foundation on which the nation has been built upon.



The word druk or 'thunder dragon' first originated in Tibet. Legend has it that Tsangpa Gyarey, a renowned meditation master and ancestor of Bhutan's founding father, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, was visiting Nam Village in Lhasa, Tibet to set up a spiritual centre. On his visit there, he was reported to have seen nine dragons flying, triggering a clap of booming thunder in the sky as he approached them. Reading all these as auspicious omens, he named the centre Druk, and his spiritual tradition took the derivative name Drukpa.



Majestic Gangkhar Phuensum with its towering peaks

Local historians claim that Bhutan was called Drukyul and her people Drukpa after most people converted to the Drukpa school of Buddhism. Before becoming Druk

Yul, Bhutan was known as Lho Jong 'The Valleys of the South' or Lho Jong Menjong 'The Southern Valleys of Medicinal Herbs'.

Bhutan is also known to be one of the world's last surviving Buddhist kingdom. And some say, the last Shangri-La.

The Kingdom of Bhutan made international headlines when it became a democratic, constitutional monarchy in 2008.

National Symbols

National Flag

Bhutan's national flag is divided diagonally into two halves of yellow and orange. The upper half in yellow symbolises the king as the upholder of the spiritual and secular foundations of Bhutan. The lower orange symbolises the flourishing of Buddhist teachings, manifested in the Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingmapa traditions. The dragon signifies the name and purity of the country: Druk Yul, Land of Thunder Dragon, while the jewels in its claws denote the country's wealth and perfection.



National Emblem

The national emblem of Bhutan maintains some of the emblems of the national flag. It is contained in a circle with a crossed dorje (thunderbolts) in the centre, placed above a lotus and flanked by two thunder dragons. In the compassionate form of Triple Gem, the sacred jewel at the top of the royal crest symbolises the supremacy of the sovereign in the Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan while the lotus represents purity.

The crossed dorjes placed above the lotus represent the harmonious relationship between the traditional customs of spiritual law and modern authority. The male and female thunder dragons with snarling mouths symbolise the country's guardian deities protecting the country.



Climate

Bhutan has a variety of climates due to varying altitudes and terrain. The south has a hot and humid subtropical climate, and the southern foothills experience the heaviest rainfall due to the southwest monsoon flowing from the Bay of Bengal. The west-central part has temperate climates with warm summers, and cool winters with snowfall occurring occasionally. In the northern region, the weather is much colder during winter. Mountain peaks are perpetually covered in snow, while lower parts are still cool during summer due to the high altitude.



Seasons

Bhutan has four distinct seasons. Spring in Bhutan is relatively short. It usually starts in early March and lasts until mid-April. Summer with occasional showers happens from mid-April until late June, whereas heavier summer rain lasts from late June until late September. Autumn follows until late November, and winter sets in from then until March.



Population

Bhutan has a population of 779,450 people (as of June 2021), which is equivalent to 0.01% of the total world population. The population density in Bhutan is 20 people per km². Nearly half, or 45.8% of the population lives in urban areas.



The Bhutanese

Ngalop, Sharchokpa and Lhotshampa

There are three major ethnic groups in Bhutan: Ngalop, Sharchokpa and Lhotshampa. They are also collectively known as Drukpas (literally, people from Bhutan).

Aside from the three major ethnic groups, Bhutan has nomadic communities living in the highlands such as the Brokpas in the east, and the Layaps and Lunaps in the northern part of Bhutan.



National Language

Dzongkha

The national language of Bhutan is Dzongkha. There are two other major languages, Tshanglakha and Lotshamkha. In total, there are 19 different languages and dialects spoken throughout the country.



Spiritual Practices

Buddhism

Bhutanese predominantly practice Vajrayana Buddhism (Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingmapa traditions).



National Animal

Takin

Bhutan's national animal is the takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*), a rare mammal that is often associated with religious history and mythology. There is a takin preserve in Motithang in Thimphu, where tourists can visit to catch a glimpse of this unique national animal.



National Flower

Himalayan Blue Poppy

The national flower of Bhutan is the Himalayan blue poppy (*Meconopsis galydiana*). It is a rare flower that grows at an elevation of 3,700 - 4,300 metres above sea level. The elusive Himalayan blue poppies can be found in eastern Bhutan, particularly in Merak and Sakteng.



National Tree

Himalayan Cypress

The national tree of Bhutan is the Himalayan cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*). Cypressess are found in abundance and easily noticeable near temples and monasteries. The cypresses grow in temperate climate zones between 1,800 - 3,500 metres.



National Bird

Raven

The national bird of Bhutan is the raven. It represents one of the most powerful deities of the country, Jarog Dongchen.

The Royal Raven Crown worn by the kings of Bhutan represents the deep reverence that Bhutanese hold for these national birds as protective deities.



National Sport

Archery

Archery was declared the national sport in 1971 when Bhutan became a member of the United Nations. Bhutan also maintains an Olympics archery team.

Bhutanese regularly hold archery competitions and tournaments throughout the country. The target distance for archery in Bhutan is 145 metre, double that of an Olympics archery range.



National Butterfly

Ludlow's Bhutan Swallowtail

Ludlow's Bhutan swallowtail was originally discovered by botanists Frank Ludlow and George Sheriff in Bhutan around 1933-1934. It was rediscovered 75 years later by Karma Wangdi, a forestry officer, in August 2009. He collected the first evidence — a specimen of the butterfly — in Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary and proved that this rare butterfly can still be found in Bhutan. Ludlow's Bhutan swallowtail (*Bhutanitis ludlow*) was officially endorsed as the national butterfly in 2012.



History of Bhutan

Early History

Bhutan's vibrant history is strongly tied to Buddhism. You'll discover important spiritual masters of the Himalayas who played vital roles in Bhutan's early history. When trying to understand Bhutan's history, you have to open up your mind. Instead of rationalising the events, we suggest you visualise the essence of its spirituality. Absorb the interesting folklores about the kingdom.

Buddhism was first introduced to Bhutan in the 7th century when the Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo, built Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro and Jambay Lhakhang in Bumthang — two of the 108 temples built to pin down a demoness.

It is believed that the demoness was obstructing the spread of Buddhism, and these two temples pinned down the left foot and left knee of the demoness who was subdued.

The Zhabdrung and the Dual System of Government, 1600 - 1907

Under the politically and religiously charismatic Ngawang Namgyal, Bhutan became a unified polity in the 17th century. Ngawang Namgyal was a religious master of the Drukpa school who held the honorary title of Zhabdrung Rinpoche, 'Precious Jewel at Whose Feet One Prostrates'. Persecuted in Tibet, he fled to Bhutan in 1616. Over the next 30 years, he unified the 'southern valleys' into the nation State of Druk Yul.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal provided Bhutan with a unique system of administration and law. He established the unique system of government with the Central Monastic Body under a religious leader, the Je Khenpo (chief abbot), and a political system administered by a temporal chief, the desi (secular ruler). This dual system of government, *choesi*, lasted until the Wangchuck dynasty took over in 1907.



You may see children as young as seven years old enrolled in a monastic school



Painting of Zhabdrung Ngawang Norbu

Bhutan and the British

The 200 years prior to the establishment of the monarchy was the most unstable

period in the history of Bhutan, with internal strife, civil wars and political turmoil. 22 *desis* were reported to be assassinated or deposed by rivals during these years, except for the 13th *desi*, Sheru Wangchuk, who ruled for 20 years. Between 1651 and 1730, Tibet invaded Bhutan around seven times. The political instability caused rival factions to seek support from the Chinese emperor in Beijing.

In 1730, the 10th *desi*, Mipham Wangmo, assisted Gya Chila, the ruler of Cooch Behar (present-day West Bengal), against intrusion in a family feud, thus allowing Bhutan to station a force in Cooch Behar. In 1768, the *desi* formed alliances with the Panchen Lama in Tibet and King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Nepal.

In 1772, Bhutan invaded Cooch Behar to help settle a feud over succession, resulting in Cooch Behar seeking assistance from the British East India Company. British East India Company drove the Bhutanese garrison out of Cooch Behar and later attacked Bhutan itself in 1773. The Druk *Desi* signed a Treaty of Peace with the British East India Company on April 25, 1774, where Bhutan agreed to return to its pre-1730 boundaries.

The Duar War

However, skirmishes over boundaries and trading rights continued with the British for the next 100 years. The continual skirmishes at the southern border escalated and eventually led to the Duar War (1864-1865), a confrontation over who would control the Bengal Duars. Bengal Duars is the area of plains between the Brahmaputra River up to the lowest hills of Bhutan.

The Duar War lasted only five months. It ended in Bhutan's defeat and loss of the Assam Duars and Bengal Duars. On November 11, 1865, Bhutan signed the Treaty of Sinchula to restore friendly relations and gave up the territories in exchange for an annuity from the British.

During this period, there was a civil war in Bhutan due to power struggles between the Paro and Trongsa valleys. The Trongsa's *penlop* (governor), Jigme Namgyal, eventually controlled central and eastern Bhutan. After his death, he was succeeded by his son, Ugyen Wangchuck, who defeated his political rivals in several civil wars, and was elected as the first hereditary King of Bhutan, marking the beginning of the Wangchuck dynasty.

Monarchy and Governance

In 2008, Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy, with His Majesty the fifth King as

the Head of State. The kings of Bhutan are known as Druk Gyalpo, 'Dragon King'. Through the admirable stewardship of the Druk Gyalpos, Bhutan has shown excellent leadership in environmental preservation and balanced governance. They have maintained significant forest cover, provided a safe habitat for endangered species, and adopted many environmentally friendly and sustainable policies.