
Opening Extract from...

Married to Bhutan

Written by Linda Leaming

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Married to Bhutan

How One Woman Got Lost, Said 'I Do', and Found Bliss

Linda Leaming

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For Judy Liff Barker,
for keeping the faith

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

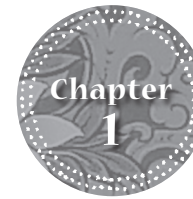
All names of people and some place names have been changed as a nod to the veil of fog that often envelops Bhutan. As much as possible I've tried to update things that have changed during the almost two decades I've had associations with the country, but I also want to convey the idea of Bhutan as I see it, or saw it from the beginning. The country and its people are making tremendous changes, but the things that matter—family, culture, humor—remain. The little house on the farm where we lived outside the capital of Thimphu is still there, but the farm has become a large school.

The Bhutan I married is a rural Bhutan, full of religion, superstition, wonderful friends and family, hard work, and jaw-dropping beauty. I never use the word *pristine* anywhere else, but I do in Bhutan. Most of the people described in these pages will never read this book. My audience in Bhutan is the intelligentsia, the average resident of Thimphu: educated, savvy, and self-examining to a degree that would surprise most Westerners, but we are a little patronizing that way. For this reason, educated Bhutanese might take issue with my characterizations of life in Bhutan, my insistence that Bhutanese look at time differently and might not be punctual getting to the office. I beg their indulgence. You don't know what you have until it's gone.

I make no secret of the fact that I think my Bhutanese friends and family live more sanely than many people around the globe. They are my patient teachers. What I write and all I know is the experience of an outsider who had the extraordinary good luck to be welcomed into this unique place. It has been life-altering. In a way, it is a real marriage. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, my life belongs to Bhutan.

Just as Alice, when she walked through the looking glass, found herself in a new and whimsical world, so we, when we crossed over the Pa Chu, found ourselves as though caught up on some magic time machine fitted fantastically with a reverse. . .

— Earl of Ronaldshay, British governor of Bengal, 1921, on crossing the river (Pa Chu) that led him into Bhutan



From This Day Forward

Several years ago, a friend called from London about an upcoming assignment in Bhutan in March, which was only a few weeks away. He had heard nothing about his travel arrangements, agenda, housing, schedule, or fees—all he knew was that they wanted him to be there. "I can't get anyone to answer my e-mails," he said, exasperated.

"Oh," I said, trying to soothe him, "that's because the Bhutanese don't answer e-mails."

"You're joking."

"Not joking," I replied.

"I can't get anyone on the phone either."

"What month is this?" I asked. I knew it was mid-winter, but I was vague on the exact date.

There was a meaningful silence, then, "It's the second of February," he said tersely.

"You won't get anyone on the phone in February."

"Why, for God's sake? Has everyone left the country?"

"In a manner of speaking. Not much happens in the winter." I explained that government offices have a shorter workday in the winter. In November the *Je Khenpo,* the head abbot and spiritual leader of Bhutan, travels from Thimphu (pronounced Tim-POO) to his winter headquarters in Punakha (Poo-NA-ka), the next valley over, along with about 800 monks. It's an age-old custom in Bhutan and probably has something to do with the fact that Punakha is warm in winter. Besides, Bhutan is still mostly agrarian, so it's a migrating kind of place, even now. People and animals move to better pastures and better weather, where growing seasons are longer and grass is plentiful. This monk migration is the official signal that winter has arrived. It's also the unofficial nod to Bhutanese men that they can wear tights or leggings under their *ghos,* their Japanese-bathrobe-like official dress. Bhutanese are required to wear traditional dress, the gho for men and the floor-length, sarong-like *kira* for women when visiting temples or in government offices. It is a point of national pride, as well as a social leveler.

I got back around to the migrating monks. "When spring comes, around April or May, the Je Khenpo and his retinue make their way back to Thimphu and Trashichhodzong, the seat of government, and men go back to wearing nothing whatsoever under their ghos for the summer.

"They cut off an hour because it's darker earlier and cold in the offices," I said, hoping he was still with me. "That's also the reason for the tights. The cold." I heard my voice trail off.

"Okay, okay, okay, okay, O-KAY!" he said. "I don't want to hear about migrating monks wearing *tights*." His voice had taken on a high-pitched trill. "I can

understand that there would be winter hours for government servants, especially in a mountainous country with irregular heating. But that still leaves seven hours in the day where they would actually be in the office. Am I correct in that assumption?"

"Not necessarily," I ventured gingerly. "Offices open at 9 A.M., and civil servants usually arrive on time—at 9:45 on the dot. Before that they take their children to school and their brother-in-law to the bus station. Then they have their morning tea break. That usually takes about 45 minutes. Then they catch up on the goings-on of their work mates and what happened on the latest episode of the Indian soap they all watch, and maybe they play a little solitaire on their computers. That gets us up to around 11:30."

"Right."

"Lunch is at 1 P.M. sharp, so they'll pop out at noonish to run some errands before lunch. Maybe they have to pay their electric bill, or get air in their tires, or pick up their brother-in-law from the bus station and take him somewhere else. Then they'll go home to eat or meet friends in town at a restaurant."

"And lunch is one hour?"

"No, it's half an hour. So they get back to the office around 2:30 or 3 P.M."

"I see."

"Right," I continued. "Then it's time for—"

"The afternoon tea break!"

"Yes!" I said enthusiastically. He was finally catching on. "And after that it's time to call it a day."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"They'll get in touch in their own time," I offered. My friend said he needed to go lie down. The line went dead.

Okay, I was messing with him a little bit. But at the time—more than ten years ago—Bhutan was a sleepy, albeit magical, little place. It still is. Back then there wasn't a whole lot of urgency. But in 2006, the benevolent fourth king made a historic pronouncement. He said the people might not always have a good king. The country must become democratic. Having researched this, I can't find another instance in the history of the world where a king has voluntarily, without war or revolution, abdicated in favor of democracy. It's gotten people fired up a bit. General elections were held for the first time in 2008. Now, I'm sad to report that many people in Bhutanese offices come early and stay late.

Bhutan does seem a bit unreal at times. Hardly anybody in the U.S. knows where it is. I have friends who still think the entire country is a figment of my imagination. When I was getting ready to move here, and I told people I was going to work in Bhutan, they'd inevitably ask, "Where's Butane?"

"It's near Africa," I'd answer, to throw them off the trail. "It's where all the disposable lighters come from."

They'd nod in understanding.

So few people have heard of Bhutan. It's bad for the world, which should know that a country like it exists; but it's good for Bhutan, nestled deep in the Himalayas between Tibet and India. The tiny Buddhist country thrives with little outside influence. A modern day Shangri-La, it is one of the most seductive and interesting places on the globe.

Thimphu, the capital, sits in a bowl-shaped valley and has about 100,000 people but no traffic lights. There's no Styrofoam and few plastic bags, as decreed by

the aforementioned king, an enlightened monarch who said he'd rather have Gross National Happiness than Gross National Product for his people. The army makes rum and scotch; and the government dispenses condoms—ribbed, flavored, dotted, your choice—to all of its citizens for free. The country uses two separate calendars, the Gregorian calendar alongside their own lunar calendar, which acknowledges holidays called "Blessed Rainy Day" and "The Meeting of Nine Evils." Having two calendars is an apt metaphor for how the Bhutanese conduct themselves: they are nothing if not adaptable, blending their age-old customs with life in the rest of the world. As much as the Bhutanese are modernizing, they are also taking great pains to keep their traditions. It's an ever-so-delicate balance.

ATMs have sprouted up in more than a few places around Thimphu, and now there are three banks in the country. It took a while, more than five years, for the ATMs to catch on. At first, people were lukewarm about them. Bhutan's currency came in the 1960s; before that, there was much bartering, and the Bhutanese used Indian and Tibetan currencies. There's still some bartering, and people have a healthy disregard for money. If they have it, they spend it. If they don't, they hit up a friend or relative.

The capital has its share of cars; more than 10,000 crowd the narrow streets, representing about 80 percent of the cars in the country. If you get out of Thimphu, you pretty much have the road to yourself. But watch out for the Indian Tata trucks that barrel down the narrow mountain roads, carrying nearly-out-of-date foodstuffs from India to remote villages. The bright faces painted on their hoods manage to look jaunty and menacing at the same

time. If they're not loaded down with stuff, the cavernous truck beds of the Tatas traffic in human beings, serving as makeshift taxis and buses. It's not the most comfortable way to travel the winding mountain roads, which is why the trucks' sides are caked with vomit, but it's free.

You'll also find people washing their laundry in the streams beside the road, or bathing. The roads are sometimes makeshift meeting places, mating places for animals, places to sell vegetables or cheese, or places to split bamboo reeds or dry grains.

Sustenance farmers and their families make up a large share of the population; monks, including whole groups that devote their lives to praying for world peace, comprise another substantial portion of the populace. There are rich communities of flora and fauna endangered in the rest of the world, more than 480 identified varieties of edible mushrooms (said to be about one-fourth of what's actually here), and a great deal of hydroelectric power. During the summer monsoon season, Bhutan is one of the wettest places on the earth, and the country is getting rich selling electricity to India.

Bhutan is also very precarious. Because of climate change, the glaciers in the north of the country are melting rapidly. Glacier lakes are swelling and threaten to overflow their banks and burst out into the valleys where everybody lives. So along with all this peaceful beauty, there's a lot of vulnerability.

A few Internet cafés in towns like Thimphu, Paro, and Phuentsholing are thriving. There is television: local cable stations offer about 35 channels, and satellite TV is coming. Journalists who visit the country for a few days or weeks, then write in-depth articles or books, like to make much of the fact that there was no television in Bhutan

until 1999, and now television and exposure to the rest of the world are corrupting the minds of the innocent Bhutanese. That's sort of true and sort of not. Many people in Bhutan had bootlegged satellite dishes and could watch television before 1999, or they had videos and DVDs and could watch movies. The average Bhutanese house with a television gets news from India, China, Korea, Japan, Germany, the U.S., and the U.K. This seems like a positive thing. And even the most isolated villager in Bhutan is surprisingly worldly, if not in the actual ways of the world, then in the ways of human beings.

There's a local television and radio station, Bhutan Broadcasting Service, or BBS, and several new radio channels have come onto the scene. Oprah is on every afternoon, as is Larry King. We have Jay Leno, David Letterman, and HBO. We watch a very popular Indian talk show called *Koffee with Karan,* with a "Lie-O-Meter" that actually pops up on the screen if Karan suspects a guest isn't coming clean. We like Indian soap operas, which are every bit as fabulous as their American cousins. There are endless episodes of shows such as *Desperate Housewives* and *American Idol,* as well as numerous reality shows and their hybrids. The current Bhutanese obsession is *Druk Star,* the homegrown Bhutanese *Idol* competition. The Indian version of *Idol* has been popular over the years, too. It had the production value of a high-school talent show, but in a country of over a billion people—many of whom have cell phones—it was an amazing spectacle. There were riots one year because the Indian equivalent of Ryan Seacrest made what was perceived to be a slur against the winner, who was of Nepali descent. The Bhutanese look down on India from their perch close to the

heavens and enjoy the high drama. The effusive, emotional Indians are the Italians of Asia and make a nice contrast to the quiet, unassuming Bhutanese.

Because of geography, religion, and culture, the average Bhutanese thinks very differently than the average American. This isn't good or bad; it just is. They live at a slower pace. They have built-in bullshit detectors. They are introspective and self-examining and well versed in the geopolitics of the region in which they live. They know an impressive amount about the rest of the world. If you're smaller, you have to look outward.

Paradoxically, Bhutan, an agrarian society for centuries, has developed in isolation. Self-imposed to some extent, the isolation is also a result of geography, weather, and karma. Mountains to the north, west, and east and dense jungles in the south form natural barriers that keep the Bhutanese in and the rest of the world out. Not a lot of things or people can traverse the rugged Himalayas; there are only three very narrow ways into the country and one or two daily Druk Air flights. Buddha Air, a Nepali airline, began flights to Bhutan in August 2010 but quit the same month. Still, no other country in the world is as isolated or ethereal.

Bhutan is about as far as you can get from my family home in Nashville, exactly 12 time zones away and an epic journey that takes upwards of 36 hours to complete and requires changing planes at least four times. If you can stand the discomfort, it's worth the effort. Bhutan's lush mountains and sheltered valleys make it one of the most spectacularly unspoiled places on earth.

Even with all of the change, in Bhutan, we move at our own pace. Bhutan missed the Industrial Revolution

and slept through the two world wars, and Y2K definitely came in a little fuzzy; after all, it was only the beginning of another in a long line of centuries.

The year 2007 marked the 100th anniversary of the monarchy in Bhutan. Before the monarchy, Bhutan was ruled by an elected *Druk Desi,* or regent; secular governors called *Ponlops;* and the Je Khenpo, the spiritual head of the government. But because 2007 was an inauspicious year, the anniversary was celebrated in November 2008. We just roll with time in Bhutan, squeeze or stretch it according to our needs.

The way the Bhutanese firmly refuse to be controlled by the clock is the main thing I loved about the country when I first visited in 1994. It's quirky and takes some getting used to, especially for harried, time-conscious Americans; but once you get into the swing of things, it's a great way to live. The country has worked for decades on what is unofficially known as BST—Bhutan Stretchable Time. If you have an appointment to meet someone at, say, 10 A.M., you have anywhere from an hour before to two hours after to keep the appointment. There's a very large window. It is safe to assume that the person you want to see is also running a bit late. You just sit down and wait and someone brings you a cup of tea. That you can always count on.

Before I came to Bhutan, I was always irritating friends and family in the U.S. by being a few minutes late. My mother used to say I would be late for my own funeral. ("Avoid clichés like the plague," I responded.) Americans get peevish if you're 10 minutes late, which is actually 15 minutes late because everyone gets everywhere 5 minutes early. In Bhutan, no matter what time you get there, you're right on schedule.

In fact, when making an appointment for someone to come for a meal or to fix the plumbing, a Bhutanese will say, "Come Wednesday," and that is specific enough. As long as the person shows up within the 48-hour window that is Wednesday and Thursday, everything is as it should be.

These flexible habits are age-old. Perhaps they came about because until recently—and even still, in many places in Bhutan—if there's a great distance to be traveled, it's usually on foot, so it's hard to know when you will arrive. If someone's visiting you from a neighboring village and it's late summer, he may have to stop on a mountain trail and quickly climb a tree to avoid a bear or a tiger, and that could detain him a bit. Conversely, he may show up early if the bear or tiger is chasing him. Then there's the unpleasant thought that he might never show up because he's ended up as someone's lunch. Warning: bears and tigers can climb trees, too.

In Bhutan, time is cyclical, not linear. The Bhutanese live by the seasons, which go round and round, not forward. They also believe in reincarnation, endless cycles of birth and rebirth. The way we experience time influences so many things. I think for Bhutanese, time is less about quantity than quality. They are masters of living in the moment.

I have never been someone who likes rules or structure. I don't even like ruled notebook paper. There's too much structure in the world: too much insurance, litigation, unfulfilling work, fighting; too many credit cards, receipts, forms, taxes, mortgages, traffic jams, obligations—and always enormous pressure and fear as a result.

The world lacks balance. In the U.S. we crave peace of mind; the desire for it is palpable. But we don't know how to get off what my friend calls "the hamster wheel of doom." Bhutan is good at showing people a different way to live.

I experienced my conversion, my "Aha!" moment (remember, we get Oprah, too), one morning after walking to my job. I'd been working at a little cultural school outside of Thimphu for a few months and the "commute" took 40 minutes. I could shave off an extra 5 minutes, if needed. Instead of taking the road to the forestry checkpoint, past the big prayer wheel, through the tiny village of Semtokha on the side of a hill, I could instead follow a cow path that curved up behind my house, then bore straight down through a ravine to the campus of the Royal Government of Bhutan's National Mushroom Centre, a white square block of a building with a few offices and a "mushroom production center" (a big room with recycled apple-juice bottles in rows on shelves, with sawdust and mushroom spores in them). A brisk walk across a parking lot, a hop across five stones placed strategically in a rushing brook, a climb over a two-foot concrete wall beside the latrines next to the male-student hostels of the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies, then it was a straight shot up the dirt road to Semtokha Dzong (a three-centuries-old monastery-fortress), to another cow path beside the forestry guard's house, up and then down two small ladders hand-carved out of logs leaning on either side of a barbed-wire fence, through a steep mountain meadow, past the dzong, the students' mess, and the headmaster's house to the parade ground beside the school, where we had morning assembly.

One morning I stood, as usual, in the dew-soaked grass with a handful of other teachers, waiting for the students to gather in their rows and sing the national anthem, then hear a speech and announcements by the principal. I gazed at the road that curled around the valley of Babesa about half a mile away below the school. The Wang Chu, with early-morning mist rising from its blue river waters, surrounded by farmhouses and green rice paddies, the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayan mountains above it on all sides, made me feel like I'd been transported to a page of *National Geographic*. After my purposeful, violently aerobic gauntlet of a commute, I finally felt, not like I needed to go lie down and sleep for the rest of the day—the way I had for weeks—but strong and fit, as if I could conquer the world. That or teach English to Bhutanese teenagers. The walk hadn't tired me; it had energized me. I'd traded the hamster wheel for some other kind of crazy karmic wheel. It was bliss.

I thought of other commutes back home: driving 45 minutes every morning on the interstate to get to an office and putting on makeup in the rearview mirror when the traffic slowed; being grateful that my commute took me past a Dunkin' Donuts so I could get a cup of coffee, that my car had a cup holder, and that there were no accidents to slow me down; worrying that my company was downsizing and wondering if they would keep me long enough for me to pay off the car I was driving. The radio was my shepherd, the traffic report my Bible.

I wondered what a traffic report from my commute during Bhutan's morning rush hour would sound like, and laughed. *The cow path is clean this morning. We've got Ap Khandu's cows grazing by the fly-over, so it's all clear to the Mushroom Centre with no cow patties. But you'll want to*

watch the mud near the boys' latrines—there could be some surprises—and be careful of that third rock as you make your hop over the brook. It's a little bit wobbly this morning.

You find things when you're looking hard for other things. The trick is to be awake—which, granted, is harder than it seems. A sense of humor helps, as well as a willingness to accept whatever comes along—good, bad, or ferociously, violently different.

A man met the Buddha after the Buddha became enlightened. The man was awed by his remarkable radiance.

"What are you?" the man asked. "Are you some kind of celestial being? A god, perhaps?"

"No," said the Buddha.

"Well, then, are you a magician or wizard?"

"No," the Buddha answered again.

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"Well, then, what are you?"

"I am awake," the Buddha replied.