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Along Lake Champlain in Burlington, Vermont, p. 46. Photo by Raymond Patrick.

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BY MICHAEL HAWLEY

# PLACE OF A LIFETIME

## Bhutan

Working in November 2001 on a Friendly Planet project to document the lives of Bhutanese children, we'd stumbled into an old stone *dzong*, or monastery fortress, clinging to the Himalayan foothills in the Trongsa district. It was festival day in Trongsa, a crisp, sunny fall morning, and the inner courtyard was like a multihued fairy tale—villagers in silk *ghos* and *kira* dresses, dancers wearing papier-mâché masks and shimmering gold robes and spinning slowly in the courtyard, much as their an-

cestors had done for hundreds of years.

A little girl came up to me. With big eyes and a stunning smile she said, "*Kuzu zangpo!* Sir, are you from America?" She spoke beautiful English. All the kids

in Bhutan do. It's the medium of instruction in schools. I said, yes, I was from America.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"How old are you?" I asked back.

She said she was 13.

"I'm 15," I joked. She said her name was Choki Lhamo and she attended school in Trongsa. I told her my name was Mike, and I went to school at MIT.

INHERIT WITTE BEVIE



At a Buddhist festival known as a *tsechu*, dancers at the Trongsa monastery whirl to the music of drums and gongs.

"Actually, I teach there." She held my hand and told me how sorry she was about the catastrophe in New York. They had all seen it on television. That threw me. Bhutan, famously isolated, had resisted TV until 1999.

"Sir, after it happened," she said quietly, "our King lit butterlamps and prayed. On September 12 he closed all the schools. The government closed. It seemed like everyone in Bhutan went into the monasteries to pray. I hope the chaos settles down soon." Then she added, "Could I be your friend in Bhutan? Maybe your best friend?"

It saddened me to think this girl from a remote Bhutanese mountain village had occasion to use the word "chaos" because of the violence in my part of the world.

Bhutan is about the size of Switzerland but with a population of 600,000 (Switzerland has seven million), nearly all in rural villages. Communities seem much more closely knit and supportive of one another, to a degree that's unknown in the West.

Nestled in the mountains east of Nepal, northeast of India and south of Tibet, Bhutan qualifies as the Galápagos of the Himalaya—about 750 interesting endemic species call the Eastern Himalayas home. The red panda lives in the forests. The golden takin is a bizarre-looking thing, sort of a cross between a buffalo and a deer, with an odd snout and a blond hide. The very rare black-necked crane spends half its time in northern Bhutan. The Himalayan cherry grows at high altitudes and blooms in November. It was quite remarkable to look out over mountains above 10,000 feet lush with evergreens and rhododendrons and see occasional puffs of pink blossoms.

There's also the blue sheep. The golden langur. The snow leopard. The musk deer. The Himalayan black bear. The pygmy hog. The greater one-horned rhinoceros. The hispid hare. The Ben-

gal tiger. The blue poppy (almost mythical but findable in Bhutan).

Bhutan is also the only country in the world with a national park set aside for the yeti. It hasn't been seen by scientists yet, but the forests are said to be impenetrable, so who knows?

A palpable serenity enfolds Bhutan. The King refers to it as a "paradise on Earth." And he's right. There are no real cities, so the patterns of poverty and neglect that plague dense urban centers don't manifest here.

An effusively exoteric Tantric Buddhist culture pervades every aspect of



For the author, the bright smile of Choki Lhamo, now 14, came to represent the best of Bhutan. "The harmony of the culture resonated deeply with me," he says.

life. Colorful frescoes decorate houses, which otherwise look oddly like Swiss chalets. The native dress is made from gorgeous textiles in an array of patterns. The *thangkas*, Buddhist religious paintings, seemed more richly colored than in other Buddhist cultures.

My place of a lifetime is anywhere there are wonderful, compassionate kids like Choki. Her country's stated economic plan touts "Gross National Happiness." The plan seems to be working.

**MICHAEL HAWLEY** has been a creative digital pioneer at Lucasfilm, NeXT, and at the MIT Media Lab as a professor. Also an accomplished pianist, he won the Van Cliburn amateur competition in 2002.

**travelwise** For information on traveling to Bhutan, visit [www.kingdomofbhutan.com](http://www.kingdomofbhutan.com).