

PASSPORT TO ENLIGHTENMENT

A night with the monks of Thimphu's Dodedra Monastery

By Craig Charles

SHROUDED in fog and misted by centuries of drizzle, a twisting uphill trail leads to Dodedra Monastery. This Buddhist enclave is located high above the city of Thimphu in the ancient Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Here, four pilgrims and their guide have clawed their way up the mountainside in the hope of contemplating mortality among the enlightened.

Now, the trail has been blocked by stubborn horn-bearing cattle and greased by rain clouds making the trek especially challenging. Our guide won't be deterred, though. He grabs a nearby stick, waves it at the recalcitrant steers, barks out orders in his native *Dzongkha*, the national language, and convinces the bovines to move on down the trail and let the visitors pass.

You won't find Dodedra Monastery in the *Lonely Planet*



A monk at Dodedra Monastery

Bhutan guidebook. Perhaps that is what makes it so special. In Bhutan, Westerners are still an anomaly, especially visitors eager to explore Buddhism, the country's predominant religion.

Upon our arrival at the mountainside enclave, we are greeted by an orange-clad

monk wearing plastic Croc sandals and a gentle smile. His assistant, a six-foot-five hulk whose robe appears two sizes too small, has a gentle voice and an unassuming swagger. His enormous hands engulf a teapot as he beckons us to enjoy sweet tea and puffed rice while our

guide makes a donation to the devout and bids us farewell.

Were it not for our rain-soaked Gore-Tex jackets and modern nylon backpacks, it would be impossible to know what century it was. The stone buildings surrounding us have been carved out of the mountains with primitive tools and hand-made concrete is formed with sand hauled up on the backs of believers.

We are the monastery's only guests, and we are soon escorted to our accommodation which is a pair of simple rooms with mattresses, ample blankets and even a hot water heater. True backcountry luxury. Our monastic guides tell us that we are free to roam the grounds and we soon discover the 120 young disciplines are in the fifth of a mandatory forty-day long confinement to the grounds.



It is time spent in prayers, fellowship, and meditation.

One of my fellow travellers, a college student from Long Island, New York, is on the path to Buddhism and he quickly engages our hosts in a discussion regarding his interest

in taking his commitment vows. Arrangements are made for him to take vows in the following week.

My road to Dodedra has taken a different track. I am in Bhutan from America serving as a volunteer reading and English teacher on a month-long placement at Thimphu's Changangkha Middle Secondary School.

I have joined 13 other volunteer teachers from across the globe to share our expertise with Bhutanese teachers in placements across Bhutan. Although Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan, lessons in Bhutanese schools are delivered in English. It is, however, the weekend, and I and my three new-found friends have decided to go





Craig with his three friends

native and spend the night with the monks of Dodedra Monastery.

We soon settle into the rhythm of monastic life where the patter of the rain drowns out the tap of the paddle ball game we have brought as a gift for the monks. Cell phones and electric lights seem out of place in Dodedra, as young monks

pour handmade butter candles into round brass bowls, placing wicks in the centre just as the wax congeals.

The young monks, eager to practise their English, stop to offer their greetings and introduce themselves. While prospective monks at Dodedra must complete eighth grade before committing to the order,

other Bhutanese monasteries accept much younger recruits. After being invited to witness evening prayers, we emerge from the temple to find white-faced monkeys peering out from the mountainside trees. Nearby, a waterfall plunges down the sheer cliff anchoring the compound, and a small brook spins a prayer wheel sending messages skyward with every turn.

Our dinner is a culinary delight. It consists of soft boiled egg whites separated from the yolks, battered, and fried with spicy green chilies, onions and rice. Yolks are served on the side. The vegetables are grown in a monastery greenhouse and we bid our heartfelt compliments to the chef as we gobble down our dinner.

We are warned that a Himalayan black bear has



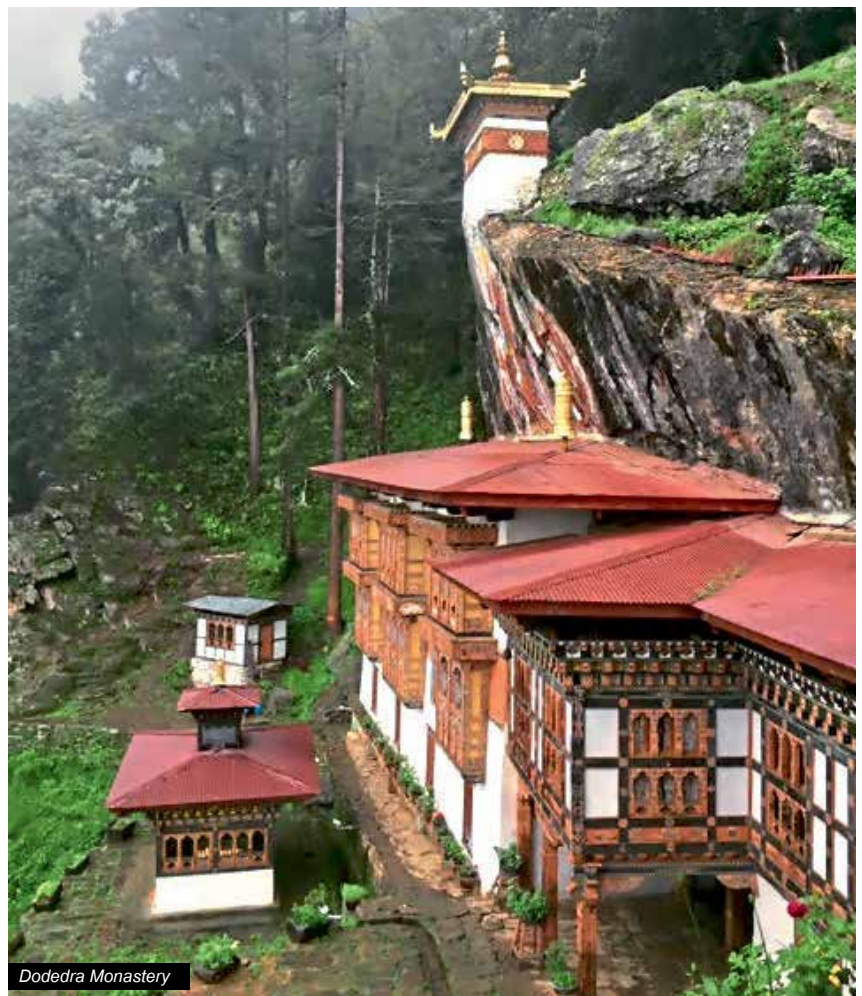
The six-foot-five hulk



been on the prowl around the monastic grounds this week, and we should not go outside if we hear the temple dog's bark during the night. We sleep with our windows open and our senses alert.

The 4 am call to prayer cannot be ignored. It begins with a wooden mallet striking brass and continues with an ever-increasing cacophony of howling dogs and shuffling slippers. I rise to greet the orange-clad army of monks as I slither past the monastery dogs and begin making my way to the temple. Sitting as close to akimbo as my western legs permit, I relish the rich tone of the chants and the Zen-like state achieved by the monks.

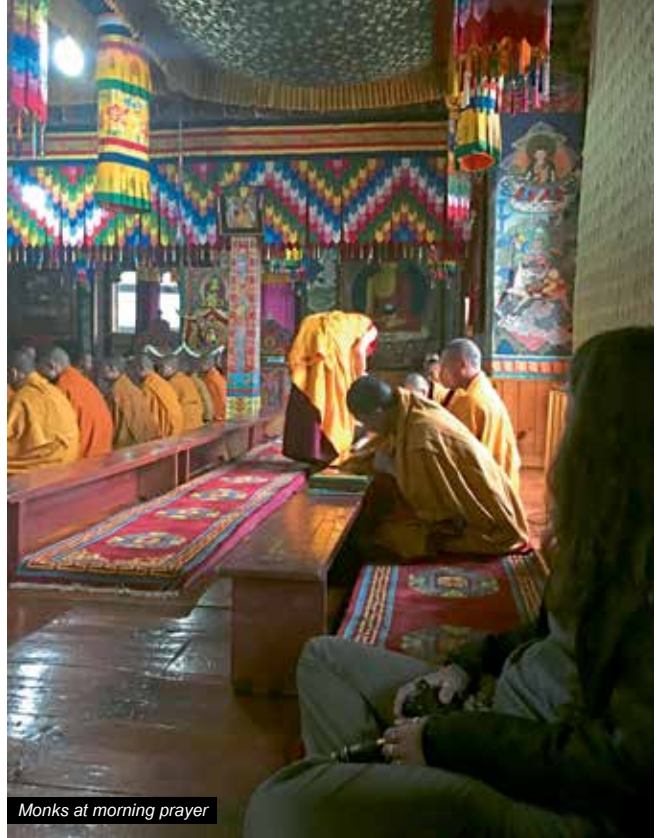
In a country that prides itself in valuing Gross National Happiness over Gross National



Dodedra Monastery



Railing mist



Monks at morning prayer

Product, it is impossible to separate Buddhism from Bhutan. A sense of generosity permeates the culture. Everywhere I travel, I am welcomed with natural beauty, tea, laughter and a sense of

communal national pride.

Signs throughout the monastery remind one to be mindful, and we are cautioned a thousand battles won would mean nothing if we haven't conquered our own thoughts.

Following morning prayers and meditation, we are served a chilli and hand-churned cheese mix for breakfast. Our host tells us it is his favourite dish, and he leads us on a tour of the monastery's antiquities. We are taken to a covered cask of holy water which, we are told, springs a leak in the presence of negative karma. I cringe as our host lifts the sealed lid, but is relieved to find the vessel full.

We bid farewell to our most gracious hosts and again step into the fog, meeting our guide halfway down the steep mountainside. With the city

lights of Thimphu within sight, I am once again reminded that the path to enlightenment is long, crooked, and beset with hazards. But, of course, the world's most difficult journeys always are this way.



Clouds through the window



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During his next visit to Bhutan, he plans to reconnect with Bhutanese friends, and step out on the Jomolhari trek.