

## Postcard from Bhutan

Bhutan is one of the more difficult places to reach; like North Korea, either you go on a highly structured package tour or you are a guest of the government. If you manage to surmount these hurdles, you are pretty free to do what you want, although certain areas of the country require special permission. But the country does have a strong sense of being cut off, 'out of time', a peaceful islet in a world of chaos. Yet in some ways it isn't. Last December, the king led his troops in the field against insurgents along the southern border; not against his government, but rebels against the Indian and Bangla Deshi governments hiding in the difficult terrain. This was deemed to be a major victory and the Bhutanese are very proud of it, but it has led to a greater sense of insecurity. The Chinese, of course, are making noises about how parts of Bhutan are really parts of Tibet, which of course they have an inalienable right to govern. India exercises control over Bhutan's foreign affairs and indeed the country is very much within the Indian cultural sphere. Tiny shops, 'general shop cum bar', burst with all the sprawling light industry of the subcontinent, girls in leather trousers seductively urge Pepsi on passing herders.

This is curious, for the Bhutanese are rather formal; they like order, people to be properly dressed, pieces of paper to be signed and stamped, introductions to be made. Coming from rambunctious, noisy Thailand, this can either strike you as cold or calm. Personally, it appeals to my Germanic side; often I like things to work, trains to run on time, telephones to ring. I can imagine, though, after a while here, you might be afflicted with a desire for a bit more chaos and exuberance, a tinge of Italy. But actually, the strongest sense you get is of a former British colony, although it wasn't. The Anglo-Bhutanese society meets at No. 1, Whitehall, which probably tells you something. English is widespread and prestigious, and many small things, such as the red pillar boxes, give you an endearing sense of post-colonialism. The Bhutanese love pets, especially cats, and they wander round the houses, sitting between family members around the stove, and the English find this very endearing. Some of this may be fossilised borrowings from India; India is the source of much new Anglicisation. Nonetheless, in the countryside there are many elements of English fantasy, wooden houses and log fires, an intense blue sky, the ever-spreading pine forests, clear lakes and rivers, horses, dogs and nearly tame birds.



Indeed, something no television documentary or glossy picture-book can quite prepare you for is the landscape. Along every road there are sweeping vistas, conifers to the edge of the mountains always on the horizon, gleaming with snow. When not preparing to snow, the sunshine is brilliant, and a startling feature of driving the high roads are the sharp transitions between dry Mediterranean scrub and Nordic scenes of fir-trees and snow, complete with icicles and frozen streams. Bhutanese houses, probably not accidentally, resemble Swiss alpine houses, often three stories and framed in elaborately carved and painted wood. Streams are crossed by quavering suspension bridges straight from an Indiana Jones movie. Every administrative centre is dominated by a *dzong*, a huge Tibetan fortress, usually built on a hill-top, where the chief abbot and the secular governor conspire to administer the province. The *dzongs* were once oppressive places, extracting taxes in butter and cheese and keeping the villages in poverty; Kafka's 'Castle' comes to mind. Smaller settlements have a temple, often ringed with squawking crows and scrappy dogs waiting for