

A magical kingdom

Bhutan more than lives up to expectations, says **MICHAEL CHIANG**

IF you ask me, 2011's Wedding of the Year was not Prince William's betrothal to Kate Middleton, but the far more enigmatic and enchanting marriage of Bhutan's dashing young king to his commoner wife. Set in a magnificent kingdom amidst mountains high above the clouds, theirs was truly a fairy-tale ceremony, replete with old-fashioned finery and pageantry.

Say hello to Bhutan, paradisaical kingdom with the happiest people in the world. Where everything just sounds too good to be true, like a piece of bedtime fiction spun by wizened grandmothers to awe and wow little children.

Yet visitors to this remote corner of the world will discover that there really is an inexplicable magic about Bhutan.

The journey of discovery starts even before you've set foot on the pristine soil. Bhutan, nestled in the heart of the Himalayas, has an airport considered one of the most difficult in the world – the landing has to be navigated entirely by sight, as the mountainous terrain renders the plane's auto-pilot system ineffectual. With a heady mix of trepidation and excitement, you watch (and feel) the plane gently tilt and sway past cinematic 3-D ridges as it manoeuvres the tricky descent to Paro Airport.

So what does Bhutan have to offer jaded travellers who've swanned their way through most of the world? The truth is, there may be little to do but so much to see.

A certain timelessness shines through, even in the more "modernised" towns of Paro and Thimphu, the capital. Despite the visibility of mobile phones and the preponderance of MTV and Bollywood on cable, you sense that the country is cosseted from the weary travails of the outside world. This is what Shangri-La must feel like: there is a pervasive sense of the mystical woven inextricably into the various facets of everyday life.

Bhutan's magic is in the details, in all the small moments and all the little discoveries. There is exoticism, fuelled by the many religious and historical legends that abound. Figures like Guru Rimpoche, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan back in the

eighth century, recur in much of the folklore. The famous Taktsang monastery, for instance, is where Guru Rimpoche was believed to have meditated for three months, having flown there on the back of his consort, who had transformed herself into a tiger.

The trek up to Taktsang is clearly a must-do. This sacred 300-year-old monastery, mind-bendingly perched on a cliffside almost 3,000 metres above ground, is probably Bhutan's most iconic and photographed. Also known as Tiger's Nest, the monastery looks like it's been super-glued to the



Breathtaking: Dzongs (ancient fortresses) are found in every township. (Left) Glowing faces of the young and old

side of the mountain, defying gravity and logic. Depending on one's level of fitness and determination, the climb can take between two and three hours. For those less inclined to attempt the arduous task on foot, ponies are available.

While conventional wisdom has always taught us that it's all about the journey, here at Taktsang, there is a strange sense of contentment rather than accomplishment when you reach the peak. Everything else seems to fall away into insignificance.

The Bhutan experience is also about soaking in the everyday. Oftentimes, it feels like you've wandered onto a lavish film set, with a cast of hundreds in period costume setting off on some secret adventure on a glorious sun-drenched day. Bhutanese all wear a traditional dress – gho for guys, kira for women – and these handsomely woven tunics are usually worn to work as well.

Homes may be simple, wooden structures, but the walls, beams and doors all feature hand-painted de-

signs in vibrant hues.

Most breathtaking are the dzongs (ancient fortresses) that you'll find in every township. Dzongs serve as civil and monastic administrative headquarters and, cloistered within their stately walls, is a wondrous world that appears to spin on its own time and pace. Monks in burgundy robes make their unhurried way across ancient pavements. Intricate prayer wheels wait silently for the clasp of pious hands. Young novice monks scamper up wooden stairs, grinning.

Bhutan itself has always been famously cloistered. Tourist arrivals are restricted to 20,000 a year and a hefty daily-rated visa of US\$250 (S\$314) is levied to keep the modern world at bay.

This is a country that will go to great lengths to protect both culture and environment. In Phobjikha Valley, for example, an entire community lives without electricity to protect the endangered black-necked cranes, for whom telegraph poles and wires would pose a real danger.

Out in the lush, sprawling countryside, the kingdom's single highway takes you past farm crops of varying shades: terraced fields the colour of jade (rice), gold (mustard) and purple (buckwheat), appear like giant patchwork quilts wrapped around the feet of pine forests.

Depending on the time you visit, there is much to savour food-wise. Matsutake mushrooms – highly prized and expensive in Japan – can be found in abundance at Thimphu's weekend market, alongside careless heaps of apples and peaches. There's also red rice and fern shoots, which sound more unusual than they taste. Even the Bhutanese staple of "chillies and cheese" turns out tame by Singaporean standards.

Lest you think this might be a hardship holiday destination, rest assured that plenty of super deluxe resorts await. The best-known boutique property would be Uma Paro, set in a lush pine forest with panoramic views of the valley, with rates starting from US\$290++. For something more exclusive, try Amankora's luxury lodges, preciously sprinkled across the valleys of Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Gangtey and Bumthang, with rates



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL CHIANG

Cliff-hanger: The 300-year-old Taktsang monastery, also known as Tiger's Nest, is probably Bhutan's most iconic and photographed

from US\$1,300++ (inclusive of all meals and transfers).

Bhutan, with a modest population of only 695,000, seems firmly anchored to its richly religious past even as it forges its way anxiously into the wired and wireless age. Leading them is Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the 31-year-old Oxford graduate who is now the world's youngest reigning monarch.

The gentle, hospitable people have

the natural warmth of the Balinese and the easy charm of the Thais, but possess an inner glow unique to themselves.

One is unsure if this comes from their deep-seated Buddhist spiritualism; when a Bhutanese smiles at you, it seems to radiate from the heart, and is hugely affecting.

From May 17, Druk Air will begin direct flights from Singapore to Paro

