

Motorbiking across Bhutan

Returning to the carefree days of their youth, a couple rekindle their love affair with motorbiking on an exhilarating ride across the mountain kingdom of Bhutan

By Judith Cameron

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Bhutan clan ... the group's Enfield bikes lined up in front of Punakha dzong. Photograph: Judith Cameron

The road wound uphill until we finally reached the crest and an area of prayer flags where we could park the bikes. We took off our helmets, feeling the bite of the wind, and looked across the highest mountains in the world. A sparse landscape gave way to distant snow-covered peaks and a backdrop of cobalt-blue sky. This was the reason we were here.

"Motorcycling?" asked friends, when we planned our trip to Bhutan. "Why not trekking?"

Because motorcycling is something my husband Phillip and I had promised ourselves since we were teenagers in the early 70s, riding a Triumph. But we'd put it out of our minds when our eldest daughter became ill. Her untimely death in 2006 was a dreadful shock, and the dreams of our youth lost focus. But once our youngest child was settled at university, and we'd tried to come to terms with our loss, we wanted to do something together again. Something that brought back those carefree years. Motorcycling may not seem romantic to others, but to us it is redolent of special times gone by.

Sprawled on the gravel of a busy Indian road, surrounded by people wondering what a middle-aged woman in full motorbike gear was doing in Bengal, I began to question the wisdom of such a trip. After flying into Kolkata, we had travelled to Siliguri to collect our motorbikes for the beginning of the 1,200-mile, 18-day journey. We hadn't even reached the Bhutanese border and already I was wondering how many more falls my knees could take. But the other bikers were so upbeat that joining our mechanics in the back-up vehicle never felt like an option.



Three to one ... the bikes helped make friends en route.

Photograph: Judith Cameron

Ferris Wheels is not the only company to run bike tours in Bhutan, but we liked the look of this small Australian outfit that promises to take you "outside your comfort zone". Owners Mike and Denise Ferris believe they were the first people to motorcycle across the country, in 2005, and now personally escort every trip. Most of the 16 bikers in our group were Australian, and not everyone was a complete bike freak, although I was the only one who didn't own a bike at home. In fact, I hadn't ridden one for more than 30 years until a recent refresher course.

With encouragement from Denise, I overcame my fear to discover that my juddering Enfield was similar to our old Triumph, and soon rediscovered the sense of freedom, fun and exhilaration that motorcycling offers. In the frantic Indian traffic, where a cow is as likely to cross the road as a rickshaw or car, I soon mastered the local art of sounding my horn at every possible opportunity.

When we passed through the ceremonial arch into Phuentsholing, Bhutan, the change was dramatic. The roads were clean and tidy, there was virtually no traffic, even the stray dogs looked well fed. Almost everyone wears traditional costume, in fact there is national dress code: men wearing long black socks, leather shoes and a *gho*, a loose, belted, knee-length coat; women in bright silk *toego* jackets and *kira* – straight, ankle-length skirts.



Dzong of praise ... the Taktshang 'tiger's nest' dzong.

Photograph: Danita Delimont/Alamy

After a night at the Lhaki hotel in Phuentsholing, we made an early start to climb through lush fern forests on a steep, winding mountain road that soon dwindled to a gravel track. We slipped and slid up the hillside until the trees gave way to views of Himalayan valleys and mountains.

After a couple of hours, we stopped for tea at a cafe near Gedu and gazed over acres of terraced paddy fields; at Chukha, adjacent to thousands of prayer flags pegged out like washing in the wind, we ate lunch of vegetables with rice and noodles, accompanied by bowl of *ema datse*: stewed chillies and cheese. Houses, farms and shops are built from stone and packed mud with white walls framed by ornate painted patterns in red, gold and brown. Many display overtly phallic paintings that our guide, Sonam, assured us are not fertility symbols but there to ward off evil spirits.

In the afternoon we visited the exquisite Buddhist temples or *dzongs* of Punakha and Trongsa, dating back to the 16th century. Monks continued their daily rituals of work and prayer as we wandered through the elaborate courtyards and passageways. Surrounded by ancient dry moats, these monasteries and regional town halls were easy to imagine as the fortresses they had been in another era.

The straight, freshly surfaced road of the Chhu valley beside Bhutan's only airport was a treat as we headed towards nearby Paro – a town booming as a result of its access to the outside world. We stayed at the new Janka resort. Its pitched roof and painted walls look traditional, but it offers kingsize beds, en suite bathrooms and Wi-Fi.



Revved up ... Judith hits the road.

Photograph: Judith Cameron

A heavy frost covered our bikes the next morning, and I was grateful that a coach ferried us for the hike to Taktshang, the famous "tiger's nest" dzong. Just a few miles from Paro, with its delicate features perched precariously on a narrow stone ledge some 700 metres above the valley floor, this is Bhutan's most popular tourist destination. When the road petered out, the coach came to a halt and left us for a few hours to wander up a mule track shaded by pine trees. The only other "traffic" was a young Buddhist monk and his train of packhorses. Dressed in red robes, with a near-shaven head, he strode past in animated conversation on his mobile phone. After climbing clear of the forest, we looked through the faded prayer flags across a deep gorge to Taktshang. The pathway dropped beside a gushing waterfall before climbing again to the entrance.

On leaving Paro, we crossed the highest road in Bhutan at nearly 4,000m, where not only the altitude but the far-reaching views of endless mountain peaks took my breath away. Later, crisscrossing down the mountain, I managed to burn off my rear brakes and was grateful to the mechanics, Imran and Afiz, for replacing them on the side of the road. Not long after, one of our most experienced riders misjudged a bend and flew off the road into the forest. He suffered only a broken ankle and arm, but it ended his trip and was a timely reminder to us all. Everyone was cautious as we continued into the capital, Thimphu.

The city is a maze of narrow passages full of small shops selling anything from sodas or toothpaste to *doma*, a mix of betel leaf and areca that is chewed and dyes mouths red. We visited the embellished temple-like Chorten Memorial building, a good starting-point for visitors wanting to learn more about the country's religion, history and economy.

Beyond Thimphu lies the Bumthang valley, a mecca for trekkers where life is visibly more simple. We passed people with woven baskets of produce on their backs or crouched barefoot in icy streams as they washed laundry. Our guesthouse there was a working farm, its sparse rooms heated by woodburners. I took a traditional stone bath: small boulders from the river baked and placed in a wooden tub of scented water. It was sublime luxury after a chilly day in the saddle.

Continuing eastwards, we followed a narrow track clinging to the side of a cliff face where streams and waterfalls leapt across the roadway. The weather closed in as we climbed a pass and low cloud reduced visibility. Avoiding piles of rocks that had slipped from the mountainside, I was almost relieved that I couldn't see what lay below as I passed memorials to the hundreds of workers who perished building the road. The morning rain turned to hail, sleet and, finally, snow. My waterproof trousers didn't live up to their name, and before long I couldn't feel my fingers or toes. The luxury of the Druk Zhongkhar hotel in Mongar came as a relief, especially when Sonam got hold of some local liquor, *arra*, to warm us up.

Rangjung monastery, a summer retreat and the furthest point east on the road map, was our final destination before turning south, back to India. We scrambled up a track to reach the single-storey building with its splendid views and eat a final lunch of rice and noodles before heading to nearby Trashigang for the night. The Druk Doethjung guesthouse was delicately ornate with tiny rooms and embroidered screens covering open grills instead of windows. A fire blazed in the inner courtyard where we stayed up late, talking, eating and drinking.

Approaching Samdrup Jongkhar the next day, we dropped from the cold altitude, bare rock faces and mountain passes to wooded hillsides littered with giant magnolias and poinsettia trees. Once again we wound through fern forests until we hit an unmade road and bumped along with heavier traffic making its way to the border. At one point we had to wait while explosives were set and part of a rock face was blown and shovelled off the edge into the river below as part of a road-widening scheme.

Sitting comfortably on my trusty Enfield, I watched a bulldozer roughly level the highway before we could continue, and contemplated my journey. It had been the perfect way for Phillip and me to do something special together – an adventure and experience I would love us to repeat. Next up: the Andes.

Getting there

Ferris Wheels' (+61 2 9970 6370, www.ferriswheels.com.au) Bhutan trip has been incorporated into its Shining Shangri La Safari, covering Nepal, India and Bhutan. This 25-day tour costs AUS\$8,500pp (around £4,900) including hire of an Enfield motorbike, accommodation, three meals a day, maintenance and support vehicles, plus a scenic flight from Kathmandu to Mount Everest. Flights excluded. The next departure from Delhi is on 18 December 2010.