

TIGER'S NEST

Monastery:

worthy of its fame

By Jessica Vernon

A cluster of white structures clinging to the face of a cliff with all its strength: this was the first image I saw when I googled Bhutan for the first time twelve months ago.

I caught my first real life glimpse of the nest through the cab window. The high noon sun cast such a glare that I had to roll down the glass and squint my eyes to be sure of what I was seeing. From so far away it looked like a white patch painted onto the cliff—there was no dimension to it, nothing 3D. As we neared, the structure began to take shape, growing out of the rock. Impossible was all I could think as I stood at the base of the mountain looking straight up. You could imagine its muscles trembling from exertion; a battle to the death being waged inside its walls. Yet on the outside it remained poised and collected as if the fight with gravity wasn't happening at all. I was surprised by the unassuming nature of its splendor—had I unconsciously attributed the qualities of vanity and superiority that so often come with fame to a building?

We walked slowly up the hill feeling sorry for those tourists who, due to strict time constraints, had to climb the mountain within hours of arriving to the airport. Bells floating on the wind brought warning of the approaching herd of ponies at fast trot, sending up plumes of dust. They passed us in a fast-moving single file, like compact little train cars barreling down the mountain, barely clinging onto the track. Decorated with big tassels hanging from

their bridles and little bells under their chins, the oranges, golds, and reds of their gho-striped pack pads complimented their furry brown bodies.

Thick forests provided welcome shade from the afternoon heat and a fresh gust of wind carried the sing-song voice of a man running down the trail chasing the indecipherable words of his mantra. Long delicate strands of sage-colored lichens blew elegantly in the musical breeze, suspended from the spindly branches of majestic fir trees. Emerging from the forest we reached the postcard viewpoint at the top of the ridge directly in front of an 800 meter cliff and stood breathless. *Impossible...* I thought.

Tiny figures could be seen crawling around inside the monastery like little ants dressed in gho and kira. Long strings of prayer flags draped across the wide gap between the two ridges; one end tied to a rock and thrown across to the opposite point, but even knowing this I couldn't imagine how they came to bridge such a vast expanse.

We took sweet time admiring the structures at a distance, taking hundreds of photographs of both the monastery and the crowds of people leaving the monastery, hiking back up the gully we were now descending. By the time we reached the entrance we were told that the lhakhang was closed from 1-2pm for lunch. A flash of frustration washed over me, evaporated moments later by a small kitten I found basking in the sun. I picked him up and he

reluctantly let me cradle him in my arms. This attracted several little kids and we were soon surrounded by the entire family all wanting to touch my little pet. We handed our camera to one of the fathers for him to take a photo. After lots of laughs and "1, 2, 3's," the family departed. When we looked back to see the pictures, there was nothing. He managed to not take a single photo of our brief friendship.

We ate some snacks and sought shelter from the wind. An hour later we were allowed to enter. It was so quiet inside. With the morning crowds gone, the afternoon was reserved for those who liked to take their time. Perhaps the five months in Bhutan had slowed my pace, calming the constant sense of urgency to get here.

A freshly whitewashed stone staircase curved gently toward an archway drowned in light. Potbellied clay pots were planted with fake red flowers. Never did a plastic flower look more elegant. There were some real flowers too, rebelling against the winter. We entered the first two temples alone. The wide planked floors were soft and smooth from centuries of shuffling feet. Indentations were worn into the boards in front of the central deities, carved by hundreds of thousands of bodies bowing in prostration. The cold wood, shiny drapes and colorful wall paintings were bathed in gold dust, our movements sending spirals of glitter in the air.



Back outside and up another level I spotted a cloaked door with a little sign beside it that said, "Tiger's Lair." Inside lay a dark crevice with three ladders going down to a bottom that couldn't be seen. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be there or not. It seemed a little sketchy to be open to the public, but there was no one around to stop me so I started climbing down. I hate ladders so my heart, already accelerated from the adrenaline of possibly getting caught, was in my throat. I almost went back several times but my curiosity won the internal battle and at the bottom I was certain I had reached a place that most people don't get to see.

A small altar glowed in the light of a single candle at the deepest corner of the cave. I made a tiny prostration in the cramped temple. At the other end sunlight pierced through the darkness and my curiosity took charge again. Squeezing through two big rocks I leaned out. I was looking straight down the sheer face of the cliff. Nothing below me but black and tan streaked rock

and a thick forest of trees a long, long way down. I got that roller coaster feeling in my stomach. I managed one quick glimpse up and saw a corner of the monastery hanging even farther out from the wall than I was.

Yup, definitely not supposed to be here.

Climbing back up the ladders was much less scary than sticking your head out of a crack in a cliff wall.

Two Bhutanese families had gathered in the small courtyard. Sheltered from the wind, the space felt warm and comforting, making you forget that you're inside a structure anchored to the face of a cliff. Until you look up and see another 300 meters of mountain towering above you.

Everyone climbed the final staircase together, bare feet making soft pitter-patter noises on the cold stones. There were at least twelve people crowded into the little temple; all moving in a ripple of prostrations, up and down, each to the rhythm of their own incantations. Small painted Buddhas lined the walls, hundreds of them, all

the same but not one identical. The family soon left and I lingered by the window. Looking down all I could see was a tangle of trees and I realized that it was the corner I saw jutting out above the cave.

I stepped slowly back towards the doorway and joined the families in the last temple. It was an intimate moment to share, bowing in front of a shrine in one of most sacred sites in a country revered for its sacredness. I felt honored to be in the presence of these people from generations both younger and older than mine, from lives so different from mine, in a place so far from my home. But in that small room the differences didn't seem so big. Everything that happened in our individual lives so distant from one another had brought us all to the same place at the very same moment. Everything we had been through led us to this exact point and this exact time. The chances of it seem impossible.

