



Images by Pooja Bhula

**TOP:** Young girl sells apples and yak cheese en route Dochula Pass  
**RIGHT:** Tango Monastery  
**BELOW:** Cheese momos and T Momos with *ema datse*; masks used for dances; Druk Wangyal Chortens at dawn



**G**liding through fluffy white clouds that kiss the light edging the deep sky-blue heavens, which are turning a high blue, I marvel at the snow-capped peaks peeping out. "There's the Everest!" a voice calls. I look, but can't tell which one is. Anyway, I'll go there another day. Soon, it's time to swoop down to the 'Land of the Peaceful Dragon', and I do, with fellow passengers aboard Drukair, rather smoothly, given the narrow passageway of sub-alpine ranges leading to Paro airport. The November breeze, playing with the gentle Paro Chu (river), greets us as we step out. My spirits lift up further, on noticing that there's no artifice of modern structures to disturb the serenity; the airport proudly showcases Bhutan's traditional Dzong architecture with wooden facades, sloping roofs and colourful thanangka paintings that also embellish its interiors. No wonder Bhutan tourism welcomes one and all, saying, 'Happiness is a Place'.

Over the next few days, I discover that in Bhutan, there are many roads to 'Happiness'. My first joyous route (leading to Le Meridien, Thimphu) treats me to the river (changing colour from green to blue), willow mountains shaded brown and yellow, quaint traditional houses, grazing cows and witty road signs—"Shooting stone drive carefully", "If you're married, divorce speed" and many more—to punctuate the journey with humour. At first, I'm disappointed with the hotel's minimalistic decor (compared to Bhutanese houses), but its modern depiction of local art grows on me. Even so, their newly opened, traditional-looking Paro property, enveloped in nature, is more my style.

A second happy trail turns out to be next morning's pre-dawn drive up to Dochula Pass. Flanked by cypress trees, it has the odd waterfall, prayer flags and rosy-cheeked ladies selling stringed cubes of yak cheese and freshly plucked green and red apples (some sliced and dried) in translucent,

pink polythene bags. The top view leaves me speechless. Imagine 108 stupas against a backdrop of sunlight filtering through the mist, falling on towering conifers, splitting into many beams. Called Druk Wangyal Chortens, they were built to honour King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's victory over Indian rebels in the 2003 war and in memory of Bhutanese soldiers it killed. Could the hotel have chosen a better spot for a breakfast picnic? On the way back, we spot a few black yaks!



Bhutanese burl-wood bowls are very light and very expensive

People often say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach; well, the same goes for women. The idea of stealing some solo time to navigate narrow bylanes of the city's centre to sample the local cuisine thrills me to bits. The roads have no signposts to indicate a restaurant is nearby, but buildings at every turn hide interesting small eateries. To my delight, while the Bhutanese love their meat, largely pork and beef, and some chicken, their fare includes a variety of vegetarian dishes. And cheese and chillies find their way into everything! At a local's suggestion I stop at Momo House in Thimphu Plaza and devour multilayered 't momos' and cheese momos (also stuffed with diced cabbage and onions) served with starchy *ema datse* (chilli cheese), not surprisingly Bhutan's favourite. One level above, at Yummies, I get a spicy salad and *hoentey* (buckwheat dumplings filled with shredded turnip, cheese, onion and distinctly flavoured local spices). I'm too full to try more, but the 'Authentic Bhutanese Cookbook' by Punap Ugyen Wangchuk has mouth-watering veg delicacies: soups, butter teas, *puta* and *khur le* (buckwheat noodles and pancake), *kewa datse* (a vegetable of cheese, chillies and potato)... In fact, leafing through the pages, I find terribly tempting dishes for every occasion (like visiting a newborn) and ailment (like healing cracked bones). Oh, and for picnics—a picnic curry called *zachum tshoem*. Till now, I thought the hotel's picnic breakfast had European inspirations, but little did I know that picnics are so much a part of the Bhutanese culture. Our picnic lunch is at yet another gorgeous location, by the river-side, at the base of Tango Monastery. As little monks go about their stone-throwing competition, I'm reminded of the warning I'd read earlier, 'shooting stone drive carefully'. LOL.

Now, back to food. So far, in Bhutan, I've seen chillies left to dry on roofs and even outside restaurants, but at a small Paro market, I discover they slice and sun dry most veggies—bitter gourd, pumpkin, fiddlehead ferns, beans, you name it—for winter. They're selling tamarillos, and mushrooms I've never seen (they grow over 100 varieties) and butter from milk of cows, yaks and even *mithun* (an ox)! The cow cheese is similar to cottage cheese. All their produce is organic (among Indian imports, Amul's the most popular) so I get greedy and pack a carton of—dry apple slices, balls of cheese, wild forest honey, *zao* (like puffed rice), red rice, *ara* (local rice-based liquor), chillies (very hot, with a capsicum's texture) and my best discovery *thingay* (a strong, wild pepper).

One evening, a local journalist tells me their pastoral society is changing, the youth are taking salaried jobs. Sedentary lives and unchanged food habits are causing health problems. Many pursue higher education in India and don't want to return, a chef who's back to care for his parents, says, "There's not much happening here." So besides TV and internet, those who've had a taste of the world outside are supporting pizza parlours, etc. Well, the grass is always greener on the other side. This makes me probe the journalist again, "So are people here happy?" Pat comes his response, "This is a misconception. Happiness is our goal, not our state, and the Happiness Index gives us direction". So while we all continue in our pursuit of happiness, here's a thought: yes happiness can be a place, but to garner its loyalty we must choose it consciously and give it permanent space, inside us. So stay cool. Be happy!

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ABOVE: Spicy salad; hoentey dumplings with hot ezay chilli sauce; sun-dried bitter melon, chillies and other veggies at a Paro market



Local artist doing tshem drup embroidery; Buddhist mandala painted in Le Meridien Paro's meditation hall

# Can happiness be a place?

...Pooja Bhula sets out to explore this question in the country that invented Gross National Happiness

## Treks, tandoors AND a starry trail

Sohini Das Gupta



Adventure sports and a plush new resort make Malshej Ghat inviting even in the summers, discovers Sohini Das Gupta

**A**t Malshej Ghat, a burly mountain pass north of Pune, the Sahyadris tower over flecks of summery yellow vegetation that I'm told is lush when most tourists visit in the monsoon. The horizon is right within your grasp or a million miles away, depending on the daylight. Around a bend, a cottage-style resort—complete with flower beds and white picket fences—interrupts the landscape. Welcome to Saj By The Lake, a high-end addition to the limited lodging options (MTDC resort and a couple odd hotels) in this weekend's nest that is equally popular with mountain bikers.

With a baked-brick exterior that mirrors the rustic charisma of neighbouring hamlets, the 15-room resort is a brisk walk from the lake in question. The old-world shell gives way to a contemporary interior with smart fixtures, geometric installations and well-lit corridors. Rooms with downy beds, bathrooms with attached mini-gardens, verandahs with wooden chairs, bougainvillea briars, mountain views, and a calculated absence of wall-clocks conspire to lull overworked tourists into a state of languor.

Outside, a trail of orange and white tiles lead down to the pool area with two ceramic cows standing guard on either end. This bovine

theme recurs across the interiors; shiny paint-coated cows in the hallways make you feel a bit sorry for their grubbier counterparts in the fields outside. The pool area has clusters of deck chairs and a tandoor where one can enjoy smoky stuffed-mushrooms, or the surprisingly light *kothambir vadis* (coriander fritters). If you're a non-vegetarian, you'll be glad that this otherwise vegetarian hotel offers *bharele ande* (stuffed eggs) by the pool side. There's a strange delight in letting the hot spices make your eyes watery, even when you're squinting up to locate the Big Dipper amongst a galaxy of silver. When things get chilly by the pool (light scarves or woollens come handy after sundown), you can walk into the dining area, Maati Baani (songs of the soil) that has

big dollops of fibre clouds doubling up as ceiling lamps "to mimic light clouds that sail past the windows during the monsoon," the staff informs. The effect is surreal. True to the name, its menu draws on local Maharashtrian flavours, using organic, locally-grown vegetables to prepare dishes such as *Methi Chaman Tikki* (fenugreek cutlet, light-fried with cottage cheese and potato), *Nachni Kulip* soup (Indian quinoa broth) or *Dudhi Hara Masala* (bottle gourd, slow-cooked in a coconut gravy). For those who prefer the spicier side of the spectrum, there's *Bharele Wange* (pit-fired brinjal, cooked in an earthen pot) or *Rajma Punjabi* to be washed down with a flavourful Mint Gingerlet.

If you crave activity, try water-zorbing, archery, or just pump up the stereo for a classic pool party. Ziplining is expected to come up soon for those who love the adrenaline rush.

Located close to Saj are trails that are good for long treks (or short, your pick), a 1,000-year-old half-finished cave of lava rock, memorials of Maratha warriors strewn around the plateau and a tiny Shiv temple with peacocks and ox-riders carved in black stone slabs. You can visit these spots in half a day, taking your time to dawdle and dogtrot along. The temple bell, should you ring it, reverberates through the quaint village air, sending chicklets scurrying to their mother. Only the cows, unfazed, continue to masticate in slow motion, as it is time for us to head back to the familiar existence of traffic and wall-clocks.

At Malshej Ghat, a weekend can seem like an eon—not a bad thing, when a weekend is all you've got to get away from the city din.

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1. Views from a hamlet in Malshej Ghat 2. Memorials of Maratha warriors 3. Saj's rustic-rooms have modern interiors

## WORLD WATER DAY



Go jet boating against the current, enjoy the wild spins and funyak past The Lord of the Rings locales in New Zealand with Malavika Bhattacharya

**O**n a grey and chilly morning—a result of the previous day's rains—I board a bus from Queens-town to Glenorchy for a day of adventure on water. There are concerns. "How's the weather going to be?" someone asks Sean, our guide and bus driver from Dart River Jet, the only official operators for the river. He replies in upbeat Kiwi slang, "Sweet as".

The scenic 45-minute route winds past Lake Wakatipu, framed by the lofty peaks of The Remarkables. Five rivers flow into the head of the lake. The braided Dart River that we'll be exploring is one of them. I'm stoked at thought of any water activity. But in New Zealand, it's extra special. After all, this is Middle Earth, the surreal landscape where Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* were filmed. New Zealand's South Island is characterized by vast tracts of virgin forests, sheer mountains, pastoral plains and grand waterscapes, including steely alpine lakes and deep river valleys that stand in the shadow of the Southern Alps.

The full day activity with Dart River Jet involves circumnavigating Mount Alfred, first upstream by jet boats and then downstream on funyaks. The roughly 50-kilometre loop we are about to traverse winds through the stunning Mt Aspiring National Park, wide rivers and narrow streams. At the Glenorchy base camp, we suit up in wetsuits, fleeces, booties, life jackets—the works. But I still have no idea what a funyak is and can't wait to see what I'll be rowing.

This jet boat is a little multi-seater motorboat, known for its high-speed upstream navigation and wild 360-degree spins. "You're going to get very wet, so hold on for a bumpy ride," says our pilot. For our first leg, about ten of us speed off against the current of the river, the spray of icy water on my face, whizzing past waterfalls and velvety meadows. All of a sudden, we do a full circle whirl on the water, eliciting many squeals and whoops. We're drenched. We cover a nearly 40km distance in barely an hour, peppered with thrilling spins along the way. Engines slowed, now we veer off the murky main river, down a stream of brilliant blue.

This is Beans Burn, a narrow stream that gurgles and rises over smooth river stones. The water is so clear, I can see the rocky riverbed. Along the flat green banks sit bright red funyaks—little inflatable canoes, each seating two, or at most, three people. The team of guides briefs us on rowing and safety instructions: the person at the rear acts as a rudder, steering the boat with their flat oar; others row. The trick is to do it in tandem. Instructors drift along-

side the ten funyaks, ready to help or rescue errant parties. Leisurely, we go downstream, past open fields, where woolly sheep graze. Our instructor Matt points to mountains in the distance, telling us about the area's significance to the Maori tribe as an important source of the green stone, pounamu. For centuries, they traversed the region and crafted precious jade stone weapons and jewellery.

Navigating the currents is hard work in some stretches, and more than once, we spin in circles, row frantically around large rocks, and try our best to avoid getting beached. When our arms tire, we aimlessly drift downstream in the calm stretches. En route, we pull up at a large meadow. A picnic lunch is laid out—sandwiches, meats, cheese, cakes, juices and hot drinks. Tired and starving, we welcome this break to get our energy up. A short wander through the forest leads to the Rockburn Chasm—a sheer gorge with foaming white water far below. I hear it roar and feel its spray. On days when the river isn't quite as muddy from the rains, funyaks can actually navigate the chasm through dramatic landscapes and crystal clear pools that I can only imagine.

We row down the last stretch to Paradise, a rocky beach strewn with weathered pebbles—deflate and roll up the funyaks. On the return, we drive through much of Middle Earth: the thick beech forests of Lotherien, the wide pastoral plains of Beorn's house in *The Hobbit*. In the distance, rise the Misty Mountains. The sun shone down on us all day, cerulean waters and snow-capped peaks glinted in a magical golden light. I navigated a stunning waterscape set amidst a fantasyland. There's only one way to describe it: Sweet As.



Left: Jet boating at speed Right: Wild spins

Funyaking at Rockburn Chasm

Sergio De Rosso