

## **Travellers' Club Meeting – 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010**

### **BHUTAN**

#### **Speaker Sandy Smith**

A chatty group of 40 assembled at our new commencement time of 2pm again from near and far (country Victoria and NSW, Newcastle, Sutherland Shire). Our speaker and Heather, her travelling companion in Bhutan, drove from Mudgee and planned to drive back after the meeting!

Sandy's address was in three parts:-

- a personal section with touches of humour focused on her fascination with “out-of-the-way third world places and their people” and with photography
- a brief presentation giving introductory background information on the Kingdom of Bhutan
- a photographic presentation for our enjoyment with minimal commentary (which permitted more photos).

Firstly Sandy donned a traditional Bhutanese wraparound jacket with wide cuffs in a contrasting colour. Men wear a long wraparound tunic, called a ‘gho’ with the same wide cuffs. This traditional clothing is worn by almost all Bhutanese every day, even for kids, the exception being monks who wear traditional maroon robes.

Sandy then showed her compact photobook (which displays the equivalent of 3 kilos of traditional print albums) which we could examine after her address and find out about the technology involved.

She and Heather really enjoy going to out of the way places and photographing their travels but Heather is not interested in photography tours as such. So by way of a compromise they found a general interest tour – led by a photographer, Alison Wright, a professional photographer with National Geographic USA.

The tour group arrived in Bhutan in November 2008 just after the coronation celebrations for the new young king, Oxford educated, determined to preserve traditions and culture. The celebrations also marked 100 years of monarchy (5 kings) and of peace and happiness. (“Gross National Happiness” being the nation’s philosophical aim.) Although keen to preserve their heritage, some changes have occurred e.g. allowing selected citizens to study outside the kingdom and relaxing entry restrictions to allow tourist groups with registered guides. Television was permitted in 1999 (the last nation on earth to introduce it) although electricity is still not widespread. Television was resisted for many years because of the strong policy of maintaining the traditional culture.

Secondly we examined a map of the Kingdom of Bhutan, total area 46,700 sq. km mostly steep forested Himalayan slopes, snow-capped peaks, and crops on narrow river floodplains. The population is about 1 million of which 70% is rural. There are only 2 main roads east-west and north-south – winding and hilly with narrow dual carriageway. The largest vehicles possible are mini-buses and trucks (no semi-trailers or coaches). The east of the Kingdom has poor roads and generally lacks facilities so is quite isolated. The capital Thimphu does not have enough flat land for an airport so the kingdom’s sole airport (with short runway) is at Paro and the only passenger airline permitted to use it is Royal Bhutan Airlines which has two planes.

The ensuing presentation from several places the group visited revealed:-

- Flags – they are everywhere - mostly long narrow ones on clusters/ rows of poles but also small squares (prayer flags) on ropes around buildings and across bridges and roads especially on high points in the mountain passes. The national flag is orange and yellow and features the thunder dragon from Bhutanese mythology.
- Chortens (stupas).
- Numerous prayer wheels ranging in size from huge (3 metres), with everyone encouraged to give the wheel a spin when passing it on the street, to tiny personal hand held ones. Prayer beads are a popular alternative to the personal prayer wheel.

- Mobile phones also widespread and popular – what happened to tradition?
- Houses/buildings in the traditional style which is mandatory (whitewashed walls, green roofs, lots of timber) rather like Switzerland.
- The main building in any settlement, large or small, is the Dzong, a combined religious and administrative centre.
- Shops are timber windows onto the street – the customer stands on the street. Dogs are common in the streets.
- Chillies drying on roofs and in windows.
- The accommodation for the group ranged from a 5 star hotel in Paro with resident monk greeting and farewelling guests, to accommodation lodges in other places and a stylish comfortable tent village with traditional Bhutanese hot tub with water heated by the addition of hot rocks.
- All the textiles are locally made in traditional patterns. The women’s short jacket is worn over a long heavy cloth, horizontally striped, draped around the body under armpits with the front attached to the back by brooches and chain over the shoulder. In contrast to the women’s ankle-length skirt, men and boys wear the wraparound knee length tunic, called a ‘gho’, with vertical stripes or checks. It has the same broad cuffs as the women’s coat but is worn with a belt which allows the men to carry all their belongings against their chest. Men wear knee length socks. Of course the Indian workers and monks have their own garb.
- The longest suspension bridge in the world was a highlight – awesome.

Thirdly, Sandy provided a feast of photos with a focus on portraits of all manner of people encountered along the way and on the stunning costumes, folk dancing and marching groups at the annual November festival of the black necked crane in the Phobjikha valley. The cranes are welcomed and cherished when they arrive on their annual migration indicating an ecological as well as religious basis for the festival which involves the whole community - schoolchildren, monks, performers as well as visitors in recent years.

On Wednesday May 12<sup>th</sup> because of Sandy’s talk, I chose to watch a movie on SBS 2 - “Travellers and Magicians” shot on location in Bhutan by Australians in 2003. Thanks to my background briefing by Sandy it was really great and I recommend it.

Sincere thanks for sharing your unique photos with us Sandy!

‘Ela Taranto