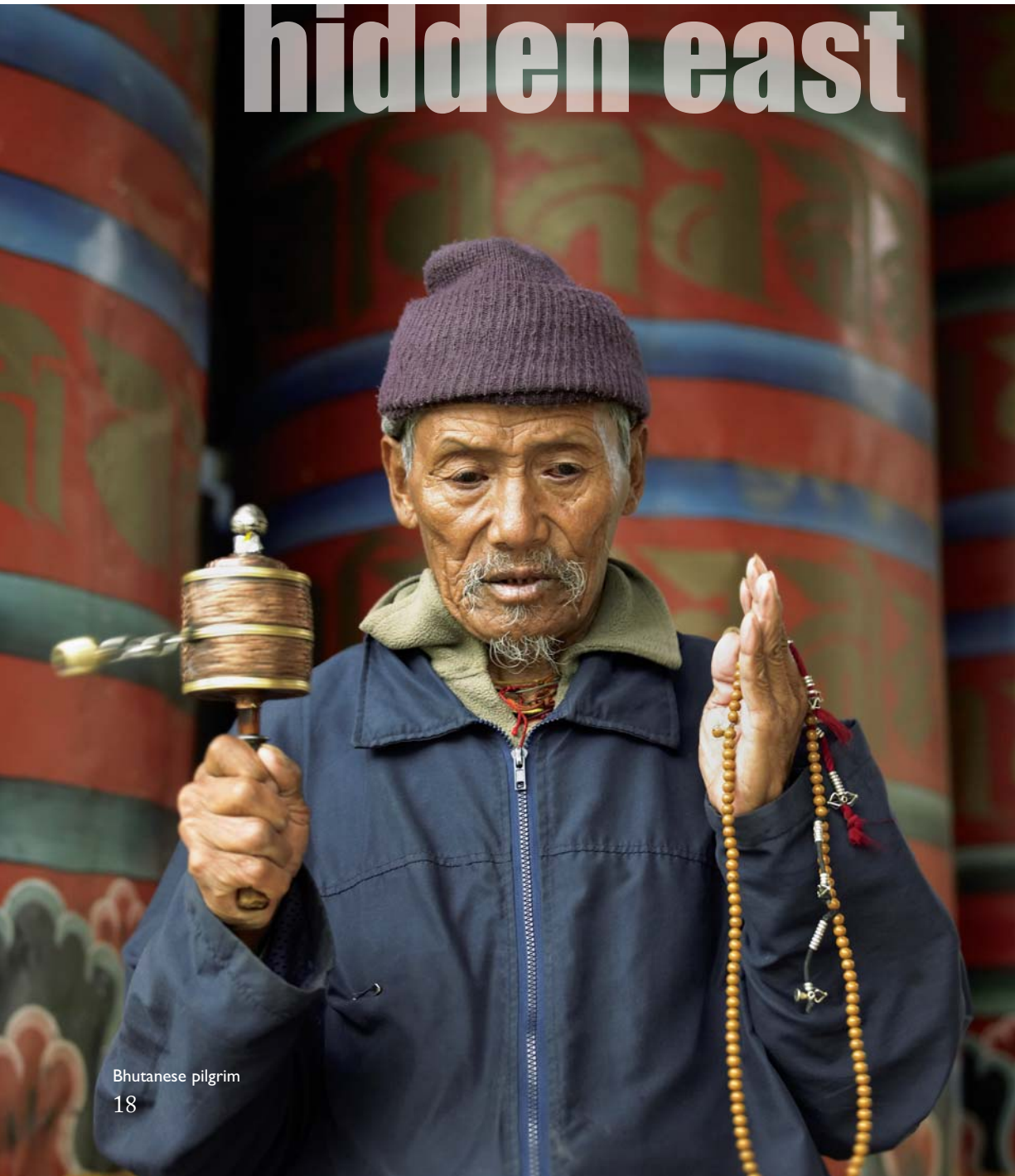


BHUTAN'S hidden east

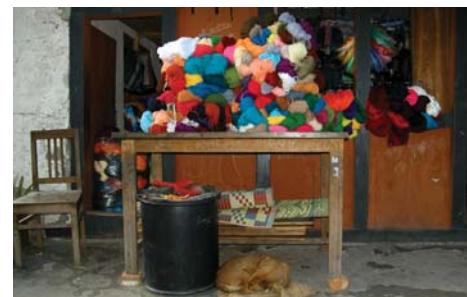


Bhutanese pilgrim



Boy monks

The hidden kingdom of Bhutan preserves Asia's cultural past in secretive isolation, but most tours concentrate on the west. Emma Shaw explores the scarcely-visited east of the country, a wild and rugged land where few travellers tread.



Trashigang



Boy monk next to butterlamps, Jakar



Chorten Kora, Trashi Yangtse

Most visitors to Bhutan visit the west of the country, focusing on Paro, Thimpu and Punakha, and if time allows perhaps venturing across to the central Bumthang Valley. In January I visited eastern Bhutan, an even more remote region where accommodation is basic and in limited supply, to see what it was like. Be reassured: the intrepid traveller will be thoroughly rewarded with a truly unique experience.

The journey into eastern Bhutan is itself a fantastic experience: you trace every contour of the valleys on the journey deep into this hidden mountain kingdom. The national language fades away: the people of the east speak Sharchop, itself divided into many different dialects. The few roads only connect the main towns and, compared to the western and central regions of the kingdom, this area has a far greater level of isolation between the towns and the outlying communities. Most people live off the land and times can be hard, with a subsistence way of life supplemented only by some weaving projects, notably in Khaling, that allow women to earn an additional income working from their homes. Though most fabrics are transported to Paro and Thimpu for sale in handicraft shops you can still find newly woven fabrics here with a true sense of their place of origin.

Trumshing La (3,750 metres high) is the pass that divides central and eastern Bhutan, about three hours by road from the Bumthang valley. Through the winter months this pass is often impassable, which only goes to accentuate its air of isolation. In the summer months Trumshing La is a fantastic place to stop and stretch your legs. Prayer flays are wrapped around the trees and the chorten that mark the pass, and the views from this point are truly incredible.

Soon after crossing Trumshing La you drop steeply in altitude, the temperature steadily increases and the vegetation becomes more tropical. From here the road to Mongar is literally carved out of the mountainside. There is a sheer drop from the passenger's side of the road that would have been terrifying but my confidence in Dodo, my driver, let me relax into a spellbound reverie, appreciating the steep-sided valleys funnelling down to rocky mountain streams.

Mongar, Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse are the main places of interest in eastern Bhutan, while Gom Kora and Chorten Kora are the primary religious sites. Chorten Kora is located at Trashi Yangtse and is built in the style of Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu. Gom Kora is about half-way between Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse and is a sacred

place where the Guru Rinpoche, the founder of Buddhism in Bhutan, is said to have meditated and left an impression of his body on an enormous rock in the monastery's grounds. The deep and unquestioning devotion to Buddhism is perhaps the most unifying element of the people of Bhutan.

From Trashigang you can exit Bhutan by travelling south along winding valleys and over mountain passes until you are suddenly brought to an abrupt halt at the town of Samdrup Jongkhar on the border with India. Instead of staying at this rather dreary border crossing I'd recommend pressing on to Guwahati, the capital of the Indian state of Assam, reached by a straight road that represents an immediate change from the slow pace of Bhutanese roads.

Though Guwahati is well connected by air to Calcutta and Delhi, after the peace of Bhutan's little-visited east it seemed all-too-cosmopolitan. The best escape might have been to spend a tranquil few days cruising the Brahmaputra River. Far away from the chaotic bustle you associate with India, the remoteness of the Brahmaputra is the perfect complement to a trip to Bhutan.

Emma Shaw
Bhutan Specialist



Khaling

FACT FILE

A 16-night trip to eastern Bhutan including return flights starts from £4,200 per person based upon two people sharing. A ten night trip to Bhutan without visiting the east starts from £3,000 per person. For further details please contact Emma or Beatrice on 01993 838 320.

