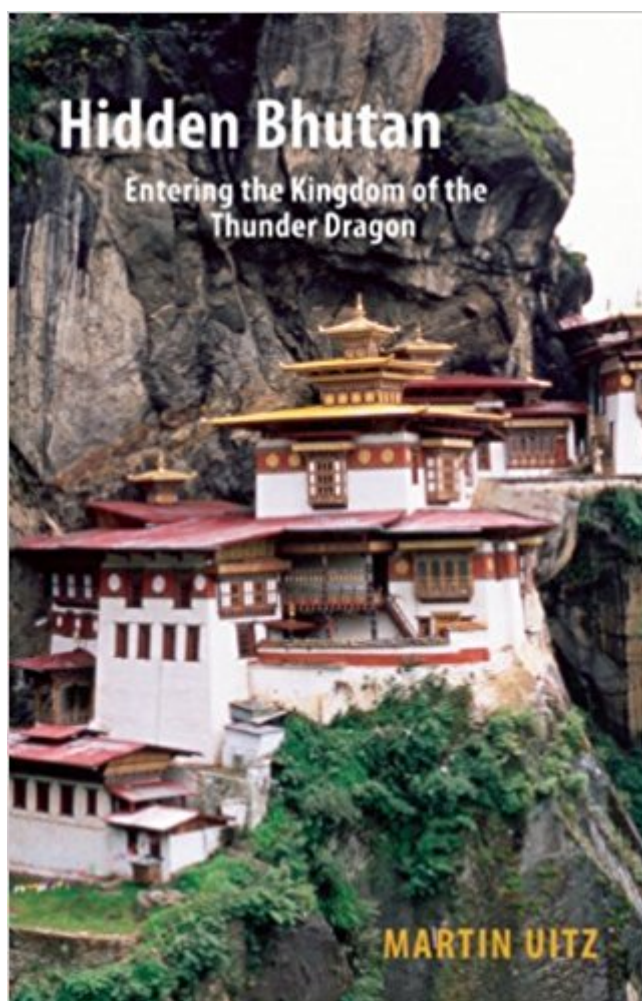


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Hidden Bhutan: Entering The Kingdom Of The Thunder Dragon (Armchair Traveller)



Synopsis

In 2006 Time magazine listed the King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, as one of the 100 "leaders and revolutionaries" who are changing our world today. Yet it was only in the 1960s that the first road linking the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon with India was opened, and since 1974 only a strictly limited number of tourists have been allowed to visit each year. Martin Uitz, a renowned expert on Bhutan, describes how the Bhutanese, in pursuit of the principle of "Gross National Happiness", are carefully moving towards a more modern future, including a constitution and democracy, whilst preserving their traditional society and attempting to conserve the environment. Uitz made many fascinating discoveries in this enigmatic Kingdom. He was able to explain why the only traffic light was taken out of service, why six men are not allowed to go on a journey together, and what the subtle eroticism of a traditional hot-stone bath is all about. Along the way he also discovered that the Bhutanese hills are more alive with Edelweiss than the hills around his native Salzburg.

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Customer Reviews

Uitz Martin (1952-2007), traveled to the most remote areas of the Himalayas from the early 1970s. After two decades spent as a tour operator and tourism advisor with the Austrian Development Cooperation of Bhutan, and then lived as a freelance writer in the Kingdom until his death.

very interesting stories and traditions that anyone should know as they travel around Bhutan. really

enjoyable and makes the visit more fun.

In a hundred pages, Austrian ex-pat Martin Uitz explores the off-road, off-beat side of Bhutan. Although he works in its Ministry of Finance, one of a hundred foreigners in its booming capital, Thimphu (which as of 2006 had about 70k residents--now it's near 100k), he nods to the bureaucratic morass and civil service's perks only in the opening chapter. Compared to other accounts by those from abroad stationed in Bhutan, such as *Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey into Bhutan* by rural teacher Jamie Zeppa, or *With a Dzong in My Heart* by Thimphu consultant Lansell Taudevin, Uitz does not reveal much about himself or his family's experiences. Rather, about the same time as when *Radio Shangri-La: What I Discovered on My Journey to the Happiest Kingdom on Earth* by Lisa Napoli takes place, Uitz roams out of the city to explore a countryside even there as close as a few hours walk up mountains to yak herders and a takin reserve. Most of his narrative riffs off of two themes. Episodes on the Snowman Trek (see *Beneath Blossom Rain: Discovering Bhutan on the Toughest Trek in the World* by Kevin Grange; *Yakking with the Thunder Dragon: Walking Bhutan's Epic Snowman Trek* by Mark Horrell; *Journey in Bhutan: Himalayan Trek in the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon* by Trish Nicholson) comprise a fast-paced chapter. For those not wanting to read a whole book--or the three above--this chapter conveys the gist of this difficult journey well. Uitz loves the "tsachu" ("hot water"--that is, hot springs) which entice the traveler to Gasa and ease the burdens of a summer trek--the exception to the rule as the other accounts take place in the fall. He also goes on a "Thousand Lake" trek in Dugala, and this is refreshing as an example of an excursion not discussed by others. The challenges on the narrow paths and steep inclines, amid yaks, bears, and leopards, demonstrate the rigors of life for many in Bhutan who don't live in its capital or near the highways, even as these stretch deeper, along with electricity, medical centers, and schools, into the furrowed heartlands of the kingdom. He even runs into a royal entourage, as one of the land's four sister queens, Ashi Sangay Choden, makes her way to visit those in the steep central highlands. Another theme is that of the supernatural attractions, as well as the natural wonders. His tale of a "tsechu" holy dance festival at Jambay in Bumthang appeals for its wry look at his fellow Westerners, tourists bent on the long road there and the "dance of the naked monks." This turns out anticlimactic. He gets hit up as a "rich" chilip ("foreigner") at his home by an importuning self-styled "enlightened one" scavenging for grub and cash. He roams around the healers claiming powers, and speculates. What's intriguing, after I've read *Dragon Bones: Two Years Beneath the Skin of a Himalayan Kingdom* by Murray Gunn, is an overlapping perspective. The two worked around the same time in the capital, and Gunn's pal Mike

beat the author out for the "chilip" part in a locally made film. He dyed his hair blond but left his beard black, as the director directed. Uitz notes he suspected "the young man walked into the role by chance"--which is, according to Gunn's version, the truth. Uitz also enjoyed the uneven, if more ambitious, film exhibited abroad, *Travellers and Magicians*, although it's not the "three-hour epic" but half that length, at least in the version I reviewed. Again, overlaps occur, as its star, Tsewang, is the ex-husband of Jamie Zeppa. Other connections extend. The hydroelectricification of the nation, to supply India with power and Bhutan with funds, was engineered with the advice of such as John Wehrheim, whose photo-narrative *Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness* documents the changing and unchanging landscapes. Author and intellectual Karma Ura explains the nation's transition from a feudalism where "lords and slaves ate from the same plates" until recently (see Michel Peissel's 1968 visit across a then-unpaved hinterland in *Lords and Lamas: A Solitary Expedition across the Secret Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan*) to a constitutional monarchy integrating democracy in its striving for Gross National Happiness. Finally, the temptations abound. As Laudevin and Gunn noted in their stay, the Bhutanese army funds its pensioners by the sale of whisky. Hunting is outlawed, but to meet the demand for dried yak meat in a land where farming crops can be a problem, they tend to fall off cliffs and wind up butchered. Plastic bags banned helps reduce pollution, but trash often litters the place. Tobacco apparently (as in the *Travelers and Magicians* star's role) entices many but its presence, Uitz reports, diminishes. Marijuana, grown wild, however, as media enter the realm, is starting to be experimented with by the young. The betel-leaf snack, "the national drug" as he glosses "doma," remains cheap and universal. I recommend this as an educational and entertaining overview. It sums up efficiently much that is in other media and books (all above reviewed by me Nov.-Dec. 2012) on Bhutan, yet Uitz conveys his information clearly and without pretense or elaboration. Translated by Nathaniel McBride (I read the 2008 printing; 2006 German original) smoothly, this can be perused in a sitting or two; its easygoing pace expresses information in a straightforward, but thoughtful, often self-effacing manner. While his sources, frustratingly, are not always credited precisely, and while the lack of a map may frustrate readers unfamiliar with the region, he bridges the gap between guidebooks, histories, and travel narratives in this little entry in the fittingly named *Armchair Traveller* series.

A short (99 p) and quite interesting introduction to the largely unknown country of Bhutan. Chapters cover various aspects of life as experienced by the Swiss writer, from the local sauna bath to a dancing shaman. He undertakes 'the hardest trek in the world' and meets the timid local animal, the oddity known as a takin ('According to legend...the holy man supposedly assembled the remaining

bones of a cow they had eaten, setting upon its neck the head of a goat.')

And talks about such matters as drugs and the imminent provision of electricity for all villages. A few photos would have been nice (I found myself going on the Internet to look up photos of places - and the taken). And although the country seems to have its fair share of problems too (an author whose work Mr Uitz recommends seems to talk a lot about the poverty etc), this is a resolutely positive work. However - I have learnt a lot on a place I knew nothing about!

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