

1998 KINGDOMS IN THE SKY INDIA, SIKKIM, BHUTAN

Thursday, September 17, 1998. Left Atlanta at 7:40 and 8 hours later arrived in Zurich. It was close to the departure gate for the Delhi plane, and I chose to go there rather than into the terminal. As I was sitting quietly at the gate reading, I was paged. "Please check with Swiss Air for a message". I knew it was Martha, because I had wondered why she hadn't met me. Her flight from Cincinnati preceded mine by more than an hour. I looked around for a Swissair agent but none were to be seen. I went back through security and made the long walk back to the terminal where I found Martha in the Business Class Lounge, a large crowded place with a smoking section. We found two seats together, but I pointed out it was not as peaceful as gate 83 and we made the long trek back to the gate. It was starting to fill up with people, but we didn't have too long to wait before boarding.

I had crossed the Atlantic in first class on a Delta system-wide upgrade, but the cost of first class from Zurich to Delhi was excessive so I downgraded to business. It wasn't bad, although the footrests did not come all the way up and the back didn't fully recline. For a day trip it was ok. I dozed a lot of the way. 7 1/2 hours later we landed in Delhi. It was midnight India time, 9 1/2 hours ahead of Atlanta, enough to make the jet lag fairly severe. We were met by the greeter from Goway, Ramjid, and the driver Somnat, and transferred to the Park Hotel. Somnat will be our driver for the next three days, and that will take getting used to since Indians drive on the left side of the road and Somnat likes to tailgate! Our hotel room is very small but we were happy to bathe and fall into bed.

Saturday, September 19. To no one's surprise I was up early, wakened by twittering birds outside our bedroom. After a continental breakfast in our room we met our guide Suri, for the city tour at 9:00 AM. He is very knowledgeable. Our first stop is a Lakshmi Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu. Suri gave one of the best explanations of the Hindu religion that I have heard. They believe life and religion are inseparable, all living things, and also such things as dance all are part of their religion. Thus there are many gods and you pray to the one that represents your problem. A person has many rebirths in different forms. After a walk through the temple, we were dripping wet from the heat and humidity (as bad as it was in Indonesia last winter).

Near the hotel, Delhi gives the impression of being a shabby city with many of the buildings in need of paint or repair. It reminds us of India's poverty, for interspersed are shantytowns and even tents where people live. However there are fewer beggars than when I was first here in 1964. Suri tells us there is employment opportunity for all but looking around I see that many of the jobs are for manual labor. For instance scythes cut the grass and the grass is hauled away, often balanced on some woman's head, to supply fodder to the animals. "Sacred" cows are seen, turned loose by their owners when they are no longer productive for milk or labor, for they cannot be killed.

We went to the mall, as wide as our Washington DC mall, with all the handsome government buildings taking their inspiration from such places as Versailles and the Capitol Building. Then we stopped at Humayan's tomb, which was built for the second Mogul emperor and was the inspiration for the Taj Mahal, with its gardens and turrets. Many of Humayan's relatives were also buried here but the records have been lost as to who and where they were. Nearby were the embassies and the nicest residential areas with mansions set back from the street on large lots. Suri tells us that it is very expensive to have a home here because land is so expensive.

The Qutb Minar was built by the first Muslim dynasty to rule India. The tower was built by a succession of rulers and each of its 4 "floors" is a slightly different style. It was briefly used as a minaret but its purpose was a victory monument.

The nearby Hindu temples were torn down and the material from them used to build a mosque. Thus the mosque's colonnade has remnants of the Hindu style, although the animal figures have been removed. In the courtyard is a curious iron column thought to be 1500 years old. Unexplained is why there is no sign of rust on it.

Suri felt we needed an air-conditioned rest stop, but it turned out to be a Kashmir rug and souvenir merchant's establishment. We did not buy anything although a lot of pressure was put on us. When Suri suggested another stop for lunch we agreed and he took us to Gaylords (undoubtedly a relative of the one in New York) where we had "mild" curry dishes, which were nice and spicy but not too hot.

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Then it was back into the heat for a visit to the poignant memorial built on the site of Mahatma Gandhi's cremation. The Indians feel they receive part of Gandhi's soul when they pay homage and a steady stream of people was placing flowers on the platform inside a walled courtyard. A perpetual flame burns. Nearby were the sites of Rashid and Indira Gandhi's cremations but we did not walk to see them in the heat.

Then it was on to the Red Fort built in the Mogul style, once thought to be the loveliest palace in India. You could get the general idea of the marble pavilions but the semi precious stones and gold leaf that used to adorn them had been vandalized and plundered by the Persians when they invaded. Here the Emperor had his peacock throne, carried back to Tehran by the invaders. Nearby they are getting ready for a festival in a couple of days and were setting up Ferris wheels and so forth.

The Park hotel was a welcome sight and both of us raced to the bathroom for showers and shampoos. I was wringing wet from all the heat! We then fell into bed and slept for three hours. Then it was down to the coffee shop for a light meal until back to bed again. To my surprise I slept until about 4:30AM. Such is the jet lag!

Sunday September 20, 1998. Our departure time was 6:00 AM. The trip to Jaipur is six hours long. Much of it is interesting. Herds of cattle, camel and bullock carts, people drawing water at the village spring, ladies in saris with their clay water jugs. But much of it was also a huge parade of trucks, all belching fumes into the polluted air and all driving like maniacs. I'm glad I was not driving since the technique is to pull into the oncoming lane to pass, laying on the horn, and at the last moment pull back into the traffic lane as another truck goes whizzing past, an endless "chicken" game. We passed one accident where a truck hit a car and totaled both it and the car! Since there are no sidewalks and the people walk in the street, I was also not surprised to see one accident where a car had hit a pedestrian. At the mid point we had a stop at a tourist oasis and were able to go to the restroom and have a snack. As we passed into Rajasthan, the flat countryside became much more fertile and there were prosperous looking farms. For the first time we saw herds of sheep and goats.

Then we got stuck in an endless line of stopped trucks. However, Somnat was equal to the task. He pulled off onto the berm, rocky and rutted, and passed a lot of trucks on the left. Then when we could go no further, he would stop and get one of the trucks to pull back and he would thread the car through to the other side of the road where we traveled into the facing traffic, pulling off on its berm when needed.

When that got blocked he repeated the process crossing back through the line of trucks to the first berm. An amazing driving job, but I felt for the car's springs and tires! At last we got to the cause of the traffic jam, two trucks had collided blocking the road! As we neared our destination we started seeing hills, craggy treeless lumps, which we were later told, were the oldest mountains in existence. The last few miles were a toll divided highway and we made better time.

So it was a long and tiring drive and when we pulled in to the Amber Fort, I hoped we would have a chance for some rest but no, we had to get on a elephant and ride up to the palace. Our guide Ranveer (pronounced "Rahn we") Singh is a member of the same caste as the man who built the palace, Maharajah Jai Singh (but Ranveer said it was a distant relationship). The Singhs are a warrior caste. When I did this elephant ride 35 years ago with Mother, I had enjoyed it very much, but 30 years later the swaying howdah and the sun beating down on us and the numerous vendors who scampered alongside trying to sell us various things, plus being tired from the drive, made this anything but fun.

When we dismounted I all of a sudden felt quite shaky and had to sit a moment or so in the shade before we walked on up to a small restaurant.

Some time later, with a cool drink inside, I felt well enough to continue and we went up to a magnificent palace abandoned in the 17th century. Beautiful carved marble pillars adorned the receiving hall and then we proceeded into the maharajah's private quarters. Beautiful frescos and mica mirrors adorned the ceilings and walls. Pieces of glass, some in the shape of wine bottles embellished the walls as well.

In the bedchamber, four niches held torches and when the room was dark they reflected off the mirrors and it looked like a starry sky overhead. We had this romantic effect demonstrated for us

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with candles. I was afraid we had to walk back to the car but Ranveer found a jeep to carry us down and at last we reached the Holiday Inn in

Jaipur. It's a great improvement over the colorless Park Hotel and our room is of sufficient size.

After a lovely two-hour break where we enjoyed hamburgers in the coffee shop, we set out to see Jaipur, The Pink City. Maharajah Jai Singh, who lived in the wonderful palace at Amber, decided to move his capitol when the one inside the fortress walls became crowded. He needed a larger flatter place to live in order to have a place to locate his astronomical instruments. He planned the city of Jaipur with its elaborately decorated buildings, all painted pink and then enticed the residents of Amber, and artisans from all over, to move the few miles to his new city in 1730. The most famous building is the Palace of the Winds, really just a facade, where the ladies of the court could look out and see the city while they were hidden from public view. The palace is a huge complex occupied by the present Maharajah, who no longer has any political powers. His large land holdings make him very wealthy and he has turned a lot of the palace into a private museum.

We toured the out-of-doors astronomical observatory, with the largest sundial in the world, correct to within 8 seconds, and also admired the various contrivances to see the constellations and moon. The original guest quarters now house a collection of textiles, embroideries, and block prints that date back 200 years.

Then we were taken to a jewelry merchant, for Jaipur has a big gem cutting industry. I got led down the garden path and bought a lovely star ruby ring (the star rubies come from India). Ranveer was so pleased (he probably gets a big commission for taking us there) that he followed it up with a visit to another store, but Martha and I were worn out and asked to be taken back to the hotel.

After an early dinner we were in bed by 8:30. At least we got through the day without a nap!

Monday, September 21. Awoke at 5:00 in time to hear the first call to prayer. Today has a leisurely start at 8:00 for the four-hour drive to Agra. We stopped at the Palace of the Winds for Martha to get a picture in the good light and immediately a snake charmer appeared and started playing his flute to attract our attention! Then we headed out of town on the Agra road. Yesterday we had been on the main highway between Delhi and Bombay. Today's road was a much lesser traveled highway. Fewer trucks but the road was very bumpy and full of potholes so it was still hard to make good time. The roads were crowded with pedestrians - men in their traditional dhotis, women in saris. We passed a flock of gypsies displaying their dancing bear.

The scenery was lush farmland and a downpour reminded us that the monsoon season had not passed. We stopped at the midpoint for refreshments and then went on to Jaipur Sacra.

Akbar the great, the third Mogul Emperor, had several wives but no children. Someone told him to consult a wise man at Sikri. After two of his wives were successful in bringing children into the world, he built a palace in their honor calling it Fatiphur (or Victory) Sikri. It was also built for strategic reasons. No one is sure why it was abandoned 8 years later; it may have been because the court was moved to Lahore for even more strategic purposes. It is like walking through a beautiful ghost town. The rooms are ornately embellished but feel like they were never used. They are made of deeply carved red limestone. They aren't sure what some of the rooms were used for but the Shah's bedroom with huge stone bed and secret passage to the harem is obvious. In the courtyard was a large parcheesi court where they used to play the game with live slave girls.

Our guide, Yogi, rode with us back to Agra and checked us into the Clarks Shiraz Hotel where Mother and I stayed 35 years ago. It is still a nice hotel but the aging plumbing makes the toilet hard to flush and the water pressure is not so great. I thought our arrangements had been for "superior" hotels but the Park and Clarks Shiraz are decidedly "inferior". When Mother and I were here, a snake charmer waited for tourists right outside the gates. While we have seen many of these, with their flutes and snake baskets, begging for us to pay to see the snake, there is none at the Clarks Shiraz today. Lunch was a problem because the restaurant closed at 2:30 but we were served sandwiches in the bar. At 4:30 we met Yogi and set out for the Red Fort.

The fort was built by three of the mogul emperors over a period of 80 years. Each built a section of their own favorite style. Today much of the fort is occupied by the military but we were allowed into the part built by Shah Jahan, husband of the lady buried in the Taj Mahal.

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Everything in his section was white marble, decorated with carved geometric designs or flowers and many of the designs were inlays of semi precious stones, the same work for which the Taj Mahal is famous. It is on a bluff overlooking the Jalma River and the Taj Mahal itself. While we admired the view a funeral procession passed by, all men carrying the body, which had died that day, and bearing it to the ghats along the river where the body was cremated according to Hindu custom. We could see smoke coming from the ghats where a cremation was already taking place.

Shah Jahan's second son murdered his brother so he could inherit the throne. Then he imprisoned his father, daring not to kill him, and the Shah spent the rest of his life confined to his private apartments overlooking the tomb of his beloved Mumtaz. We could not go to see the Taj Mahal by moonlight because it is closed on Monday so Martha and I had a delicious tandoori chicken dinner at the fifth floor Indian restaurant in the hotel overlooking the red fort. A storm blew through while we ate so even if the Taj had been open the excursion would have been doomed.

Tuesday, September 22, 1998. Left for the Taj at 8:00 AM to beat the crowds, for this is the premier tourist attraction in Agra if not in the whole country. The bus had to park a half-mile or so from the gate and we caught a tuk tuk to the entrance. A tuk tuk is a three wheeled motorized vehicle that doubles as a taxi in these parts.

There have been some changes at the Taj Mahal since I was last here.

Instead of entering directly through the huge gate we were directed to a smaller gate on the side and our handbags were searched as we went through the metal detector. But inside the Taj Mahal glistened as always, seeming to float on its white marble platform before a backdrop of empty sky. Its perfect symmetry and proportion make this white marble building even more beautiful than its reputation and we sat for some time admiring it as Yogi told us the story. The Mumtaz was Shah Jehan's favorite wife and when she died in 1630 in childbirth having their 14th child he was devastated. He took 23 years to construct her tomb bringing in the best artisans he could find to design and build it.

There are two side buildings; one a mosque, the other a guesthouse, to complete the symmetrical effect and the garden is also divided with reflecting pools and symmetrical gardens. It is all more beautiful than words can describe. As we neared the building the detail started to emerge, for the white marble has been elaborately decorated with inset precious stones in floral and geometrical designs and around the huge entrance arch are the words of the Koran, the letters being taller toward the top to make it seem all the letters are the same size.

Inside, under the dome, lies the Mumtaz's casket and to her right the only non-symmetrical part of the whole complex, Shah Jehan's casket, for he never was allowed to construct the black marble tomb that he envisioned for himself across the River Jalma, being a prisoner in the Red Fort. Actually the real caskets are in the crypt below but no one is allowed to go down there anymore, as there are too many people. As we left the crowds were starting to come and they say in the season, which starts in October, there can be a two-hour wait to get in. This year, of course, because of the Asian money crises, it appears that fewer tourists will come, but there are still many Indians who visit this famous tomb.

Yogi took us to a marble factory so we could see how the elaborate designs are incised with semiprecious stones, lapis, carnelian and so forth. Everything from huge tables to small coasters made the choice difficult but we found a lovely marble box for Martha, made by a prize-winning artisan. Checking out of the hotel we headed for Delhi stopping to see the tomb of Akbar the Great in Sikandra just outside of Agra. Akbar was the third of the great Mogul Emperors and his tomb, behind a huge red sandstone gate in the mogul style is also red stone, inlaid with geometric designs.

Hanuman, the monkey god, was a general of great courage and is the patron saint of wrestlers. Every Tuesday he is worshipped here and the wrestlers come to rub their bodies with the soot from the incense. The baboons at the shrine know this and are all around waiting to be fed by the visitors. They are most beguiling scampering around but the guards try and run them off. The grounds also contain a deer park and the place is popular for picnics.

The road to Agra is well paved and a four-lane divided highway most of the way so we cover the distance in four hours and are soon checking into the lovely five star Taj Mahal Hotel where we

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will meet our tour with Abercrombie and Kent. After a short nap we go to the welcoming party and dinner and meet our escort, Vikram Singh Shaktawat, a personable young Indian, and our fellow travelers. Vikram is related to the Maharajah of Udupur and his picture appears in one of the books on that part of India. There are 18 of us, a full capacity crowd! At dinner we sit with Jennifer and Andy Butterbrodt, an attractive couple from Los Angeles, and Annabelle Postier, an Australian, living in Kennesaw Georgia. While Martha discusses gardening with Jennifer, I learn more of Annabelle, who has lived all over the world. Her husband no longer wants to travel since he did so much during his career so she has come alone.

Wednesday, September 23, 1998. A gray overcast day. We feel a bit sorry for the group who get their city tour today, probably in rain. Having done the city tour just 4 days ago, we opt to hire a cab for the day. Our first stop is the National Museum with its collection of Hindu and Buddhist sculptures and art. Then we made a stop at a handicraft bazaar and Martha bought a lovely star sapphire stone, which is to be made into a ring. Then on to Gaylord's for another delicious Indian meal. While I sat my left foot went numb and when I stood up I could not feel the floor and fell down to my great embarrassment. It seems to be a mild sprain. We returned to the Taj Mahal Hotel and had restful massages and dinner in the bar. Martha had huge tiger prawns, I had a steak. I think her prawns were a better choice than my tough steak.

Thursday, September 24. Flew Jet Air 2 1/2 hours to Bogdagra, with an intervening stop in Assam, in the northeastern part of India. The security was intensive with body searches before we were allowed on the plane! The customs procedure was also lengthy in this West Bengal town, but finally the 18 of us were loaded into 6 jeeps and we started up into the mountains to Darjeeling. Sharing our jeep is another single traveling without her husband. Ruth Rosenfeld from Concord, MA. This is the 6th trip she has taken this year without her husband! The road starts on the level past large plantations of tea and trees but soon we were climbing up through the rain forest. Up and up with not even a short down, we followed the path of a narrow gauge railroad, built more than 100 years ago by the British, where toy-like steam trains still run. Up and up, switchback after switchback we rose.

The scenery was lovely if misty and the jeeps reasonably comfortable.

It is about 80 kilometers up to Darjeeling but we don't travel very fast. Up and up. In July there was a huge landslide that closed a lot of the road but now it is passable although a lot of reconstruction is going on. According to our guide, a Tibetan boy named Passan (which means Friday, his birthday) the landslides happen every year. Up and up we went. There were numerous villages on the way. Switchback after switchback. Two hours later, at 4200 feet we made a rest stop for tea (what else) and some delicious chicken momos (stuffed dumplings). The engine and baggage car of the toy train came by and we all went out to see it. Then back into the jeeps for the remaining trip up to 7000 feet and Darjeeling. It was after dark when we arrived in this large prosperous town, built as a summer resort by the British in the 1850s.

The New Elgin Hotel is like an old-fashioned country inn. It is about 5 stories high with no elevators and we are on the third floor. Our room is very nice with sitting area, fireplace, TV and portable heater. Dinner a buffet of Indian delicacies. We went to bed early.

Friday, September 25, 1998. It is hard to describe Darjeeling in words. The mountain is steep and the town falls like a cascade down its side. Small level pieces of land support four and five story buildings while the narrow bumpy roads undulate their way around them. It's a big city, some 150,000 permanent residents, swelling to three times that in season. The surrounding mountains can be clear but mostly a mist encloses them. We did catch a glimpse of the top of Kanchenjunga (3rd tallest mountain in the world).

Our tour started by taking us to the zoo where we saw the red pandas. There is a breeding program to bring back both them and the snow leopard. It is a disappointing zoo in that the animals are mostly in cages, not natural settings as in our more modern zoos. We climbed our way to the highest point where a shrine exists where Tenzing Norgay was cremated. A statue of Norgay is also here and prayer flags mark the spot. Nearby is the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute with two museums with relics from various climbs. Our head guide, Tshering, is Tenzing Norgay's grandson and he pointed out pictures of uncles and cousins from his sherpa family who

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had made various climbs. The Institute's main purpose is to teach the art of mountain climbing. Next we went to the Tibetan Refuge Center where we are shown the ladies spinning wool and making rugs and their small shop where they sell their goods. A great many Tibetans came here after the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959. We continued to the Happy Valley tea garden (plantation). When the British came they brought their tea plants from China. Happy Valley is one of the oldest plantations, founded in 1856 and is still operated in the traditional way. We are shown how the tealeaves are harvested and then withered, where they develop a lovely aroma, then rolled, fermented, graded and dried. Darjeeling tea is considered one of the best in the world and the pure form is very expensive. So much so that it is usually sold as a blend with lesser grades of teas. Our guide is very scornful of tea bags, which he says are just the dust from the tea and the lowest grade.

Driving back out of the place, up the narrow road, probably the original one built by the British, our driver has a terrible time, stalling out, backing down and trying a run again, backing down and trying again, until finally one of the other drivers came and got our jeep back to the main road. Back at the hotel, Martha kindly brings me a plate of lunch in the room, and we get an hours rest. The afternoon tour is a walking trip through the "antique" bazaar where a number of curio shops await our inspection. I still haven't found a Buddha to add to my collection but keep looking. A two-hour nap before dinner and early to bed for we have a 3:15 AM wake-up call!

Saturday, September 26. We left the hotel at 4:00 AM to drive 45 minutes to Tiger Hill, a wildlife preserve. On top of the hill is a small pavilion where we waited for the dawn. It is supposed to be very dramatic when the sun rises and the rays shine off the peak of Everest in the distance. It was chilly and we waited and waited and speculated on whether the ever-present fog would lift. There were lots of other people besides our group also waiting. After about an hour the sun finally climbed above the mist and many cheered its arrival but Everest never did show. You win a few and lose a few! We did catch a glimpse of Kanchenjunga on the way down. Then it was back to the hotel for a 7:30 breakfast.

The tour took us to the Ghoom Monestery, Yigi Choling, a yellow hat monastery, with a Chinese feel in its external decorations due to the Taiwanese who sponsored it. Passing the prayer flags, blue for the universe, white for the moon, red for the sun, green for all living things and yellow for the earth, we admired the huge prayer wheels on either side of the doorway. Each is filled with prayers and by turning them you say your prayers. Above the door were the two deer, which symbolize that Buddha was born in a deer park and the eight-spoked wheel representing the 8 tenets of Buddhism. Inside Tschering explained the frescos on the walls, some of which depict Buddha's life, others, relate to other saints and gods. He also showed us the old prayer books, which had been brought from Tibet when the exodus happened in 1959. The central figure in the temple was the Buddha yet to come. In short the major difference between this monastery and the ones in Tibet is that they don't use yak butter in their lamps because the butter melts in the warmer temperature. So they use vegetable oil mixed with paraffin to form a sort of candle instead. Two of the monks don their aged yellow hats and blow their long trumpets for us.

We stopped at the Gherka Monument, which honors the gherkas who have given their lives in the wars. The gherkas are the mountain people who are fierce soldiers and have been mercenary soldiers for the British. A small obelisk and statue in a small garden form the monument.

Then on to another grander monastery, Thupten Sangha Choling, which is also a teaching monastery. Young boys in their red robes watched us climb up to the temple, which was richly embellished with fabrics and frescoes. In the gathering hall, low benches have been placed for people to sit, the highest one being reserved for the Dali Lama, lesser ones for the head of the monastery, school and so on. Tshering shows us the statues which flank the Buddha, Cheng Reezi, the god of compassion is shown both sitting, with prayer beads in one of his four hands the lotus in the another, and also as a standing figure with multi heads and arms. Also Jampayana, the god of wisdom with his book and sword to cut away ignorance. I must find a Cheng Reezi to go with my Jampayana bought in Tibet two years ago.

A last stop was made at the Ana Devi gallery. This artist is famous for his embroideries on silk. The faces are incredible in their detail and look like paintings.

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After lunch Martha and I go back up to the shopping center we visited yesterday and there in a shop we found several Cheng Reezis. The owner told us he wouldn't have shown us anything the day before since we had a guide with us and he would have had to pay a commission! I really liked one standing one with the multi arms and heads, but the price was very high (about \$900) so I settled for a lesser seated one, which should look very well in my Buddha collection. Paying became very funny as he wanted dollars and between us we barely had enough to cover it, most of our money being locked away at the hotel. The owner also identified the many-armed female figure I got in Nepal many years ago as the Hindu Chandni, a form of Thara or Dolma. I also bought a ring with Buddha on it. Inside it was inscribed in Tibetan "Om mani padme hum", "Hail to the jewel in the lotus", an all encompassing mantra or prayer of the mountains.

Then we had an "optional" tour to the Lloyd Botanical Park. Four of us set out with four of our local guides down several switchbacks, while I wonder how I will ever get through the hike back up. The other two soon drop behind but Martha and I continue to the park, which was founded by a pharmacist named Lloyd who came to Darjeeling to collect and identify herbal remedies. We got as far as the orchid house before starting back. And to my surprise I made it back to the hotel without too much trouble. Thank you diamox!

Martha went back up to the shopping square with some more money to buy some more of the delicious tea and some jewelry she had admired but I washed my filthy hair and read and rested until she got back. The air is so polluted and there is so much particum in the air you get dirty very easily. Some are having asthma and breathing problems. When Martha returned she went to wash her hair and had just soaped up when the water failed (they have to fill the tank on top of the hotel every day) and then the power failed, which at best is uncertain, for some minutes. So I took a nap until dinner and went to bed right after.

Sunday, September 27. A transfer day. We drove from Darjeeling to Gangtok, the capitol of Sikkim, 80 miles away. The trip took 6 hours!

As we left Darjeeling we had our best view yet of snow-capped Kanchenjunga. Then we drove down the bumpy narrow switchback road for two hours, where we had a short stop and could over look confluence of the two rivers (Rangit and Teesta) that flow from Sikkim. The mountain scenery is a lovely rainforest, there is just too much of it! When at last we reached the border with Sikkim there were lengthy border formalities as travel is restricted into this part of India. We had a picnic lunch at the visitor's center and then explored the border town of Rangpo, whose main claim to fame seems to be the inexpensive liquor stores.

Sikkim was an independent kingdom until 1975 when it became a part of India. Back in the jeeps we started out along the river to Gangtok, but the road was often under construction due to the numerous landslides. It was hot and we were glad when we climbed up again to Gangtok, the capitol of Sikkim. Our hotel, the Nor Khil House, was built as a guesthouse for the king. We are greeted with scarves as honored guests and the lobby is most attractive, so we were not prepared for the dismal sleeping room we were assigned. Dark and damp, with two hard beds, and when we opened our transom all the noise from the French group having a party across the hall came in. I fell into bed and slept for two hours. Dinner was, as usual, served at a cramped long table where it was hard to not be straddling a leg. This has been the part of the tour I have really disliked. I can understand the table d'hote dining for these are not really restaurants and Vikram has to tell them what to cook, but to eat with the whole group of 18 each time is wearing, nice as they are. I book Travcoa because they allow you to eat when and where you wish. Martha and I read and stayed awake until ten.

Then slept fitfully until 7:00.

This might be a good time to talk about some of the other tour members.

They are all well traveled and seem very nice. Fletch and Elsie Gornall are from Erie, PA. He's a lawyer. Jim and Janice Bennett are from the Chicago area. She's a retired teacher and makes her own original jewelry. Teddy Hong, an anesthetist, and Bill Sivick, an accountant, are younger and from California. They are traveling with a wide range of native costumes to entertain us. Shirley Alder, who is relatively young, seems to do nothing but travel and is into herbal medicines. Irene Inman is a bank consultant and is traveling with the Butterbros. Milton and Jeanann Bruzzone are Californians (we have a lot on this tour). And lastly George and Martha Zoloth, also

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from California who told us a harrowing tale of how their house almost was devoured in one of California's fires. Everyone is well traveled, but of course you would not pick this itinerary for a first tour!

Monday, September 28, 1998. We set out down the mountain, being delayed first by a Buddhist funeral procession. The body is placed in a sitting position and carried to the pyre where it is burned. This was a popular lama and many monks were in the procession. He was only 35 and died of food poisoning. A busload of monks accompanies the procession. It takes 49 days after a death for the soul to go to heaven. For the cremation, astrologers are consulted to find a propitious day. Army trucks passed us heading north to the Tibetan border, which is about 30 miles away. Next it was a parade, for this is the first day of a Hindu holiday, Phulpati, in honor of Durga. Durga is actually three goddesses, Cali for Destruction, Lakshmi for wealth and Saraswati for knowledge. The paraders chant and parade to the temple with their offerings where the image will be washed. Tomorrow a mock battle will be held to commemorate Durga vanquishing the demon Mysosori. The eternal battle of truth and evil. So the traffic was very bad and it took quite a while to reach the river valley. On the other side of the river we climbed again, passing more and more prayer flags as we neared the Rumtek

Monastery.

The Gyalwa Karmapa founded his first monastery in the 12th century in Tibet. The second Karmapa was the first reincarnation ever recognized in Tibet in 1206. He has now been reincarnated many times and the 16th reincarnation founded Rumtek as his main seat outside Tibet. He had been born in Eastern Tibet in 1923 and fled Tibet when the Chinese came, coming to Sikkim through Bhutan. He died in 1981 and his remains are entombed in a golden stupa covered with jewels in the monastery. The 17th reincarnation, which has been recognized by the Dali Lama, is in Tibet. The purpose of the monastery is to spread the teachings of Buddha for the liberation of all sentient beings from the suffering of Samsara. We had a half km walk up to the monastery from the parking place. Inside the entrance was a huge courtyard where the sacred black hat lama dance takes place. Inside the monastery are the usual books and frescos and also 1000 small images of Buddha donated by a benefactor. Beyond and above the main sanctuary are the classrooms and above that the hospice for the school. We went up to the second level to see the gold stupa with its rich jewels, surrounded by effigies of the previous Karmapas. It was all very moving.

On our way back to the hotel we stopped at the Institute of Tibetan Studies, sponsored by the Sikkim government with exhibits of various sacred relics, books and so forth.

At lunch in the hotel (at my suggestion, now at tables of 6!) I mentioned how great the morning had been and was greeted with remarks about how dirty it all had been! I hadn't noticed. Some feel we have seen enough monasteries! After lunch we went to a handicraft center and I found a couple of masks for Connie and Seymour. They are clay so I hope they travel home ok.

Then, most of the group returned to the hotel, but eight of us continued to Enchey Monastery (Place of Solitude). This follows the oldest school of Buddhism and was founded in 1700 by a monk who came from Tibet and meditated here. The monastery is different from the others we have seen, the outside looking somewhat Chinese and the windows being shaped like the Tibetan windows. Actually the windows were square but the use of paint made them seem to flare. It was fairly small inside. We then watched the small children learning their chanting and climbed to the roof of the adjoining classroom building where in the distance we could see the palace. Children enter the monastery as young as three. Some because they admire an uncle or cousin who is a monk, some are orphans and some are behavior problems. Many drop out but the ones who succeed go on to Varanasi to graduate school. The ones that drop out have a hard time for they do not know English or even such things as mathematics.

Then it was on to a flower show, which turned out to be an interesting exhibit of bonsai plants. A stop for a scenic view, then we drove by the legislature building and the palace getting back to the hotel at 5:30.

Tonight they gave us a dinner of Sikkimese food. It started with a tall bamboo glass, filled with fermented millet seed. Over this they poured hot water to create Sikkimese wine. It was so bad no one could drink more than a sip or two. The rest of dinner was not great but better, momos, the stuffed dumplings, spinach and so forth.

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Tuesday, September 30. We retraced our steps to the border, past the landslides, enjoying the safety slogans painted on rocks along the way. "Better late than never", "If married divorce speed", "Life is a journey so complete it", "Better be late than 'the late'" "Be gentle on my curves" "Reach home in peace not in pieces". Whether these work is debatable for the signs on each curve saying "sound horn" are flagrantly ignored. Back in West Bengal we climbed to 4000 feet and the town of Kalimpong, and checked into the Himalayan Hotel, a delightful hotel where we are assigned a bungalow suite complete with covered porch and beautiful view. Such an improvement! Lunch was Indian delicacies, the best meal we have had.

Kalimpong was on the trade route between India and Tibet. It originally belonged to Bhutan but when the British came they took it over in 1869, paying an annual rent to Bhutan which is still paid by the Indian government. It is a clean prosperous town.

Our first stop was the Zangdolpal Monastery, located on a scenic peak above the town. We arrived in time to hear the monks chanting their prayers and playing their musical instruments. The interior of the temple has mandalas on the ceiling. It was dedicated to Padmasambhava, who was also known as Guru Rimpochet, pictured with a skull full of nectar symbolizing immortality. He was the second person recognized as a Buddha and introduced tantric Buddhism in the 8th century. We climbed to the roof to see the second "sanctuary" a small room housing Maitreya, the Buddha yet to come. There was a beautiful view of the mountains of Bhutan and Sikkim and in the other direction we could see the flat plain of India.

Then we went to Dr Graham's House. John Anderson Graham came to Kalimpong and was upset to see the orphans that were left behind when the British soldiers returned home. He started an orphanage in 1900, which has now grown until it is a school with 1200 students. There are still a few orphans but most are private students. The Jesuits run the school and the many buildings have all been built with private donations. Because of the Hindu Festival the students were on vacation but there was a small group playing cricket in the schoolyard, which Tshering compares to baseball.

Then we walked through the large bazaar, where all sorts of foodstuffs were being sold, and after that clothing, tools, clocks and so forth. At the end was the fairground and here we found some Nepalese children doing the traditional dance they do before a battle. After a long speech, which we were later told was about stopping the animal sacrificing, there were a couple of other dances. A shower and shampoo felt so good!

September 30, 1998. We left at eight retracing our steps down to the valley, and then descending to the flat Indian plain, the usual switchbacks and landslides. Teak trees in flower, spectacular waterfalls, monkey families by the side of the road. Two hours later we abruptly left the mountains and started off across the plain of West Bengal headed for Bhutan. The road was straight, which is about all that could be said for it. It was a washboard, potholed in the extreme, and when passing traffic appeared we were showered with dust. The alternative was to shut the windows and swelter in the heat, for we are only about 500 feet above sea level. The scenery was monotonous, mile after mile of tea plantations interspersed with scruffy dirty little towns. Vikram said the road had been bad last spring and the monsoon floods had made it worse. After five hours we stopped at a tourist place and had our box lunches, the usual hard-boiled egg, banana, fried chicken and cheese sandwiches. I really wasn't very hungry but enjoyed a cold coca cola.

After that the road got worse and the heat got hotter.

It took almost eight hours to reach the Bhutan border where we had to go through Indian customs one by one. The only good part was that it started to rain which cooled things off a bit. A & K really planned this badly. Until India repairs the road across West Bengal, we should be flown back to Delhi from Siliguri and then back to Paro in Bhutan. I'm sure no one would have minded the expense!

Fortunately the Druk ("Dragon") hotel was right over the border, marked by an elaborately painted arch. We are in the no-mans-land town of Phuntsholing. While we have left India, we do not officially cross into

Bhutan until about five miles further on. The hotel's entrance is lavishly decorated with red dragons, as is the lobby. Our room is fairly basic but we have screens and a ceiling fan! The

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cold shower felt wonderful. The water ran black with the filth of the journey; even my ears were full of the dirt. It will be a miracle if some of us don't get sick.

Then Vikram called and said I needed two passport pictures to enter Bhutan! I am just furious. I had passport pictures taken and sent 6 of them to A & K in June with the visa applications. They lost the pictures and I had to have them all taken again. Susan saw to it that I was reimbursed for the expense and A & K even sent an apology. Now Vikram made it sound as if the Bhutan photos are missing again. Coming on top of the badly planned itinerary today, I wonder if I want to travel with A & K again! Later I found out everyone had to have new passport photos taken, since Bhutan requires one at each check point and there are four we must go through. Vikram found a photographer to come to the hotel and we all lined up. He wanted us to each pay the \$2 cost but I refused. I think A & K should cover this 38-dollar expense for the tour since they did not tell us we would need extra pictures.

Thursday, October 1, 1998. Wonderful Bhutan, or Druk Yul as the natives call it. Land of the Peaceful Dragon. At one time there were a number of Buddhist kingdoms spread out through the Himalayas but Bhutan is the last survivor, the rest having been gobbled up by China or India. The Druk Gyalpo, or king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Waangchuck, is an hereditary monarch, the line having been promoted by the British in 1907 in order to consolidate the various factions in the Buddhist hierarchy.

The present king is the fourth and he is trying to retain the traditional values of his country while at the same time bring it into the 20th century. He has four wives, all sisters, and eleven children. The people are required to wear their traditional dress, a gho, a sort of short bathrobe-like garment for the men worn with knee socks, and the kira, a long piece of material worn as a full length sarong and fastened to an under blouse with pins for the ladies with a short jacket on top.

Both costumes have a decorative belt to hold them in place. These are required whenever the people go to the temple or to any important meeting or government office. No satellite TV is allowed, although VCRs are permitted and foreign movies have been brought in. Foreign tourists are curtailed to about 5000 a year. On the other hand, roads have been built, Druk Airlines (with its 3 planes) functions out of the one airport in Paro, and medicine and schooling is becoming universal for the 800,000 natives. Most of the population is Buddhist but there are some that are not, particularly near the border. Here in Phuntsholing there are many Nepali and Indians who are Hindu. Bhutan is very different from where we have been. The friendly people seem relatively well off, the streets are clean and in good repair. Everyone speaks English since it is required in school. And its position in the Himalayas makes it very scenic.

Martha and I walked around the town, which at 9:00 AM was hot and steamy. Not much to see but the small shops catering to the people's daily needs. However a lovely Buddhist temple in a small park was interesting, its god, Mahakala, who is the main god of the Bhutanese.

Our departure is not until 10:30 because of the problems of getting the visas. Our female guide is Karma, a young woman who spent 18 months at the University of California, and our male guide is also Karma, who went to Delhi to go to college. There is a shortage of first names in Bhutan and most can be used for either sex. We have a 22-passenger bus and a separate pickup for the baggage.

We finally got our visas and climbed into the bus. It is crowded and there is a defunct air conditioner under my seat, which is putting out scalding hot air. Martha Zoloth finally got them to turn the air-conditioning off! As before, the mountains rise abruptly from the plain and soon we are in beautiful scenery with rain forests and waterfalls. The government has curtailed tree cutting and as a result

Bhutan is about 75% forested. The road was built by the Indians in 1960 and is in good repair with only a few slippages to give us problems. We believe the landslide problem is because the mountains are so young and have not eroded like ours have. Of course rain will cause landslides anywhere. We go over one pass of 10,000 feet. After almost three hours without a stop, female Karma finally gives us an opportunity to go into the bushes to answer calls of nature. I did not indulge but Martha reported that she killed two leeches. It was almost four hours until we finally found a place to stop and have our lunch, at a small hotel. The buffet was the usual tasteless buffet of oriental chicken and vegetables.

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As we got nearer to Thimphu we saw more and more of the picturesque Bhutanese houses. Two or three stories high, the lowest floor was originally reserved for the animals with the families living above. Below the roof an open space was left for drying and storing food. The living quarters are brightly decorated with colorful designs around the windows and at the end of each of the many rafters. The windows themselves consist of six or eight small windows grouped together. They are arched with a trefoil-iated top. The roof traditionally is wood boards held together with a cross board and rocks to keep them from flying away. However, many are now roofed with tin, which gives them a fine place to dry their colorful red chili peppers.

It took seven hours to come across the mountains. Thimphu is nestled in a valley and is the capitol of Bhutan. 40,000 people live here. We are staying at the Taktsant hotel right. We are lucky to have hotel rooms at all for the big Tshechu festival of the fall is going on and everyone has flocked to Thimphu to see it. The festival is in memory of Guru Rinpoche. One group of tourists was put up at a nearby house dormitory style! However, the Taktsant is decidedly second-class. We have already suffered the Nor Kill and now this. I feel like I am on a budget tour! We have a steady diet of table d'hote buffets, which all seem the same and which are unappetizing.

Our room is adequate although I have yet to learn how to open the door. I did however master flushing the toilet. You open a valve, flush, then close valve again. When we forgot to close it we got a phone call in the middle of the night telling us about it! There is a major water shortage in Thimphu and sometimes there is no water at all. I have yet to find it hot as well! All this in a country whose major export is hydroelectric power from all those beautiful mountain streams and waterfalls.

Martha and I check out the handicraft shop and Martha bought one of the jackets the women wear over their Kira. Some of the tour members are buying Ghos and Kira to wear to the festival!

Friday, October 2, 1998. This is the third and last day of the Tshechu festival and by the time we got to the Tashichoe Dzong, a fortress like monastery, it seemed as if everyone from all of Bhutan was there. They were all in their best ghos and kiras, some richly brocaded. At a ceremony like this they also are required to wear a sash, long and white for the men, red for the women, and other colors represent higher offices.

Our guide happily announced it was everyman for himself and told us to be at the bus in three hours. Since the standees were six or seven deep I looked around for an alternative and spied a stairway going up to the main gallery where the king and all the important people were watching. The guard took a dim view of my being there but I held my own and soon he ignored me although he continually shooed off the people who joined me. Part of this was because he had to keep an open way for some of the characters to come down. Seated on the wall beside me was a French tourist, who had been here all three days and he was able to explain what was going on. He also told a fellow tourist that the reason I had been allowed to stay had been because of my white hair! The dancers wore colorful gold and white costumes and danced their precise steps to oriental style music. Periodically there was a sort of intermission and two lines of young people would come out and do a sort of line dance.

Working the crowds were numerous masked clowns who begged for money, hopefully dollars, to support the monastery. I gave 100 rupees (about \$2.50) thinking once was enough but they kept coming around again and again while I told them "I gave at the office".

Guru Rinpoche himself first performed the dance of Ging dang Tsholing in Tibet in the 8th century. The Tsholing, "terrifying deities", came out in their masks to purify the ground. The Ging, who are Guru Rinproches retinue, come out to chase the demons away. Then everywhere there seemed to be drums, people leaning out of windows, and coming down the stairs to celebrate the victory. They beat the drums with curious bent sticks and also tapped people on the head with the sticks as a form of blessing. Another dance, the Guru Tshen Gye, depicted the eight manifestations of the life of Guru Rinpoche; vanquishing evil spirits, his miraculous birth from a blue lotus in the lake, another manifestation represented him mastering knowledge, and so forth.

Everything was beautifully costumed and even if you didn't know exactly what was going on it was fascinating to watch. I have seen a lot of "folklore" shows and even a festival or two but never anything to equal this wonderful sight. It was wonderful!

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As interesting as the show was, the Dzong was also worthy of note. It was originally built in 1216, and has been rebuilt several times after fires and even an earthquake damaged it in 1897. In 1962, the third king decided to make it his seat of government and in 1969 it was consecrated. Golden domes mark its corners. The large central square is beautifully decorated in the Bhutan style and surrounding it are the

Government buildings and monastery. It was also amazing to watch the crowd, which got bigger and bigger until there was hardly any standing room left in the square. People were on every protruding ledge and hung out of all the gallery windows. Some small children were hoisted on their father's shoulders to see the dances but most could not possibly have seen what was going on. Never the less everyone seemed to be having a fine time.

After more than two hours of this I had had enough and Vikram found the pickup to take us back to the hotel. Most of our group had already preceded us. Rather than face another tasteless buffet lunch, Martha and I decided to try the "Swiss Bakery" across the street and had delicious salami sandwiches and scones for lunch. The owner was trained in Switzerland. After lunch we walked from one end to the other of the main street (Thimphu is one of the smallest capitol cities in the world). The main thing being sold were the fabrics for which Bhutan is known, but not knowing what I would do with a kira if I had one, I only bought a couple of pieces of inexpensive silver jewelry. It is obvious that tourism is still new to Bhutan because there is little to buy. However it was fun, and in the square Martha and I had a "Kit Kat" chocolate bar. They are heavily advertised everywhere and I had never had one! In the evening we were taken to the Yeezdin Guest House for dinner in their attractive dining room. I found the food more of the same dreary diet but it was nice to get out of the hotel (for breakfast they had served us cold toast and hard-boiled eggs in a basement room).

Saturday, October 3, 1998. An overcast day that turned into rain. First stop was the post office where we admired Bhutan's distinctive stamps, which depict all sorts of scenes from around the world. Behind it was a small handicraft shop with a nice selection of things.

Then we were taken up on the mountainside to Ziluka Monastery, which is a nunnery. The nuns shave their heads and wear similar red robes to the monks. In the courtyard nuns were polishing the brass butter lamps and inside they were saying their prayers while seated on cushions on the floor. A cat and a dog rested among them. Beyond them was the sanctuary and it was small but a lovely place, quite feminine in feeling. The main image was of Dupthop Thangtong Gyelpo who came from Tibet in the 13th century and founded the monastery. His seventh reincarnation is a seven-year-old boy being educated in Nepal. On one side of him was Tsherini, who represents long life and on the other side was a green Tara, who is regarded as a manifestation of Buddha's various activities. In front were lovely ghee butter offerings in shapes like flowers, and in front of them were marigolds floating in numerous small bowls which are offered each morning to purify the air. The holy books were wrapped in brocades and beautiful tongkas and frescos of demons completed the decoration.

Above the monastery we were taken to an enclosed area to see the yaks and ttakins, which are native to Bhutan, but it was raining fairly hard so I did not leave the bus.

By the time we got to the memorial chortan (called stupa in other parts of the world) with its gold spire, the rain had let up and we did the clockwise perambulation with the numerous pilgrims for, as in Tibet,

October is the time of the pilgrimage. They were prostrating themselves in front of the chortan, saying their prayer beads, and spinning their prayer wheels. You could hear "Om mani padme hum" being chanted. The chorten was built in 1974 to commemorate the third king who died in 1972. It is an example of tantric Buddhism and commemorates the Mindof Buddha. It is unusual in that there is a small chapel on one side but we cannot enter because there are services going on.

We had lunch at Plums Cafe across the street from the hotel where a big treat was a delicious moist roast chicken dish and apple pie!

Our city tour continued and we had pointed out the various buildings all built in Bhutan's distinctive architectural style. Then we crossed the river to the other side of the valley. As we drove by the attractive Riverview Hotel we asked why we weren't staying there and Vikram's answer was that it wasn't as convenient to the town. Since the town wasn't that far away, and the

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noise of Thimphu so bad, with dogs howling all night, radios blaring, trucks barreling through town, and noise from all sorts of activities in the street below our hotel, we failed to see why staying at the second class Takhsang was better! We went on to see a paper factory where paper is being handmade, and then to the large market which takes place every Saturday and Sunday. Mostly the market deals with farm produce and there is a large handicraft section but the prices were pretty high. Then it was on to the archery field where we watched some men practicing the national sport. The range is half again as long as a football field. When we got to the government-run Handicraft Emporium we said goodbye to the tour, and shopped for some pieces of jewelry and I found a wood block of teak used to print the mantras which should be decorative on my walls,

For supper we were taken to the Royal Bhutan Golf Club in the shadow of the Dzong. It was very basic, one room with tables for us and a buffet dinner. In the vestibule was a list of all the people who had shot holes in one and "His Majesty" was included.

Sunday, October 4, 1998. As we left Thimphu we crossed the Bridge of Prophecy. Phajo Jomdjom Shippo, came to Thimphu in 1222. While meditating, Guru Rimproche came to him and told him he would find a consort in the valley. He saw some girls across the river and found a consort. Then he built a bridge to commemorate the event. They had 7 sons and 1 daughter. He threw the sons into the river and asked the deity which ones would help him spread the word of Buddha. Three drowned. The other four were sent to each part of the country.

We passed the imposing Simtpha Dzong, the oldest in Bhutan, and followed the gorge of the Thimphu River down on the road to Phuntsholing.

Beautiful scenery, which we missed on the way up due to the fact it, was dark. At the checkpoint, where three chortans guard the way, we turned up the Paro River into the Paro Valley. The valley is lush farmland and small terraced farms look prosperous. They grow rice, wheat, millet, barley and vegetables. At one point we stop to see a family threshing their wheat. They lay it on the road for the cars to run over, then thrash it with a flail, that is really two sticks held together with a piece of leather. The women gather the result and winnow it by putting it into a straw basket and letting the wind carry away the chaff.

A small parade of three cars decorated with prayer flags passes us. One carried the target from the archery game they apparently have just won.

The houses seem more elaborately decorated here; sometimes the windows come in tiers of fifteen (three rows of five). They are built without nails, being mortised and tenoned. Female Karma entertains us with stories of the early monks who came to

Bhutan and soon the 2 1/2 hour trip is over and we come in past the Dzong of Paro which dates from 1647, having been reconstructed on the site of an even earlier one. Then up a steep hill to the Druk Hotel, which is a great improvement over the Taksang!

After lunch we went to the National Museum in an old watchtower. A very impressive museum, 6 stories high, includes the dungeon. Inside a one-way path through the various galleries is richly decorated in the Bhutan style. The exhibits start with prehistoric artifacts and then get more recent. Images of Buddha and the various gods of the religion, 200-year-old Thonkas, religious relics of all kinds. On the top floor was an exhibit of Bhutan's stamps, which are very interesting. In the back of this floor, in a room where we must take off our shoes to show respect is a huge "tree of life" and on the branches of the tree are images of Guru Rimproche in four of his manifestations, surrounded by gods and guardians. Many small statues line the walls, and offerings of water and money have been made. Proceeding down from there, we go past exhibits of stuffed animals and butterflies, costumes, copper and pottery work, all beautifully displayed. At the lowest level you step outside between two giant prayer wheels equipped with a stick to ring bells as they turn. We are lucky for just as we finished the museum lost its electricity. Then it was into the town of Paro for a half hour shopping stop before returning to the hotel. This is another town gone to the dogs, which are everywhere. I am so glad we are away from them and up the mountain.

We have a problem, for our plane the King who is going there for a three-day conference has appropriated back to Delhi in the morning. Vikram has us confirmed on the 5:45 plane but it will get us back to Delhi quite late and some are catching early planes home. Vikram is having our

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farewell cocktail party here tonight. It turned out to be around a bonfire in the courtyard, which I attended in Gortex, for it has turned cooler, but never has been really cold. Then another buffet dinner.

Monday, October 5, 1998. Beautiful day. Three of the group went out at 7:45 with the king. We had a call at 6:00 AM trying to find someone named Stefan so of course they called us and I never got back to sleep.

Martha left at 7:00 for the hike up to the Eagles Nest Monastery. Our bus trip left at 9:30. We went down the beautiful valley lined with prayer flag decorated houses, to the Kichu Resort, where Vikram is staying. It seemed very nice. Then we went up into the hills where we stopped for a distant view of the Eagles Nest Monastery and the other contemplative monasteries nearby. Perched on a ledge on the side of a mountain, it is the most famous sight in Bhutan. Foreigners are not allowed at the monastery. There was a fire and one building of the monastery has been lost, but it is planned to rebuild. Then we pushed on further to the end of the road, to get to the Drugyer Dzong, which was built in 1647, to celebrate a victory over the Tibetans. The Dzong burned in the 18th Century and is in ruins but we climbed up to the entrance courtyard. It is a grand ruin and there is talk of restoring it. There was a double wall to provide protection to the people who went out to get water, and some of the red coloring still exists to show where the temple was for all Dzongs have a temple.

Bhutanese history is rather vague since no real research or digs have been done. The only written records are the religious books in the monasteries. Thus all dates are only approximate.

Near the Dzong was a small village and we were taken into a farmer's home where the fifth generation was living. This was a poor farmer and no modernization had been done except for a single light bulb in each of the four rooms. We climbed a steep ladder up to the second floor where the family lived. Sparsely furnished, the kitchen had a wood stove where the lady of the house was cooking with 5 pots. In a small room nearby, once a prayer room, there was a storage closet with meat drying hung under the rafters. Off the front room was the family prayer room, part of which also had a desk where someone had been studying English. In short, this family was living in very primitive circumstances. As we left we filled her hands with 10 negultrim (about 25 cents) notes and she smiled a broad toothless grin. Then it was back to the hotel past schoolchildren on their way home for lunch. There we had a last buffet lunch, which actually was quite nice.

We had to be out of the room right after lunch and I spent the afternoon playing bridge with Janice & Martha and Jeanann. I hadn't played party bridge in years and was totally lost by the score, but it passed the hours.

At 3:30 we went to the airport for a two-hour wait until the plane for Delhi. Customs was not too difficult and Martha and I both lucked into executive class seats.

The flight out was spectacular with the whole snow capped Himalayan range to be seen. We finally had a clear view of Kanchenjunga and then Everest.

Back in Delhi we had four hours at the Taj Mahal hotel before heading for the airport. I was first class on Swiss Air and they really treated me as if I was incompetent. One lady was assigned to escort us through customs, ahead of some waiting business men, to the first class lounge, where she got a man to move so Martha and I could sit together, then she came back to get us when it was time to board. On board I was tucked in for the night under a comforter by the steward, and slept most of the way to Zurich.

Here we had a day room at the Best Western Hotel, for 6 hours, where a shower and shampoo felt so good. Then Delta brought me home to Atlanta, 33 hours after I had left India.