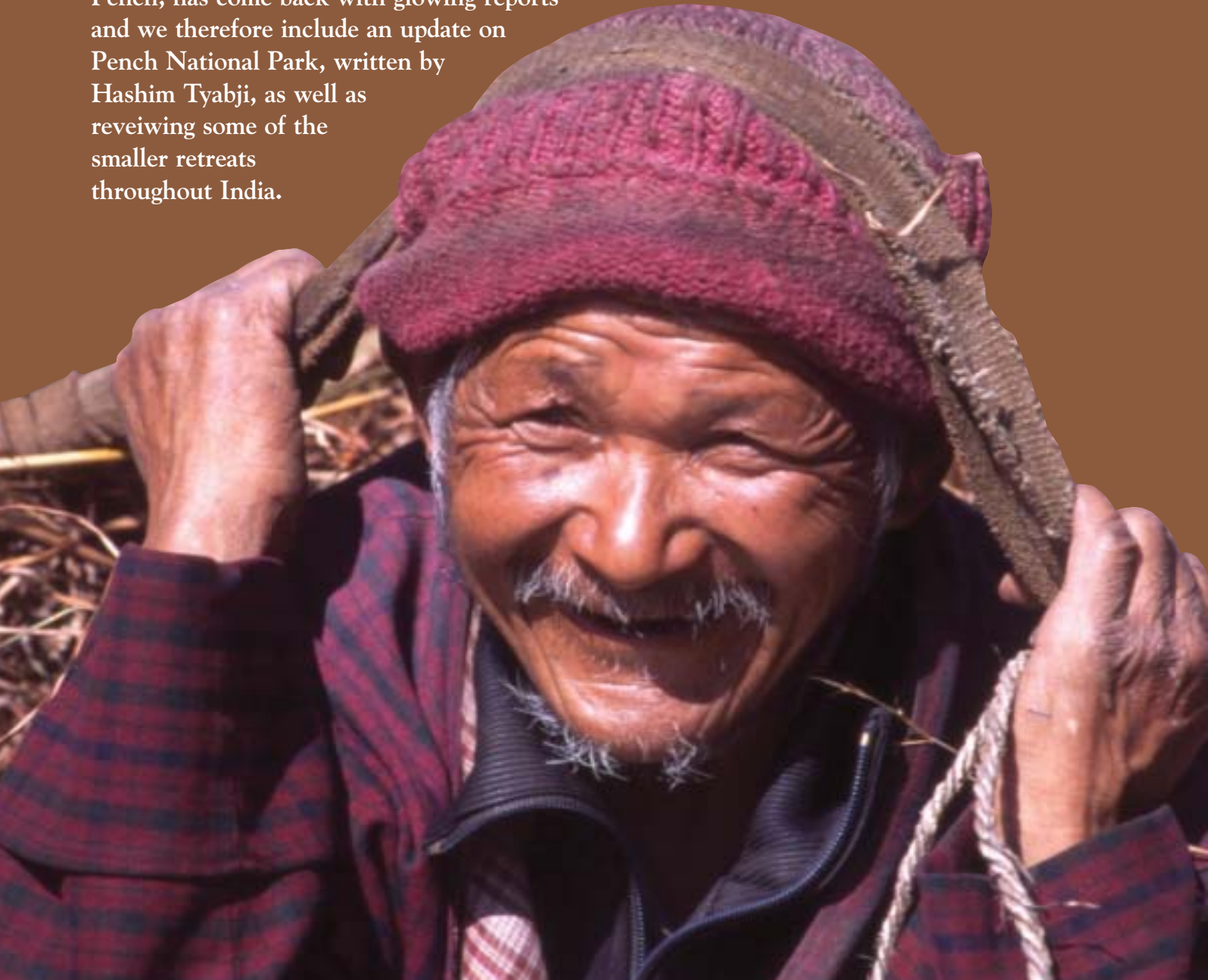


# INDIAN EXPLORATIONS

NEWSLETTER 2005

Welcome to the 2005 edition of our newsletter. We are excited about being able to add Bhutan to our portfolio as it must rank as one of the most beautiful countries on earth. We also cover Christina Ong's magnificent Cocoa Island in the Maldives, some hot new properties in Bhutan, with two articles, one by the renowned naturalist, Hashim Tyabji, plus the Himalayas (spearheaded by Michael Palin's wonderful series, which I hope you were all glued to!). We have been turning our attention more and more to well being as we all struggle with the reality of relaxation in our very busy lives. We all enjoy the concept, but never have time to transform it into something more tangible. So many of our clients in fact practice homeopathy and alternative medicine, which complements the whole ethos of relaxation, which is where Kerala, the Himalayas, the Maldives and Bhutan really come into their own. These days one wants to be flexible and supple for as long as possible, which is where yoga excels. All these places offer a "hippy-free", intelligent, yoga lifestyle. We have recently had several articles published on Pench (including a trip that we arranged for Brian Jackman) and from which we have had a huge response. I have to say that everyone who has visited Bagh Van Lodge, in Pench, has come back with glowing reports and we therefore include an update on Pench National Park, written by Hashim Tyabji, as well as reviewing some of the smaller retreats throughout India.



## TRINITY, COCHIN

Opened at the beginning of this year, this is Cochin's latest boutique hotel and a stone's throw from Malabar House. This beautifully redesigned, three bedroom 18th century house is an eclectic mix of modern and antique Indian design and furnishings. The minimalist lines, open plan layout and mezzanine floors emphasise the traditional wood furniture and local Malayali designs.



For 150 years this lovely building with its large courtyard was the office of the Dutch East Indian Company. The ground floor now houses one of Cochin's finest shops and the rest of the building makes up Trinity, just a short walk from the famous Chinese cantilevered fishing nets, some wonderful churches and other colonial buildings. The large airy sitting room is an ideal space in which to sit, read and dine with a mezzanine level above furnished with cosy day beds; perfect for reading or totally chilling out! The three bedrooms all have ensuite bathrooms and are decorated in wonderful vibrant colours. There is also an outside sitting area where one can have breakfast or escape the hot Southern Indian sun during the day. Alternatively spend the day cooling off in the swimming pool. In order to make your stay perfect there are house staff to look after your every need, whether you take the whole house with friends or family or simply on a per room basis only. You will be well and truly spoilt. Only breakfast is served at Trinity itself, lunch and dinner are served at the fabulous Malabar House restaurant a two minute walk away. Kerala benefits from a tropical climate and is therefore warm and humid all year round. The best time to visit is from August to Easter.

## SHREYAS, BANGALORE – THE NEW SPA

Pawan Malik, an Indian who had been working abroad in the financial world for years, returned to India and created his dream: a stylish retreat set in 25 acres of stunning gardens. Here they apply the eternal Vedic instruction - Athiti Devo Bhava - and 'treat thy guest as an embodiment of the Divine'. Due to its slightly elevated position Bangalore enjoys an agreeable climate for most of the year. The coolest period is from November to February. The monsoon is between June and August but is a particularly pretty time as everything is lush and green.



Both traditional and Ashtanga Yoga are practised here in one of the finest yoga pavilions in South India (all yoga sessions are included in the daily room rate). The hall is open-sided and overlooks peaceful gardens and guests are taught that anyone of any age and fitness level can benefit from the amazing effects that yoga has on both the body and mind. As well as yoga, guests can work in the enormous herb and vegetable gardens to really help them get as far away from the stresses and strains of modern life as possible! This is a true retreat geared to self-discovery, where the aim is to enhance the best of Indian spiritual wisdom and philosophical tradition regardless of religious beliefs.

If getting your feet dirty whilst planting paddy is not your idea of relaxation, then you have the choice of a large heated and ozonated swimming pool, outdoor Jacuzzi, indoor steam rooms, two spa treatment rooms offering Indonesian and Thai massages, walks around the gardens, an extremely well equipped gym, an extensive library, a home theatre with extensive audiovisual facilities and a wide choice of DVD's to watch. There is a comfortable, peaceful sitting room for guests to relax in. You have a choice of accommodation in either a private permanent tent, which has a verandah and a superb semi-open-to-the-skies bathroom, or a ground floor cottage. They are all decorated in natural colours and a comfortable, minimalist style yet furnished to the highest standard. On warm evenings guests are encouraged to eat together in the garden but you can choose to eat at your own table if you wish. The carefully planned vegetarian meals are exceptionally good and the chefs will try to accommodate all tastes with their Indian, Continental and Oriental dishes. Beware - The retreat is totally alcohol free – so either abstain, or bring your own!

## THE WINDERMERE ESTATE, KERALA

Fifteen minutes from Munnar and 1600m above sea level in the Western Ghats, perched on a hilltop, is The Windermere Estate which boasts some of the best views in Kerala. Looking out across the surrounding cardamom fields (often above the clouds) one feels a million miles away. This is the perfect escape for lovers of nature, mountains and walking. Munnar is considered to be the least spoiled of all the traditional hill stations left in India and is absolutely beautiful.



There are three cottages, ranging from 2-4 bedrooms, and a cosy five bedroom farmhouse. All have ensuite shower rooms with plenty of hot water provided by the local geyser! The Coffee cottages are light and airy with panoramic views and spacious sitting rooms. The dining room has an alpine chalet feel to it – perfect for the colder winter months. During the rest of the year, one can enjoy eating al fresco on the lovely verandah which is perfect in the warm tropical climate. The cuisine is a mix of Malayali, Oriental and Continental as well as local family recipes. Local excursions include tours of the tea and cardamom estates, guided walks in the hills, the caves or the valley below, golf at one of the world's highest golf courses, sailing on the local lake and bird watching. They will also arrange ad hoc picnic lunches which is a lovely surprise at the end of a challenging walk! The hotel is open all year round but probably the best time to visit is from September to April although there can be the odd shower in October!

## GLENBURN TEA ESTATE, DARJEELING

This is a unique opportunity to stay on a working tea estate amongst the champagne of teas. The 150 year old tea planters house is set above the River Rungeet, 3700m at the highest point on the tea estate with spectacular views of the Himalayas and Mount Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world.

The main house still has the colonial English feel to it with its wonderful, long verandah where one can eat, sit or simply relax looking out over the 1000 acre estate. When the weather is cooler, dine in the cosy candle-lit dining room where everyone eats together or the small pavilion in the garden, which is also perfect for taking tea in the afternoon. One can arrange to dine privately. The food is fabulous – some of the best to be had in India! Table d'hote menus are offered, with a choice of either Continental, Oriental or Indian cuisine using the estate's freshly grown vegetables. Picnics and barbeques can also be arranged. The suites are subtly decorated in pale colours, giving them a light and airy feeling with ensuite bathrooms (with large old fashioned baths perfect for long soaks), dressing rooms, sitting rooms, verandahs and wonderful views of the tea fields, mountains and forests. Geysers provide hot water and, during the colder months, hot water bottles are provided for that added homely feel!



Glenburn is a perfect escape for couples or families alike - with lots of mountain activities such as hiking, fishing, swimming in the river, camping, picnicking, rafting, trekking, bird watching and village visits. There is a full time resident naturalist and guide or, for a real treat, even a village masseuse! All this, in addition to visiting the tea estate itself and learning how this famous tea is produced.

The best time to visit Glenburn is from October until May, when the weather is cool with clear blue skies and plenty of sunshine. This is the perfect place to start or end a holiday in India. Allow at least three nights here to totally unwind, breathe in the fresh air and absorb the breathtaking scenery before heading off on the rest of your trip. All our clients have overwhelmingly adored this heavenly retreat.

## UPDATE ON PENCH & BAGH VAN – BY HASHIM TYABJI

Despite a truant monsoon in 2004 and consequent near drought conditions this summer, it has been a fantastic year for wildlife in Pench. The portents were excellent when our first guests at Bagh Van had three tiger sightings in as many days from jeep and elephant. Last year's young males had become confident adults and it was a joy to see them still using their natal area. Unlike other areas with high tiger densities, leopards remain extremely visible in Pench. Perhaps it is the terrain, with its rocky outcrops, that allow them to share the tigers' domain while keeping a margin of safety and permits them "to boldly go where tigers roam".

Pench has always been famous for its wild dogs and from October to early December hardly a drive went by without a sighting. And then, suddenly, they were gone to re-appear only after the denning in March. Highly itinerant, they cross the Pench river into the forests of Chhindwara and so out of the tourism zone. Their presence adds so much excitement to the jungles and it's always good to see them again with their young as summer approaches. With the water shortage in the hills the gaur remained in the lowland forests around the lake and were seen regularly throughout the year. The other good sightings were of chausingha or 4 horned antelope both within the park and in the buffer zone forests; our first sighting of gazelle not far from Bagh Van and an excellent sighting of wolf close to the lodge. As always we kept our eyes open for the small animals and Sameer saw Rusty Spotted Cat; I saw an Asian Wild Cat and Mary Peacock had a superb morning sighting of a pair of ratels. By February the Flying Squirrels were visible again and the mystery of their movements during and after the monsoon remains.

Our second season at Bagh Van went better than we could have hoped for thanks to the increase in interest in Indian wildlife and hopefully our focus on good guiding and a varied programme with enthusiastic and knowledgeable young naturalists and Mary Peacock as the manager. We continue to upgrade the lodge with heaters for the rooms in winter and coolers for the summer; we now have 3 specially built wildlife-viewing jeeps and new furniture and decoration, adding warmth to the interiors of the dining area. For the next year we have some exciting additions with walking camps being planned for a max of 4 people, a fly camp on the far side of the park that allows access to a largely ignored but beautiful area of jungle and a fishing camp on the Wainganga where mahseer and carp provide some excellent angling. So do come to Pench! It's still quiet and undisturbed with a wealth of forest and wildlife to be explored.

Fly-fishing in Kashmir on beautiful, traditional houseboats. Please enquire for further details.

## NEPAL

As beautiful as ever, and please do not put it at the back of your mind. Pokhara must be one of the most outstandingly beautiful areas of Nepal, with superlative walking and Chitwan National Park is as good as it's always been. Kathmandu continues to be one of the most enchanting cities in Asia. One can do a beautiful ten day trip, or even make it two weeks by adding on Glenburn Lodge near Darjeeling. We also have some super trips combining Nepal and Bhutan.



## BHUTAN



We are very excited about two new properties that have just opened in Paro in Bhutan. Hitherto, Bhutan has always had a mystical beauty about it, with charming three star accommodation. Now, it is possible for our more demanding clients to stay in beautiful five star lodges, whilst retaining the flavour and architecture characteristic of Bhutan. Bhutan is a Buddhist Kingdom, preserved in a Himalayan bowl of fertile slopes between India and Tibet. In this magical land, a precious mountain culture thrives, cushioned by pine-clad valleys and majestic peaks tipped in snow and circled in clouds, reminiscent of the alps in Switzerland. The air is clean, the people smiling, and the religion pure – not to mention that the gross national product, as deemed by the government, is “happiness”! The temperature never drops below 0 which means that the weather is temperate. For anyone interested in walking, birdwatching, or social anthropology (tribal cultures), then this is nirvana! Bhutan is at once both fascinating and stunningly beautiful. The greatest aspect is that visitor numbers are restricted and that policies are designed to protect the heritage of this profoundly traditional and religious society. The whole country is wrapped in spirituality. The two most interesting ways to enter Bhutan are via Darjeeling (perhaps after staying at Glenburn), or via Kathmandu, my favourite Asian city. Visit sacred valleys, obtaining an insight into a life which has been shielded from western influence.

Our first real find is the newly established Uma Paro, owned by Como Hotels (who also own Cocoa Island in the Maldives). Uma Paro is an exquisite retreat on a forested hilltop close to the town of Paro. Rivers snake through valleys, carrying the chants of monks. In the wind blow prayer flags, fluttering in the skies. In the highest passes, snow leopards roam in the shadows of unconquered peaks. Paro is one of the main cultural

centres of Bhutan, a town alive with people dressed in traditional costume. It is especially wonderful to be here at the time of one of the many festivals and one should visit the spectacular temples and dzongs. Here one can spend time relaxing, meditating, walking and trekking through meadows awash with wild flowers. (We can also offer luxury flycamping). At Uma Paro, there are just twenty-nine villas and rooms surrounded by a pine plantation in a 38 acre estate. Interiors have been created by traditionally-trained local artisans and each room has a yoga mat. The kitchen relies upon wholesome local produce and absolutely delicious meals feature specialities ranging from their interesting vegetarian dishes to roast yak, which is like venison. There is also the renowned Como Shabhala Retreat, which delivers healing therapies coupled with world class yoga tuition. Alternately, one can simply immerse oneself in the spirit of the land, drinking in the mountain air and views, and learning about the fascinating Bhutanese culture. There is a swimming pool and they accept children, too.

Aman Properties has built a sixteen bedroom lodge in the Paro Valley, called Amankora. They also have a seven day itinerary spending three nights at Amankora and two each at hotels they intend to acquire, in Thimphu and Punakha. They plan to build several more properties to be open by mid July.



An excerpt from Aryn Baker's  
journey written in *The Times*:

"Because I wanted to get a feel for the country, I had decided to walk, an undertaking that inexplicably required four days, six ponies, two guides, a chef, an assistant, a sleeping tent, a dining tent, a potty tent (including a loo seat) and a dog. Somewhat abashed, I asked Tshering what the fanfare was all about.

"You are paying \$200 a day to be here," he shrugged. "We are going to make it the best \$200 you ever spent." I was not entirely convinced this was necessary. I consider myself a seasoned camper and generally scoff at such effete luxuries as air mattresses and portable showers. But stumbling into camp with the last rays of the setting sun—after an arduous climb through pristine forest, over rocky gorges and past thundering waterfalls—to be greeted with a steaming Bhutanese sundowner of rum, hot

water and honey, I began to rethink my approach. By the time dinner was served (on china and by a chef in a white jacket), I knew I would never be able to go back to the days of Primus stoves again. My printed menu read, "chicken Madras, gingered potatoes and seasonal vegetables with fresh cheese." The seasonal vegetables were chanterelles and fiddleheads picked by the chef en route. I wasn't even sure I wanted to make it to Thimphu."



BHUTAN - BY HASHIM TYABJI

As the aircraft banks sharply into the Paro Valley, you catch a flashing view of the sacred peak of Chomolhari glistening white against the picture post-card blue of a Himalayan sky. It's set back on the Tibetan border but that's not too far from where our pilot has seemingly detected a target for a kamikaze mission. Losing height rapidly (that's the non-hysterical version of 'plunging dive') we skim over golden fields to touch down far more sedately than had seemed possible a few minutes ago. Flying into Paro airport from Kolkatta is probably the greatest contrast of any non-stop flight. As you get off the aircraft, the first thing you notice is the complete lack of the usual airport clutter, the freshness in the air, the CLEANLINESS. Back in 1921 the Earl of Ronaldshay described his arrival in Bhutan (by more earthbound transport) thusly, "With our passage through the bridge, behold a curious transformation. For just as Alice, when she walked through the looking-glass, found herself in a new and whimsical world, so we, when we crossed the Pa-chhu, found ourselves, as though caught up on some magic time machine fitted fantastically with a reverse, flung back across the centuries into the feudalism of a medieval age", and walking towards the terminal building, singularly lacking in the numbing dreary sameness of modern airports, you realize that things, possibly, haven't changed that much.

And that's the thing about Bhutan – this comfortable, unfussy uniqueness that pervades every aspect of life here. From the traditional gho and kira that the people must wear, to the architecture, to the scenery and the food which, to the scalded and stupefied foreigner appears to consist primarily of chillies with meat, cheese or vegetable tossed in to provide a bit of body, to the pragmatism with which they pull in whichever bits of whichever century they find useful without worrying too much about modernity or whatever. Once, on a trip to Chheri Gompa at the head of the Wang Chhu river a couple of hours beyond Thimphu, we found a yak train bringing in ginseng from the mountains along an age-old trading route that winds its way down from the high alpine meadows through dense temperate evergreen and semi-evergreen forest. As the beautifully decorated yaks trailed in to the road-head a cavalcade of modern Japanese cars swept up the well-maintained road from Thimphu and from the lead car emerged a monk of some antiquity who was promptly loaded onto a palanquin to be carried up the steep slope to the monastery. It was the retired Head Abbot or Je Khenpo of Bhutan, the second most important individual in the kingdom after the monarch; an office dating back almost a thousand years to the Shabdrung or Great Unifier who gave Bhutan its present distinctive national identity.



Chheri Gompa is superbly located above the clear rushing waters of the Wang Chhu –but so is almost every other dzong or gompa in the country. Dominating the Paro Valley is the symmetrical bulk of the Rinpung or Paro Dzong – a massive white building with inward sloping walls perched majestically in the sun atop a spur above the sparkling Paro River which is itself spanned by a beautiful prayer flag festooned wooden bridge of traditional design. From behind a line of willow trees raucous cries and not very tuneful singing indicate an archery contest. As we wander over, we are met by the astonishing sight of men standing in FRONT of the targets taunting the opposing team and trying to distract them. This is not quite as suicidal as it appears: for one thing they only try it with traditional bamboo bows and not with the more powerful compound bows that everyone is switching over to these days and the opposing targets are a good 120 yards apart so it does give one time to get out of the way. But still.....



No matter what your expectations, it would be a fair bet that the country will match them. Only 700,000 people in a country the size of Switzerland; 71% forest; a diversity of life that is simply staggering although it is most apparent in the flora, the insects and the birds. One evening, on a trip in December, we were feeling our way up to a pass in thick fog with the weird and wonderful shapes of trees draped in snow and ice coalescing out of the murk, when a magnificent Monal pheasant strutted onto the road and displayed himself a few yards away for all the time we were there. It was my first sighting of this bird which is the national bird of Nepal known as the Danphe or the Bird of Nine Colours. Just then 3 females were seen and my cup brimmed over. We reached our destination, Gante, in the snowy dark at 5.15 in the evening. The hotel was basic, located in the shadow of the monastery and within earshot of the cries of the Blacknecked cranes that had brought me here.

I spent the night in all my warm clothes immobilized by the iron weight of several dense quilts and woke to a thinning fog in the half-light of dawn. We drove down 15 minutes to the beautiful Phobjikha Valley, the marshy bottom of which is the winter home to about 120-150 of these cranes, counted amongst the rarest in the world. It was spectacular and as we walked over a narrow log that served as a bridge over a muddy depression. I saw the fresh tracks of a large male leopard etched sharp in the frost. Even my unimpressable guide seemed excited. Sadly we didn't see the owner of the tracks. But the cranes were enough and I eventually counted 120 spread in small and large groups over the valley floor with the attractive farm houses and quilted fields climbing up the gentle slopes to the forest which dominates the entire Bhutanese landscape.



This is one country in this chaotic part of the world that's got its act together. A benevolent and beloved monarch; great pride in their religion, history and culture; a sane attitude towards development; serious attention towards education and health and an over-riding emphasis on their environment which they see as the key to their future. The landscape is beautiful and the architecture embellishes it. All the old monastery-forts (called Dzongs) are still in use as administrative centres and they are magnificent affairs. This is a country utterly at home with the 21st century but supremely comfortable with its past and seemingly able, far better than the rest of us, to knit tradition with modernity in a seamless continuum. In a country whose primary export is electricity, we watched the preliminary preparations of a religious festival in a monastery in Bumthang. It was at night and the scene could have been from a



thousand years before, from a "world lit only by fire". The Abbot, in gorgeous robes watched his monks by flickering firelight and the strobe effects of the flashes of tourist cameras, perform the precise steps of dances that are a form of worship for the Bhutanese – in this case designed to cleanse the area of evil spirits for the ceremonies of the morrow, for spirits co-exist comfortably with the internet here and are seemingly equally whimsical.

Change is inevitable of course and it's coming to Bhutan as well. But they seem to be able to regulate the pace, so it gives them time to judge what to keep and what to discard, what to change and what to cherish. Maybe the fact that there are no overwhelming crowds, that there is space and wilderness and clean air and sparkling rivers, is clouding my judgement but every time I think of Bhutan I break out into a rash of superlatives. I hope it's never going to be too late to go to Bhutan but there's never going to be a better time than right now.

## MALDIVES – COCOA ISLAND – HEAVEN ON EARTH

The Maldives are some of the most captivatingly beautiful islands in the world, providing escapist fantasy for even the most jaded traveller! The Maldives represents hedonism personified – from minimalist, cutting edge design, to Robinson Crusoe retreats, for honeymooners, to families – there is something for everyone.

In this issue, we concentrate on Christina Ong's Cocoa Island. Situated just forty minutes away from Male by speedboat, one arrives at this ultimate desert island retreat. This is one of the smallest lodges, with just 33 contemporary, timber dhoni suites (replicated Maldivian fishing vessels), moored along a beach boardwalk. The dhoni's are, in fact, over water villas for which the Maldives has become best known. The whole experience is about living close to the water. Each villa has its own private verandah with steps leading directly to the gin-clear waters of the Maldivian sea. Each suite is stylish, cool, uncluttered and ocean facing – the rooms are light and airy, their inspiration drawn from south Indian and colonial furniture, using local fabrics, light white cottons and traditional colours and the rooms are also air conditioned and have CD players and a mini bar. The rooms are situated so one can either take advantage of the most incredible sunsets, or sunrise (depending if one is an early morning person, or not!).

Cocoa Island has a range of accommodation to suit everyone, from 2 bedroom villas, to 1 bedroom villas, loft villas (they have expansive living areas and spacious sundecks extending over the Indian Ocean and an outdoor shower). The rooms are also larger and then they have the loft suites and the dhoni suites. Cocoa Island provides some of the best diving in the Maldives, and includes an on-site dive centre, allowing one to take advantage of the extensive marine life, including various sharks, eagle rays and octopus and there is also excellent snorkelling, windsurfing, catamaraning and canoeing. The coral is excellent here, too, being in the Kandooma channel. This is simplicity as its best. And for those of us who love good food, you will have entered a gourmet's paradise in the shape of Australian chef Stana Johnson, who has taken dining to an exceptional level, concentrating on locally caught seafood

and fresh local produce. There are no set times for meals – which I simply adore. The whole place is very informal, no shoes, and kikois are the order of the day, although those who would like to dress up in the evening will not feel out of place.

Lastly, one cannot fail to mention the heavenly spa, the Shambhala Retreat – with the most incredibly fresh and rejuvenating gels and creams which they produce under their own name, rivalling any of the finest French spa houses. They have a meditation area, complete with swings and seating areas, for one to get away and switch off from modern day pressures. The three massage pavilions afford magnificent views across the ocean. Included is a daily session of yoga, meditation and movement. They offer massages based along Asian principles, which restore vitality and rejuvenate one entirely. This has been one of the hardest places to leave....



**SHOWS: The Ponds, Salisbury, Wiltshire 17th June, House and Garden, London 29th June-3rd July and Holkham Country Fair, Norfolk 16th-17th July.**



Afex House, Holwell, Burford, Oxfordshire OX18 4JS

Tel: 01993 822443 Fax: 01993 822414

Email: safaris@globalnet.co.uk www.explorationcompany.com