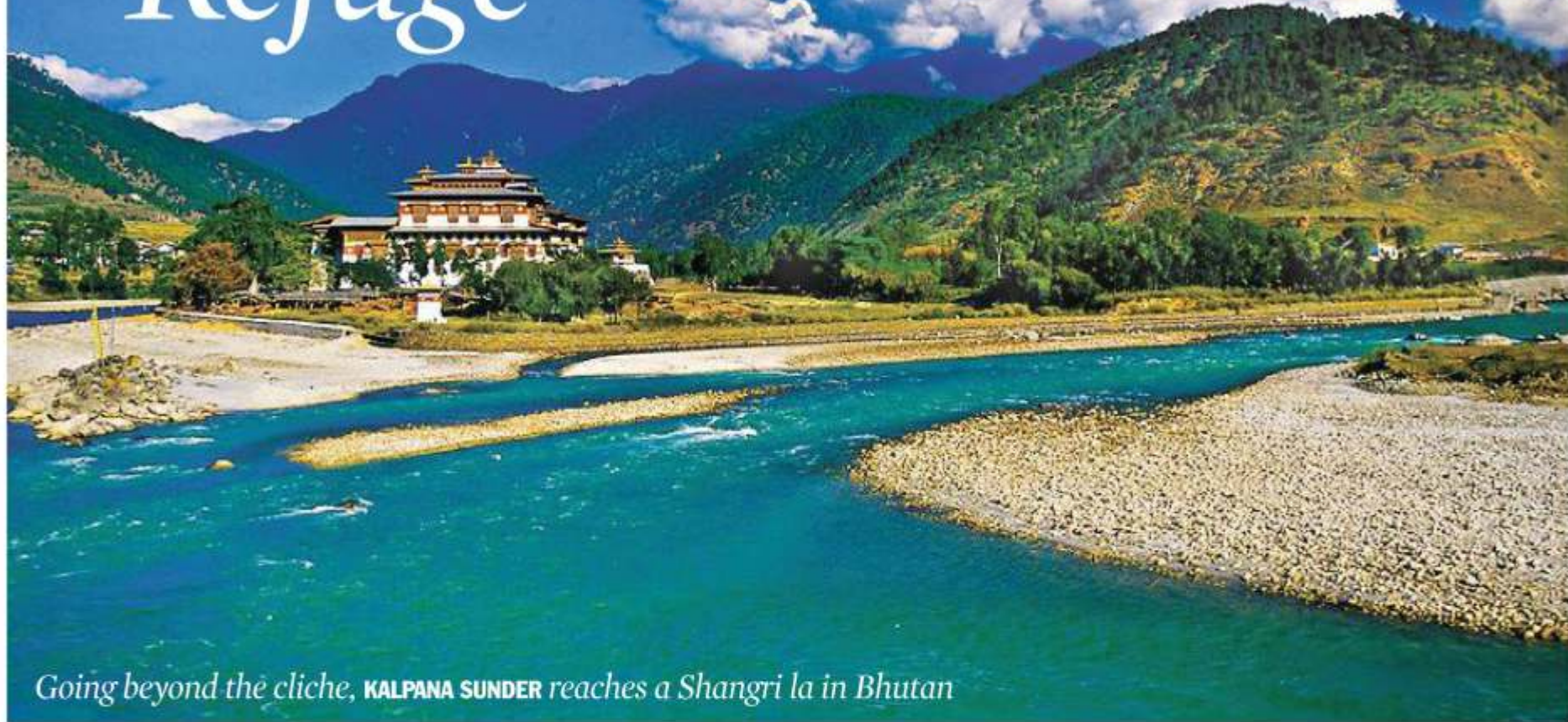


A DISTANT Refuge



Going beyond the cliché, **KALPANA SUNDER** reaches a Shangri la in Bhutan

Long ago, while growing up, my favourite book was James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the wondrous story of four men whisked away to a magical land hidden among the mountains called Shangri La. The flight that vaults me into Bhutan reminds me of that story—it is nothing short of breathtaking with the world's highest mountains, Everest and K2, literally at your window. It is the perfect antidote to the deadline-obsessed city dweller's life.

After the sky has made its statement to the traveller, Bhutan's roads are tortuous and few and far between. We careen past rows and rows of terraced rice fields, taking perilous hairpin bends, all along entranced by the views of the snow-covered mountains disappearing into wispy cotton wool clouds.

The land is alive with spiritual power: I feel it in the wind that whips up the prayer flags; in the prayer wheels that are turned by the power of water; in the serenity on the face of countless Buddha statues and in the guileless smile of a tribal woman. Paradise does not come cheap. Bhutan follows a tourism policy of 'high value, low volume' and charges a minimum tariff which keep out backpackers.

The country which was in self-imposed isolation was opened up in stages: television and Internet arrived only in 1999 and cell-phones in 2003. Even today there are only a handful of luxury hotels. The country still has no tall buildings, no pollution, no super highways or even bill board advertising.

We drive through slivers of pockmarked roads amidst daunting terrain to the Punakha Valley, which is known as the 'rice bowl' of the country. I see old men carrying improbable loads and cheerful women from the remote nomadic tribe called Layaks who are yak herders in treacherous altitudes greeting the traveller with smiling faces. They move to warmer villages in the winter and offer free labour in return for

shelter. Our home away from home is the boutique property Uma Punakha, with its polished timber floors and fireplaces, its architecture combining Japanese minimalism with hand-painted Bhutanese designs on walls and ceilings. The view of the Pho Chhu river is panoramic from the open plan restaurant leading to a balcony with clay heaters. I visit the photogenic Punakha Dzong fortress—the winter home of the monks—that stands at the confluence of the pale blue glacial waters of the Mo Chhu and Po Chhu rivers. Punakha Dzong is where Bhutan's kings are crowned, and the Thimphu monks, along with their abbot, spend their winters. Crossing a small cantilevered bridge, I reach the entrance to the Dzong with a steep flight of wooden stairs—a sort of drawbridge that was designed to be pulled up 'in case of attack'. I look up to see enormous bee hives clinging to the rafters. In the yard, a cherry blossom tree was preening with pink flowers. Inside the 17th

century building, I marvel at the intricately carved gold, orange and black coloured windows of the huge structure built so long ago without 'any written plans or nails'. I am entranced by the Great Hall with its gargantuan Cyprus pillars gilded with brass large panels of murals depicting the life of the Buddha, along with huge gilded statues of Zhabdrung who unified the country and Guru Rinpoche who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century. Over the centuries the Dzong barely survived depredation by floods, earthquakes and more recently by flash flood in 1994. Legions of craftsmen worked on its renovation under the King Jigme Singye's private supervision.

In an austere Buddhist nation where public demonstration of affection is frowned upon, I am amazed to see phallic symbols painted on the facades of homes. My guide Ugyen Tshering tells me the story of the maverick monk, Drukpa Kunley—or the Divine Madman—who shocked the staid

clergy with his exploits with women and became the symbol of fertility. The temple of fertility or Chimi Lhakhang is on the wish list of women who want to conceive. From the village of Sopsokha, I walk along a dirt road, crossing wheat fields, and timber houses with strips of meat and bundles of scarlet chillies drying in the sun. I huff and puff my way up a small conical hill to the temple. I peek into the smoky altar where currency, fruits and flowers lie in front of Drukpa Kunley's statue along with bowls of holy water, peacock feathers. I am surprised by the motley contents of baskets of offerings; cream biscuits, chocolates, fruit juices, even packets of Maggi noodles. My guide tells me that the food is distributed to the needy after the ceremonies. I play with the child monks who are barely eight or nine and are learning to chant even before they have learnt to spell. One is cuddling a kitten playfully while several others play games on their mobile phones.

Bhutan's modulated isolation has not been able to prevent the inevitable tryst with modernity. I hear the brash ring tones of a mobile phone, and Ugyen tells me that even on remote treks he gets good cellphone reception. There are pirated DVDs on sale in Thimphu's shops and I hear people's tales about how the advent of TV has spoiled domestic life. I visit a small night club in the picayune town of Khurutang, and see young Bhutanese—boys in tight jeans and spiky hairdos and girls in short skirts—fuelled on Red Panda beer, gyrating and dancing the night away. But when I come back to my hotel room, I hear only the lulling sounds of the river and the wind whispering in the trees. I soak in a traditional hot stone bath infused with camphor leaves, and I feel that I am in a sanctuary, in the calm of a storm, insulated from the real world. Does Shangri La exist? I don't know, but if it does, this really is as close to it as you can get.

