



Trek to Rigsum Gompa

The circular trek from and to Trashi Yangtse town meanders through terraced rice fields on the slopes of rushing rivers, lush green meadows and forests offering panoramic view of rural Bhutan. It also takes visitors to holy places associated with Guru Rinpoche viz, imprints of his hair, the pool where he bathed, the rock where he prayed and the Rigsum Gompa - the temple of three gods - Compassion, Power and Knowledge.

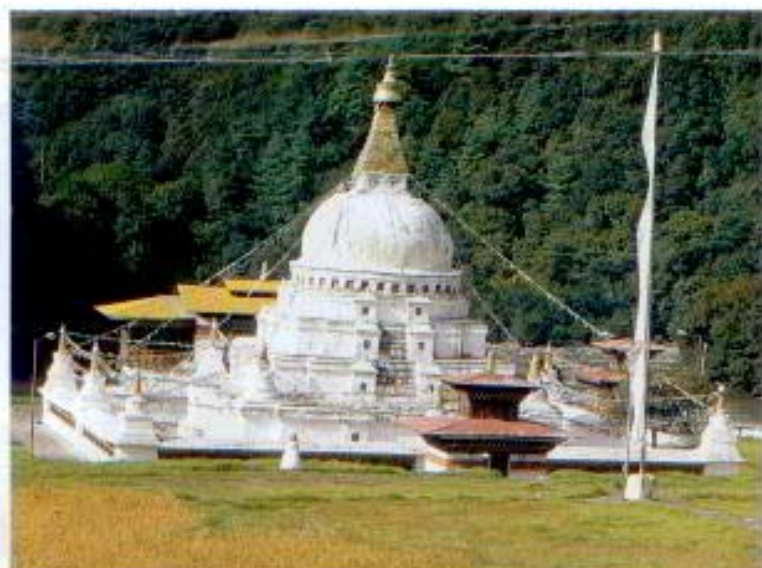
In their neat little gowns chequered purple and pink, the children stood at the school gate framed in dahlias and marigolds, staring at the first 'white lady' allowed to trek through the village, complete with guide, porters and cooks. Minutes later, we were invited to step into the classroom, glance through homework books and write a few words of encouragement on the board. Honoured by our presence, teachers and children spoke their best English, respectfully covering their mouth to avoid polluting the air.

Our three day circular trek had started in Trashi Yangtse, a pretty town tucked away in a remote valley in eastern Bhutan where rice terraces glow green and gold on the slopes and prayer





Above: Rigsum Gumpa
Left: A suspension bridge



Left Top: Chorten Kora
Above: The Kuilong river
Left: A forest on the way
Left Bottom: Guru Rinpoche site



wheels tinkle above the crystal clear rushing river. It was a bright October morning and we were soon climbing above the glinting roofs of Trashi Yangtse Dzong, the old fortified monastery guarding the valley. Yellow and blue butterflies fluttered along the path while now and then the breeze rustled through rhododendrons or the long luminous needles of a lonely chir pine. Snaking up and down in true Himalayan style, the trail meandered through forests and lush meadows, with distant views of the Melum La (Melum pass) and glimpses of peaceful rural life. Here a farmer and his wife on their way to market, there a young girl harvesting millet, a red-robed lama striding to a puja, an old lady fetching dead wood for the fire and the children returning to their lessons. Red chillies dried on tin roofs.

Was it lunch time already? We stopped by a waterfall, picnicking on red rice and beans before crossing the river on a swaying suspension bridge and setting up camp in Dechen Phodrang, a holy place at the head of the valley, visited long ago by Guni Rinpoche. There, in the shadow



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of a giant cypress tree, we peeped into the meditation cave, surrounded by strange-shaped boulders, rocks and piles of stone phalluses balancing on top, and when the moon rose in a starlit sky, we slept blissfully, lulled by the sound of tumbling waters and spinning prayer wheels.

When morning came, the fragrance of incense hovered along the bank and the local lama rushed to greet us, keen to show the sacred sites in the nearby jungle. Bubbling with excitement, he bounded like a deer from one place to the next, pointing out imprints of the Guru's hair, the pool where he bathed and the rock where he prayed. There was even a miraculous spring in the temple, running in times of drought, and the air was thick

with prayers and prostrations.

With the gods definitely on our side, we set off at last for Rigsum Gompa, a fair walk beyond the steep densely wooded hills. As we left the open meadows, cow bells vanished into the distance and the forest creaked and groaned all around us. Who knew what lurked in the undergrowth? Boar, bear, leopard? We had seen the huts on stilts from where farmers keep watch over their crops at night, and the wayside offerings to ward off evil. There was not the slightest danger, we were told, but we let the porters go ahead just in case. Up or down, the path was slippery and wet, crisscrossed by myriad streams, and the gompa remained teasingly out of sight





Left Top: A farmer and his wife

Above: A camp at Dechen Phodrang

Left: Porters accompanying the author

almost until dark. Hemlock trees towered high above us, festooned with orchids, and leeches wriggled in the mud at our feet. Then when we least expected it, the monastery appeared on a ridge far away, drifting through the mist like a promised land.

We cooked and slept in the monks' guesthouse, four walls and a bare floor but a solid roof over our heads, and woke to a fresh sprinkling of snow on the pass. At nearly 3,000 metres, the air was cold and crisp. The first rays of the sun swept across the mountain tops. Boy monks shuffled in the courtyard and the Temple of the Three Gods - Rigsum Gompa stirred to daily prayers, offered to the

popular deities of Compassion, Power and Knowledge, Guru Rinpoche and 1,000 Buddhas on the walls. Butter lamps flickered in the semi-darkness, fresh water gleamed in the silver bowls and the mountains rose in a silvery dawn, ridge after ridge as far as we could see.

Suddenly, the clouds rolled in, thick and dark, rain drummed on the roof though seconds later, the sun was out and a luminous rainbow glistened across the sky.

It was an auspicious start to our last day and as we began the long descent down to the bridge, we often glanced back, drawn again and again by the Temple of the Three Gods, all alone in the wilderness, and its cluster of prayer

flags sending blessings to the people in the valley. Now the forest closed in - walnut and oak, bamboo, hemlock, pine, rhododendron and violets, daphne plants, golden bell-flowers and drumhead primula lining the path and magpies and crickets

singing in the trees. We had reached the Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary where far below, the rare black-necked cranes from Tibet winter on the sandbanks of the Kulong river. They arrive in huge flocks in early November so we were too early to see them but Bumdeling was delightful, the perfect place to dip your toes in the water or draw romantic patterns in the sand, in the company of flitting wagtails and an inquisitive but friendly black bull. A lady from the village brought a giant cucumber to add to our lunch, a kind and delicious gift, and we watched dozens of farmers harvesting rice while horses grazed on the remaining stalks. We could have stayed all day but down the valley, beyond the paper-making workshop and its garden draped in geraniums, Trashi Yangtse beckoned, picturesque and peaceful, blessed by the white stupas of Chorten Kora mirrored in the river, on the edge of the golden paddies. ☀

Text & Photographs: Solange Hando
The author is a freelance travel writer based in Kent, UK. For further information, visit www.blazepgpbhutan.com

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Head Office: Chundudingkh, Paro - Bhutan. Tel: 975-8-271465/271462
Fax: 271206 E-mail: drukseed@druknet.bt