



# Thangbi

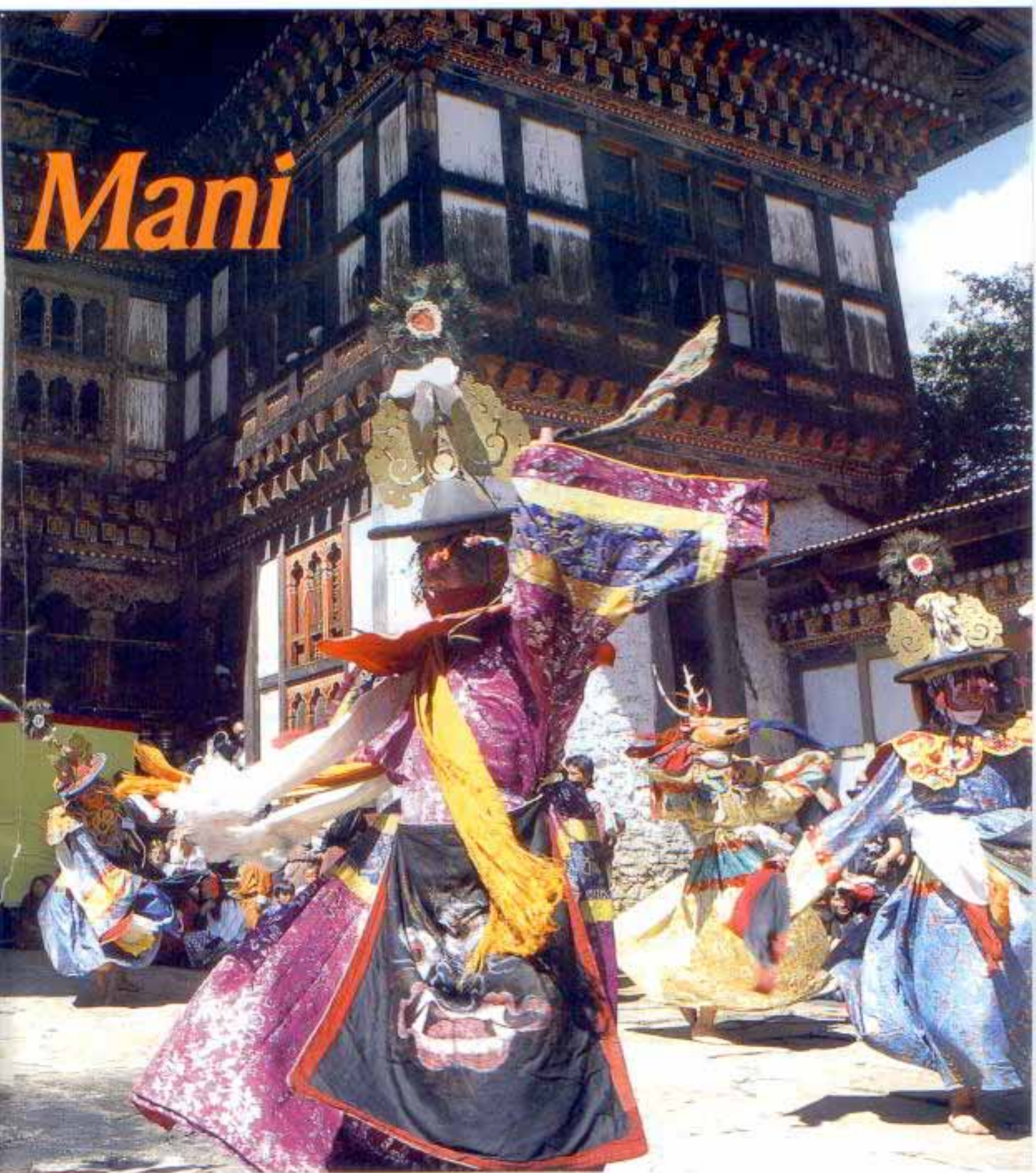
Once a year Thangbi Monastery in Bumthang valley holds one of the kingdom's most colourful festival known as *fire blessing* or a *purification rite*. In the presence of numerous devotees a monk sets fire to haystacks. Devotees run through the flames and smoke to cleanse themselves of their sins and ensure good luck for the coming year.

**D**ripped in silk and hand-woven gowns shimmering like rainbows, town folk and farmers came from all directions, women with babies bobbing on their back, old people leaning on bamboo staffs, men in knee-length chequered *gho* with sweeping white cuffs and *tashe*, and gaggle of children whose dark eyes sparkled with excitement. They walked up the valley or tumbled down the pine-scented slopes to cross the bridge. Meanwhile in the temple, monks offered fresh water to the gods and butter lamps flickered in the morning light. Something passed through the air, expectation and fear all in one, as on this second day of the festival, crowds gathered for the important blessing.

Tucked beyond the Yutong La pass in central Bhutan, Bumthang is a fertile land, wide and open to the wind. Rising from 2,600 metres high snow-capped



# Mani





highlands, Bumthang is the spiritual heart of the country, comprising four beautiful valleys dotted with temples and holy sites. In the 15th century, when Shamar Rinpoche arrived from Tibet, he set up the Thangbi Monastery on a lush plateau north of Jakar, leaving it, after a dispute, in the hands of Pema Lingpa, a local saint and artist and ancestor of the royal family. Fearsome deities and Bodhisattvas adorn the sanctuary and once a year in autumn, Thangbi holds one of the kingdom's most colourful and dramatic festivals.

Full of anticipation, we joined the faithful pouring into the courtyard for the welcome

dance. The village girls in their best finery shuffled on the flagstones to the rhythm of long horns and drums. There was much chanting and praying, and incense smoke rising through the air, until suddenly everyone rushed towards the gate, led by dignitaries, lama and red-robed monks.

Dazzled by the kaleidoscope of colours and sounds, we had hardly noticed the two haystacks waiting ominously in the nearby field. They stood just feet apart and as more blessings rose under a deep blue sky, an eerie silence fell upon the crowds. All was set for the fire blessing, a purification rite and highlight of the year. A human chain was ready to break loose at the first spark. Watched by thousands of men and women, an official ignited the hay and the flames shot up, burning smoke and ash filled the air. In one massive surge, young and old moved forward, running through the fire to cleanse their sins and ensure good luck for the coming year. Friends dragged each other through, toddlers held on to their mothers, fell, got up, men pulled up their collars to protect their hair. Overcome by the heat, I stepped back, stunned, caught up in



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unrivalled frenzy, but not brave enough to run through the fire. I kept my sins.

'I did it, three times,' called out my young guide.

She looked as good as new, bubbling all over, all set for a fresh start. The flames died down as quickly as they started and great clouds of smoke drifted downstream, bearing witness to a faith much stronger than pain. Prayer wheels tinkled along the banks, flags fluttered in the breeze and now, in the valley sprinkled with apple trees and nodding buckwheat, the harvest would be good and the children healthy.

Like a sleepwalker, I ambled back to the courtyard where masked dancers twirled barefoot on sun-baked stones while cymbals and gongs echoed across the hills. Hoisted on the wall for a better view, toddlers munching sunflower seeds, monks took shelter from the midday heat



under makeshift awnings and families gathered around home-made offerings of narigold and clay phalluses, as if nothing unusual had happened at all. A favourite moment was the sharing of chapattis in the offering dance when every hand was held out for a lucky scrap. I followed suit, among grinning skulls and fierce demons from the underworld, pouncing all around in a

flurry of multi-coloured brocade and 'thunderbolt steps'.

'Time for lunch', chirped Chimmi and with undisguised relief, I escaped for a break and a breath of fresh air on the river bank. The haystacks had vanished, leaving just a patch of singed grass. We sat with the locals picnicking in the shade. They had carried with them giant flasks of butter tea, red rice, green vegetables and chillies in cheese sauce. The last mini bus took visitors back to Jakar but we lingered on and explored the small fair at the gate where handicrafts and toy plastic guns jostled with clothes and second-hand shoes. Children washed the empty bowls in the babbling stream. The crows circling overhead swooped down for picnic spoils. A handful of youngmen tested their skill with bow and arrow - the national sport of Bhutan. The girls cheered and the

monks watched. The smell of buckwheat noodles and pancakes hovered around the food stalls.

'Shall we stay for the afternoon?'

No more flames, just time to relax, I thought, and stepped back to medieval days with jesters and tales of gallant heroes. Even the guard at the gate was smiling, still waving a bunch of stinging nettles, his only weapon to keep peace and ensure respect. Next to me, a mother breastfed her baby while a little boy with a ravenous appetite slurped up the last brown noodles out of the pot. The crowds rolled with laughter when the *Attaras* appeared, chasing each other around the courtyard, all pinsoettes and leaps to tease the pretty girls, dangling rope phalluses in front of their eyes, and hurling stones which soon



had us on our toes, ready to run.

That night in the lodge, I performed my own purifying rites in a traditional hot stone bath and as I gazed at the holy thread tied around my wrist, I knew the Thangbi Mani had worked its wonders. I was ready to delve much deeper into this

amazing kingdom and next time, who knows, I may be brave enough to run through the flames.

*Text & Photographs: Solange Hande  
The author travelled with Blue Pippie Tours  
and Treks ([www.bluepippiebhutan.com](http://www.bluepippiebhutan.com)).*

