

THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



NUMBER 51

PRESIDENT: SIR SIMON BOWES LYON

WINTER 2013

Forthcoming Meeting

"A Brush with Bhutan"

at 7pm on Wednesday, 15 January, 2014

Speaker: Tim Scott Bolton



Tim Scott Bolton is a widely travelled artist especially in the East. He has had many exhibitions on India and the Arab world in London and has future plans for one on Bhutan. Many of his paintings are in private collections, including those of Her Majesty The Queen, the National Trust and Mrs. Paul Getty.

He is a lively and amusing speaker but also speaks passionately about art and conservation. He will illustrate the talk with his own work and photographs of his travels. Last March he and a small band of intrepid 60 to 70 year olds were the first non-locals to walk from Sakteng to Merak that year.

The meeting will be held at the Polish Hearth Club, 55 Prince's Gate, Exhibition Road London SW7 2PN

It is possible to book dinner after the talk in the Club-Restaurant downstairs, but it must be booked ahead. Please contact Programme Secretary, Dorothea von Friesen if you wish to make a dinner reservation at:

dorotheafriesen@gmail.com

Drinks will be available from 6.30 pm

The Wangduephodrang Dzong Appeal – Update

As reported in the last Newsletter, the generosity of Society's members and friends has resulted in over £12,000 being collected for The King's Appeal for the Reconstruction of Wangduephodrang Dzong. A wonderful result!

In Bhutan plans for the reconstruction and restoration are gaining pace. A debate on whether the Dzong should be rebuilt in traditional or rather in a modern style have been resolved, and the decision made - no doubt to the relief of many - is to rebuild in traditional Bhutanese style.

Issues have also emerged regarding the funding of the project, and it now appears that India will fund the actual rebuilding of the Dzong as part of its financial contribution to Bhutan's 11th five-year plan. This means that monies donated by well-wishers both within and outside Bhutan will be dedicated to the internal furnishings, decoration and artefacts - those aspects that form the very 'heart and soul' of the Dzong.

DIARY DATE

Those who attended the Annual Dinner will have enjoyed meeting some of the Bhutanese students currently in the UK. In early 2014 there will an opportunity to hear even more from them as a few of the students have agreed to make a brief presentation about their visit and studies here and how they plan to use their new found expertise when they return to Bhutan.

This will be a fascinating meeting and a chance to share the diverse professional interests and aspirations of our visiting students. The provisional date for this meeting is Tuesday 25 February 2014. More details will follow soon.

SOCIETY NEWS

ANNUAL DINNER MEETING

More than 70 members and their guests gathered to enjoy the Annual Dinner of the Society earlier this month. The dinner was held at The Polish Hearth Club in South Kensington, London. The Club was established during World War II as the London home of Polish airmen. The Club, which has been through a major refurbishment this summer, looked splendid and the catering team were busy ensuring that an enjoyable time was had by all. We were delighted that Bhutan's ambassador to the EU, HE Mr Sonam Tshong, and his wife were able to attend as our principal guests. Student guests included the first three Bhutanese to attend the Pestalozzi International Village Trust in Sussex - they arrived only a month ago.

Bhutan Nuns Foundation Visit

"30 years ago it was difficult for a woman or a girl to find a nunnery." says Anim Wangmo, a Bhutanese nun, "Nowadays there are 26 nunneries."

Bhutan has a population of 700,000 and, while Bhutan's monk community is 10,000 strong, the nuns' community numbers only 1,000. Women and girls enter to follow a spiritual path but also as a refuge from poverty, abuse or because of old age or because they are orphans.

Four Bhutanese nunneries are supported by well known Spiritual Teachers (Rinpoches) in the country and three are supported by the Central Monastic Body of Bhutan. However, many nuns in Bhutanese nunneries live without adequate nutrition, sanitation and education.

The Bhutan Nuns Foundation (BNF) was set up in 2009 under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck and is the only organization set up to support Bhutanese nunneries. Its goal is to provide basic needs, training and support to the nuns as well as providing a network to enable them to share experiences and to support one other. At the core of the programme, the BNF is building a training and resource centre, which will be the first of its kind in Bhutan and will provide essential training such as health, hygiene, nutrition and education. It will be open to all nuns in Bhutan and will eventually have international exchange programmes.

The BNF has already made great progress in helping nunneries, some of which are in very remote areas without road access. And with more than 1,000 Buddhist organisations and centres in the UK, the BNF wishes to raise awareness about the nuns' plight and create a strong connection with the UK.



Dr Tashi Zangmo, Anim Wangmo and Meme Watanabe during their visit this summer

Dr. Tashi Zangmo and Anim Wangmo gave a series of talks around the UK during the summer including one at a Society meeting in London in July 2013.

"We've met a vast spectrum of people from lay Buddhists, serious practitioners and many interested in Bhutan's culture. It has been a wonderful experience and we hope that the seeds that have been planted will continue to grow and create strong connections."

The next exciting project by the BNF is the First International Buddhist Nuns' Conference in Bhutan from 13 to 16 December 2013. Both national and international nuns will be taking part in this conference to inspire, empower and exchange ideas. This will be an integral step towards international awareness and support. More information is available on the BNF website www.bhutannuns.org

Photographer and journalist Marie Venø Thesbjerg has produced a stunning photo book of the nuns in Bhutan. Proceeds of £20 (plus pp) from the sale of her book will be donated to the BNF. More details from: www.womenofbuddha.com

NEWS REPORT

Bhutan farmer wins World Food Day Award

In a ceremony in Bangkok, Thailand last week, Bhutanese farmer, Sithar Dendup, was one of the farmers who received a FAO's World Food Day Model Farmer Award. It was in recognition of his water management and teaching contributions to the environment and agriculture sector in Bhutan. Dendup lives in the village of Thangbuang Tsamang in the Mongar district and is an active caretaker of a water users group. He says he "takes a keen interest in water management, including watershed improvement, irrigation water distribution, canal maintenance and drinking water supply." He is also the spokesperson for a Farmers Group and for several hours after work and farm chores are finished, he teaches illiterate farmers in his village how to read and write. Dendup was naturally alarmed when he learned that a school-feeding program in his area run by the World Food Programme would be phased out in 2018. He believes that nutrition and food security for the children of Thanguang Tsamang will surely deteriorate and something needed to be done.



Sithar Dendup(far left) in Bangkok along with other farmers who received the FAO World Food Day Model Farmer Award

When the FAO came to his village with the idea of establishing one of its Farm-to-School projects, Dendup, as a farmer and a teacher, was very excited about the school-feeding program that involved the community

producing enough food for local children.

Whilst there was normally little or no surplus to sell at markets or for the schools, it was quite a challenge, but Dendup believed that if they worked together, pooled their labour and, with FAO's help, they could improve both quantity and quality of local produce. So Dendup formed a Farmers Group and they began working communally on 25-acres of soil, growing a wider variety of vegetables than ever before. They also cultivated rice and planted fruit trees for a better diet, nutrition and food security.

With his knowledge of water management, Dendup also led an effort to lay irrigation pipes to the communal farm. Yields and quality immediately began to improve. The farmers soon began selling surplus produce at local markets and were also able to supply vegetables at a lower cost to the Tsamang Primary School and its 130 students.

German visa application office opens in Bhutan

To cater to the increasing number of people travelling to Germany from Bhutan, a German Visa Application office has just been inaugurated at the Etho Metho office in Thimphu.

The initiative aims to offer new services, facilities and benefits to visa applicants and to boost tourism, trade and investment. It is hoped it will also enhance bilateral relations between the two countries.

The Visa Application Centre will accept visa applications for Germany only from Bhutanese applicants. "Before this facility became available, all Bhutanese wishing to travel to Germany had first to go to Delhi to apply for a visa, which incurred additional costs," said the Ambassador of Germany to India, Michael Steiner. This new Centre, which will be operational from December, will ease the problem.

Book on women's participation and leadership in politics launched

Her Royal Highness Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck, launched in Thimphu last month an educational research book titled, "Raise Your Hand: Bhutan's First Elected Women Leaders".

The book has been designed as a supplementary resource book for high school students. It talks about women's participation and leadership in politics and governance and includes stories of some 30 elected women leaders from parliamentary and local government elections in Bhutan. The book aims to inspire young women to become leaders.



NEWS FROM THE

Premiere Opera Performance

The World Premiere performance of a new original production of Handel's opera "Acis and Galatea," was performed in the courtyard of the Royal Textile Academy in Thimphu on Saturday October 14th. It was the first time a live performance of an opera in all of its dimensions had been staged in Bhutan and it involved singers, musicians, dancers, costume designers and other artists from Bhutan and abroad. Collaboration among artists and other professionals from approximately ten countries including Bhutan, took nearly a decade.



Singers and artists during rehearsal

Preston T Scott, the Project Coordinator, said, "the special feature of this production of "Acis and Galatea" is the fusion between Bhutanese music, dance and culture with western opera. New instruments which have never been played before in Bhutan will be played for the first time in the country." The participating artists from abroad began arriving in Bhutan from Sept 24 for the final rehearsal together with their Bhutanese counterparts.. Handel's "Acis and Galatea" is based on an ancient myth that celebrates the triumph of compassion and goodness over anger, greed, and ignorance. It is an ancient story from Ovid's Metamorphoses that was later turned into an

opera by Handel. The University of Texas at El Paso (USA) sponsored the project to celebrate the nearly 100 years of respect and friendship with the people and culture of Bhutan. Assistance was also provided by the Smithsonian Institution (Centre of Folk life and Cultural Heritage) and support also came from Australia, Italy and the Netherlands.

Exit surveys record same old complaints

As usual, bad road conditions, lack of public restrooms, waste management and hotel-related issues topped the list of complaints from over 10,500 international tourists who visited the country last year. In all exit surveys carried out by the tourism council every year, these have been the main issues highlighted by international tourists for improvement for the past few years. While 21 percent said roads must be improved, 15 percent wanted improved waste management, having come across litter strewn in shopping areas, pedestrian walkways and in rivers. As a destination with no other mode of land transfer, many indicated that better roads were required to justify the country's image as a "high-end" destination. Visitors also complained about the lack of public toilet facilities and restrooms along highways, trekking trails and campsites, apart from maintaining toilets located in or near temples, dzongs and restaurants.

In the past years, international banking facilities also topped the list of complaints from visitors. However, since last year, with international banking facilities in place, visitors with credit cards from major carriers, such as Mastercard and Visa, were able to use them to withdraw cash from ATMs in Bhutan. "This has significantly reduced complaints related to banking facilities," states the report.

The souvenir industry also came under criticism with little or no price regulation and innovation to suit the requirements of visitors. As in the past years, Bhutan continues to be a cultural destination, with about 99.26 percent of the tourists visiting on a cultural tour. Nature-based activities, such as trekking, bird watching, flora and fauna and adventure sports, accounted for 13.04 percent. However with the significant growth rates in arrivals from Asian markets which usually have shorter lengths of stay, the average length of stay now stands at 6.90 days, a slight decrease from 2011's 7.53 days.

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

The challenges facing the new Government



Michael Rutland with the new Prime Minister, Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay

The ballots have been tallied. A decision has been made and the citizens of Bhutan have elected change over continuity as its government for the next five years. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) won in 32 constituencies from the total of 47 seats leaving 15 seats for the former ruling government Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT). But winning the election is but crossing the first hurdle. The more daunting task that still lies ahead for PDP is to stand by their words and prove to the voters that they have voted in the right party. The 100-day pledge by PDP (see details below), which many view as an ambitious pledge would be the first test to which the new government will be

subjected. For the opposition's place, the 15 member DPT, with all its time tested leaders, will give the ruling government a run for its money in the parliament and on every decision it makes. Some consider the fulfilment of the pledges as not being a problem but sustaining them is considered to be an Herculean task.

Immediate pledges

- Will begin discussions with India to restart lottery business
- Will call on pay commission to revise pay and allowances of the civil service and local government leaders
- Will revise the Tenancy Act
- Will revise the National Minimum Wage Rate
- Will extend maternity leave of nine months for working mothers in addition to the existing leave of three months
- Will start ground work to build homes for the elderly near monasteries around the country and start allowance for senior citizens above 70 years of age
- Initiate an annual grant of Nu 2mmn for every gewog over and above the regular budget
- Do away with the pedestrian day rule
- Will introduce subsidized loan schemes for students to pursue higher studies and student discounts for public transport
- Will lift vehicle import ban for rural businesses and farmers.
- Initiate a youth employment policy to ensure full employment to our youth
- Will initiate scholarships in universities around the world
- Will develop a strategy to promote and develop import substitute products within the country
- Initiate a Meet-the-people program where all cabinet ministers including the PM will dedicate at least one day in a week to meet the people without appointment.
- Will establish a social media wing for Bhutanese across the globe to connect with the government
- Table the Right to Information [RTI] bill
- Establish three endowment funds - Art and Culture, Education and Research endowment and initiate rural posting allowances for civil servants.

NEWS AND UPDATES

A Royal wedding



The Royal family at the wedding of HRH Prince Jigme Dorji Wangchuck to Yeatso Lhamo

The wedding of His Royal Highness Prince Jigme Dorji Wangchuck to Yeatso Lhamo took place on October 17th at the Domkhar dzong in Chumig, Bumthang. HRH Prince Jigme Dorji Wangchuck is the son of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck and Her Majesty The Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck. Yeatso Lhamo is the

daughter of Dhondup Gyeltshen and Sonam Chuki, and she is also the elder sister of Her Majesty the Gyaltsuen.

From morning until evening Chamkhar town was almost deserted, as most of the local residents had gone to attend the wedding ceremony. They were also given an opportunity to offer khadar to the newly wed couple.

Challenges of collecting Cordyceps

As the snows begin to clear from the peaks in late May, farmers living in the higher regions of Bhutan head off on the long and arduous journey up to the remote mountain areas. They travel in groups, with their horses and mules, resting every once in a while and drinking hot tea to ward off the travel fatigue in this ultra thin mountain air. As they climb, the paths get more difficult and the temperature drops even lower. After about three gruelling days, they reach their destination. The reason for all this effort? The challenge of harvesting the very lucrative cordyceps mushrooms.

The cordyceps mushrooms have a long history as medicinal fungi. The earliest clear record is a Tibetan medical text in the 15th Century outlining the health and aphrodisiac properties of Yartsa gunbu (Cordyceps sinensis renamed now to Ophiocordyceps sinensis). Although there are repeated claims of thousands of years of use in traditional Chinese medicine, so far no clear textual source has surfaced. However more recent animal studies have provided preliminary support for some of the traditional medicinal uses and some varieties are a source of biochemicals with recognised pharmacological properties. Cordyceps is usually grown at an altitude of 6000 meters above sea level and it is believed that the variety found in Bhutan is of particularly good quality. Farmers are permitted to collect the plant from June 1 to 30 and the government charges a royalty of 10 percent from what farmers earn selling the cordyceps to the authorised buyers and exporters.



All the farmers have the same mission - that is to harvest as much cordyceps as possible and make a fortune. Last year, the price of cordyceps ranged between, Nu. 400,000 and Nu. 1,250,000 for a

kilogramme, all depending on the grade being sold. Cordyceps auctions in Bhutan hit an all time high this year with a total of 684.688 kilograms of the highly prized fungus being auctioned at various places. With a total earnings often in excess of Nu. 200,000 every season, many farmers and their families are taking risks that can have serious consequences. Medical clearance will be mandatory for cordyceps collectors from next year and medical certificates will need to be shown to the patrolling forest officials. The Director General of the Forest and Park Services Department, Chencho Norbu said, "people are not well informed about the risks associated with working under these conditions. We will soon be launching an awareness campaign." He also believes that many Bhutanese people are simply not aware of altitude sickness.

Ready for take off

In another milestone for Bhutanese aviation, air travellers will now have a choice on the popular Paro -Bangkok air route. Tashi Air, operating as Bhutan Airlines, the first privately-owned airline in Bhutan, launched its international operations with flights between Paro and Bangkok on October 10, 2013 flying an Airbus A320. This will mark the first time the national airline Drukair will be facing a competitor on its lucrative Paro to Bangkok sector which was established by them in 1989.



Tashi Air logo

It has taken Tashi Air more than a year to get its international air service established after it was allowed by the government to suspend domestic operations in June, last year. The Government agreed with

Tashi Air that it be allowed to start operating international services first, through which it would then subsidise domestic operations. In addition to its foreign pilots, a former Drukair captain and two former Drukair first officers will also be flying Tashi Air. Bhutanese cabin crew have also been hired.

NEWS AND UPDATES

“The EU will more than double its development assistance to Bhutan”



During an interview given whilst visiting Bhutan from Delhi, where he is based, the Ambassador of European Union (EU) to Bhutan, Joao Gomes Cravinho, made the following comments:

Our experience of work with Bhutan has been a very good one. So, in this new financial cycle, which begins in January 2014, we decided that we would significantly increase our development assistance. In fact we will more than double our development assistance to Bhutan.

The Bhutan and EU relations

The relationship between EU and Bhutan is one of intense friendship and mutual respect. In 2015 we will celebrate 30 years of diplomatic relations. It is a source of great satisfaction for us. Our relationship is one of friendship that goes beyond the cycles of governance and changes that societies faced. The relationship that we established with Bhutan in 1985 was with a very different country. The Bhutan that I last visited months ago was the Bhutan that had a different government. For us, this matters but it is not as important as the deeper current of friendship that exists between EU and Bhutan. We work with the authorities and the new government of Bhutan. The people of Bhutan chose the new government. We work

with whom they chose and we work with great pleasure, commitment and confidence.

Future areas of cooperation

We will be working under good governance because one of the main areas of our development assistance to Bhutan over the next few years is in the range of areas related to deepening of democracy. We believe that a free press is a fundamental element in the functioning of the society. It is a great stimulant for those who are in positions of authority to do things well. We are very keen to be supportive of the Bhutanese media and we will work with the Bhutanese authorities in finding ways of supporting the Bhutanese civil society, including the media under good governance. We also have a series of scholarships, which individual Bhutanese from all sectors can apply for, including in the field of journalism. Over the past 10 years we had over 146 young Bhutanese in Europe studying in all areas.

Buckwheat Bonanza

Until some five years ago, with much focus shifting to potato cultivation, farmers of Bumthang had almost lost interest in growing buckwheat. But in 2008 with a push from the Agriculture Ministry a farmer's group was formed, and cultivation of buckwheat was revived. They sowed more than 450kg of seeds of both sweet buckwheat (jo) and bitter buckwheat (gerey). Little income was generated in 2008, but by 2010, they were able to stock seeds and also sell some at subsidised rate to other villagers. Meanwhile, the farmers group made about 18 items out of buckwheat and sold them in their outlet in Chamkhar.

Products included buckwheat flour, pizza, noodles, pastries, cookies, chips, buckwheat husk pillows and mattresses, among others. The buckwheat husk pillows gained popularity after its health benefits were promoted. It was bought mostly by Japanese customers. Plans are in place to obtain new processing equipment, a seed storage room and a cafe for the sale of buckwheat products. Members are also being trained to bake cakes and cookies. The farmers group, currently only seven members, say that buckwheat cultivation is part time work, leaving plenty of time to work on their own farms at home.

Wildlife safaris in Bhutan

Ever since the amazing BBC documentary series 'Lost Land of the Tiger' which was aired in 2010, there has been a growing interest in emulating their expedition and setting up mammal watching tours of Bhutan's wilderness.

Bhutan is one of the best wildlife watching locations in the world so there will be opportunities not just to be searching out tigers but also looking for other elusive mammals. The range is impressive - from Asiatic elephants, leopards, jungle cats, Asiatic golden cat, civets, leopard cat, dhole, Asiatic black bears musk deer, goral, serow, golden langur to the much photographed takin. There are simply hundreds of endangered, rare or endemic species throughout Bhutan.



Specific mammal watching holidays in Bhutan with the aim of finding tigers and other elusive mammals is relatively new. The type of equipment used is also more associated with game watching safaris in other parts of the world. As most of these animals are far more active after the sun goes down, nocturnal spotlighting is essential to be able to see what animals may be around. Thermal imaging and night vision equipment is also used to aid in finding tigers and other predators after dark. We have already seen camera traps used by both rural farmers to help protect livestock, and by Park Rangers to help track movements. Such equipment will also have its uses on wildlife safaris.

Some of the most likely locations for such safaris will be around the dense wilderness forests either side of the Mo Chhu River. The grasslands of Manas near the Indian border are also considered a good location or the highlands of Gasa/Laya on the way to Tiger Mountain.

However this is not a holiday for the sedentary tourist. The fitness level required for these pioneering wildlife safaris is quite high. Tracking tigers may be very exciting, but trekking in dense forests for around 7-8 hours, when it can be hot and humid demands a high level of fitness. If your explorations takes you up into the mountains, then altitude challenges also play a role.

CONTACT LIST

Chairman	Michael Rutland OBE (Bhutan) PO Box 1044 Thimphu 00975 1761 8553 (UK) 2 Windacres, Warren Rd, Guildford Surrey. rutland.michael@gmail.com
Vice- Chairman	John Davey jhhdavey@yahoo.co.uk
Secretary	Andrew Sutton 01306 88 43 49 andrewsutton001@aol.com
Treasurer	Lucy Hornberger 01707 256 249 lucy@globeflower.com
Membership	Rosie Glazebrook rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com
Newsletter Editor	Sylvia Robert-Sargeant editor@bhutansociety.org
Programme Secretary	Dorothea von Friesen dorotheafriesen@gmail.com
Web Master	Chris Watt website@bhutansociety.org
General Enquiries	info@bhutansociety.org West Walls, Cotmandene Dorking, Surrey, RH4 2BL
Website	www.bhutansociety.org

NOTE

If you have not already done so, we would appreciate you sending your latest e-mail address to the Membership Secretary at:

rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com

who will then add it to the database. There is no plan for the Society to go 'paperless' but there are times when it could be very convenient to communicate information electronically at short notice.

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