

An October Trek in Bhutan

Over the Nyeri La to Lingshi

Edward Peck

Plates 33–36

When Alison my wife and I visited Gangtok in 1951 the Indian Political Officer of the day, the late Hareshwar Dayal, showed us a film of his official visit to Bhutan. This glimpse of the mediaeval Kingdom fired our imaginations and we cherished a long-term ambition that we might one day visit Paro and Thimphu and see the high Himalayan peaks on the Tibetan border. We read the sparse literature on Bhutan: Ludlow's and Sherriff's Diaries *A Quest of Flowers*, G. N. Mehra's *Bhutan*, Michael Ward's *In this short Span* and John Tyson's account in *A783*, pp183-190, but we saw little prospect of realising our ambition. Visitors to Bhutan seemed to be botanists or medical advisers invited personally by the King. Nonetheless the opening of Bhutan to tourism in 1978 gave us reason to think a trek might be possible; the growing popularity of Bhutan in the press and the approach of my 70th birthday convinced us that we must lose no time in making the effort.

We hoped to enlist some of the Alpine Club members with whom we had trekked round Annapurna in Oct/Nov. 1981 (*A787*, pp186-196) but only our good friends, Phil and Gill Weinberg were able to join us. Nevertheless, we made up a good and fit party of over 60's. We chose October as being the month with the best weather, but it was also the busiest time for the official Bhutan Tourism Organisation who, instead of accepting us as a private group, insisted on our booking through a travel agency. So it came about that our group of seven friends was augmented by a further seven recruited by Exodus Expeditions, under whose auspices we were to travel. The Bhutanese organisation is commendably efficient and they wisely restrict the number of tourists to avoid straining their limited physical and administrative resources. The Exodus members included a former Chief Conservator of Forests in Nepal, an enthusiastic professional dendrologist and the delightfully versatile veterinary surgeon who acted as medical adviser to the party, and was also an untiring amateur botanist, ornithologist and musician.

The Bhutan Tourism Organisation, following the tradition of hospitality to royal visitors, reckon to provide for their (paying) guests in all respects from the moment of their arrival in Bhutan (or even before, at Bagdogra) until departure. Accommodation, whether in the luxury hotels of Paro and Thimphu, or in tents or on a hard floor in the shelter at Lingshi, transport of baggage whether by bus, pony or yak, together with an emergency riding pony and the services of a Liaison Officer and camp staff are all included in the overall daily fee (which stood at \$85-95 in 1985).

On 5 October 1985, the 14 of us, including David Burlinson of Exodus as our organiser, assembled at Heathrow for the long non-stop Thai Airways flight to



Photo: Alison Peck

Delhi. We flew on from Delhi to Bagdogra where we were met by Tashi, the Bhutanese Liaison Officer who took charge of us throughout our stay and until our return to Bagdogra.

The hot drive through the thickly populated Indian Dooars was by a small bus, seating the 14 of us and taking 4 hours to Phuntsoling, just inside Bhutan, in the humid tropical hill forest. I quickly realised why the British Raj, after absorbing the flat parts of one-time Bhutan that are now the Indian Dooars, should have been daunted by the prospect of penetrating into these steep forested hills rising so abruptly from the plain. Had they attempted to do so, it would have been a long and difficult traverse of the hills before they reached the pleasant valleys at 1800-2500m where the main centres of Bhutanese population are situated. Even for ourselves in a comfortable bus, it took 8-9 hours to cover the 170km to Paro.

There followed a day of sightseeing in Paro; first the National Museum, housed in a fine round look-out tower above the imposing Para Dzong and displaying all aspects of Bhutan from snow leopard, by way of textiles and butterflies, to jewellery and a collection of ancient ceremonial vessels and an attractive array of modern postage stamps. Next we visited the Dzong itself, a fortress accommodating, as in mediaeval England, the civil administration and a monastery; and two small mediaeval *gompas* (monasteries) outside the town from one of which we were hurried out as the Abbot was about to receive the Queen Mother. The next day combined a training walk with a visit to the spectacular Taktseng shrine (Tiger's Nest) perched 1000m above the Paro valley on a vertically plunging cliff, where the Guru Rimpoche arrived in the 8th century on the back of a flying tiger. Although now included in the normal tourist round, the steep climb to 3100m and the vertiginous approach puts Taktseng beyond the reach of some. It is one of the extraordinary and unforgettable sights of the East. The collection of prayer flags on tall poles on the ridge 300m below the shrine, the weird moss forest, the mist swirling round the cliff-top and the narrow ledge by which the path crosses the waterfall to reach Taktseng, set the scene. One is deeply moved by the devotion of these mountaineering monks who over the centuries established this group of buildings on the cliff, including a tiny meditation cell clinging to the rock and reached by ladder. One must hope that Taktseng will preserve its remoteness and air of mystery and not suffer the fate of the Meteora monasteries in Greece.

On 10 October we were all set for the start of the trek to the E foot of Chomolhari three days and some 70km distant. We had a headstart by bus for the first 16km to the road-head at Drugyel Dzong, where the Bhutanese beat back the Tibetans in 1647. Burnt out in 1951, the Dzong reminded us of a 17th century Scots castle. Here we met our camp master, the good humoured and indefatigable Nam Gye, our cook and the two quiet well mannered boys who were to be with us throughout. Since Bhutan is so sparsely populated, there is no transport by porters, luggage being carried on ponies in the lower stages, changing about 3500-4000m to yaks, who do not take to the heat at any lower levels. The weather turned drizzly for our first 15km walk up through the rice fields and pastures of the Paro valley, to camp on a terrace at Shana, just beyond the army camp at Guni Chava. Here, at last, at 2800m we felt we were



really approaching the Himalaya; the Paro Chu narrowed to a deep gorge, reminiscent of the Marsyangdi gorge in Nepal, but differing in the density of the untouched forest (which especially excited the admiration of the two professional foresters in our party) and the virtual absence of inhabitants. Indeed for the 27km from Shana to Seo there was but one single habitation and virtually no spot for a comfortable campsite for a group of any size. The sound of the rushing Paro Chu was continually in our ears. We had been warned that bears might be on the prowl in the thicker parts of the forest and as in Canada, were advised to go in pairs making a noise to scare them off. Just as Michael Ward described it in 1964, the track 'wriggled round trees, climbed cliffs and plunged into little side gorges. Roots, tree trunks, stones, boulders and bog made up its surface. It was never flat for more than a few yards.' The only point at which it seemed to show improvement was when a well-cobbled path led steeply up to the left (west) but we were strictly instructed not to follow that, for it led to Phari Dzong in Tibet, little more than 15km away over the Tremo La. Our track continued as before along the floor of the gorge, and shortly after crossing the first of the two bridges at Seyende Zam, but leaving the second on our right, we reached the camp site at Seo, 3660m.

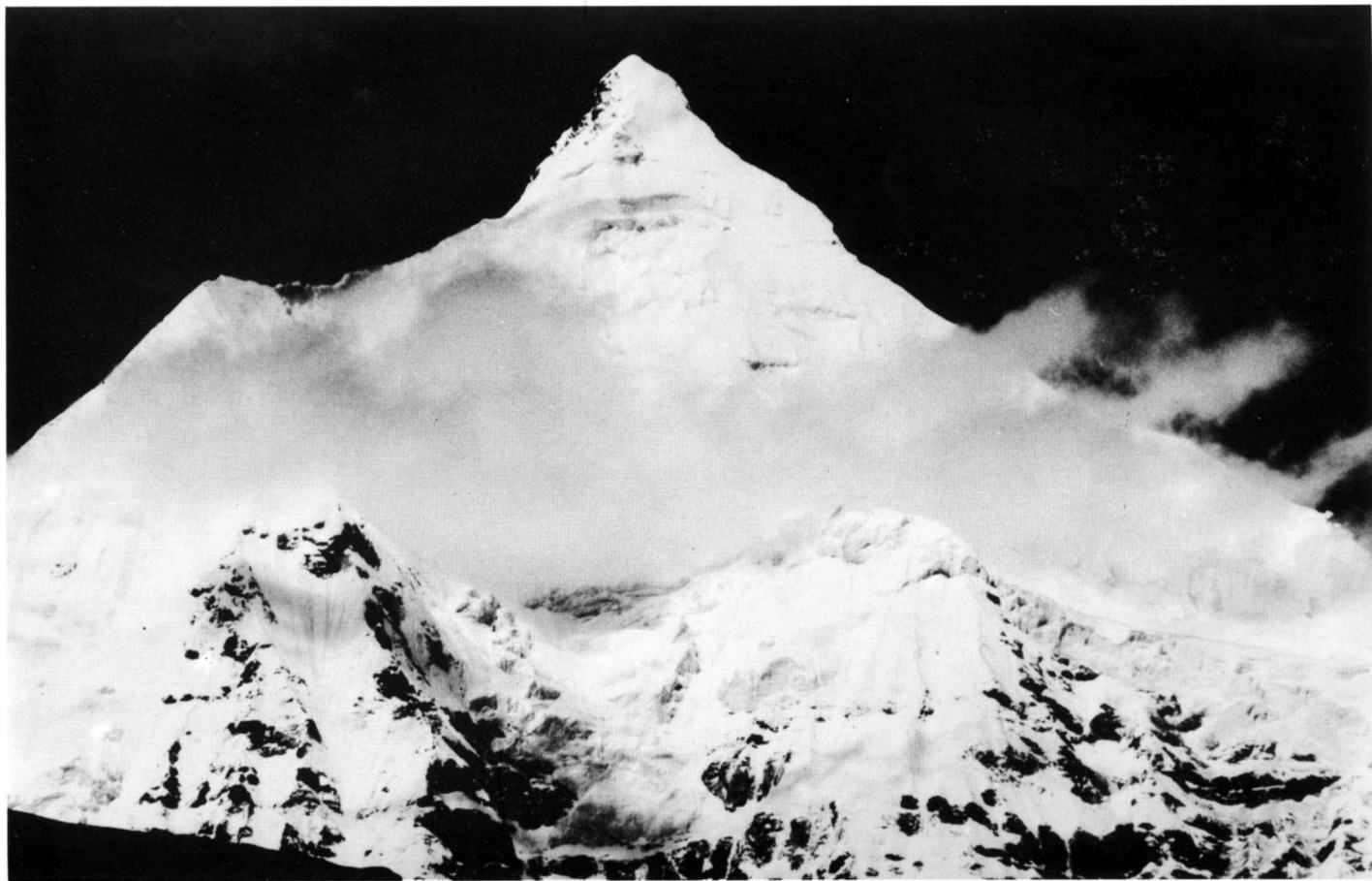
We were now near the upper limit of the forest. Yaks were to be seen grazing in the brown autumn pastures, which were dotted with several varieties of autumn-flowering gentian. 12 October was an easier day, with a lunch stop at the hamlet of Jemphe — two houses and a crone dispensing illicit chang at 3 *ngultren* a can. This was followed (fortunately) by what John Tyson called a gentle afternoon stroll across the yak pastures, past a second 'thang', equivalent to a Swiss 'alp' or Austrian 'alm', identified as Dodebethang. This led us to the ruined Dzong standing boldly on its rock at the entrance to the short side glen leading to the moraine at the foot of the ESE face of Chomolhari (7315m). Bhutan's sacred mountain, virtually the only Bhutanese mountain known to the outside world, was first climbed from Phari in Tibet in 1937 by Spencer Chapman and Sherpa Pasang in the course of the Gould expedition to Lhasa. Although refraining from treading the sacred summit, the Indo-Bhutanese Army expedition of 1972 lost three of their members. Since then the Bhutanese Government have declared Chomolhari out of bounds to climbers. Mists veiled the face in the evening, but in the early morning the vast face glowed in the sun which moved rapidly down to raise the temperature at camp from below freezing to a more than comfortable heat in less than half an hour. The upper part — a dome split by yawning bergschrunds and seamed with avalanches — could provide a dangerous but technically not too arduous route to the summit, but the lower reaches, vertical cliffs alternating with hanging glaciers, looked forbidding indeed.

We were to spend a second night in this delightful spot at 4040m. Some of us went high on a spur overlooking the cwm between Chomolhari and its neighbour to the ENE, a long black bristling ridge, called Tseringmekhang, Tseringgang, or Gyu Kang (6532m). Others of us wandered a brief way up past Jangothang, the third and biggest hamlet (at least 4 houses) in the valley, to find revealed in all its splendour the glittering spire of Jitchu Drake (6793m), its S face rising 2600m above the moraine blocking the head of the valley. We

picnicked among blue and mauve gentian, berberis in their flaming autumn colours and rocks draped with the red berries of cotoneaster as diaphanous wreaths of mist drifted about the fluted face and fearsomely corniched ridges of Jitchu Drake. Two Italians were killed on the S ridge in 1982 and it was climbed by the Japanese in 1984.

As John Tyson reported in 1978 it is difficult to disentangle the mountain names in this area. There can be no doubt about the great bulk of Chomolhari, though there is a lesser summit Chomolhari II somewhere about, possibly not visible from the E side. The range running NE from Chomolhari comprises three major summits which our Liaison Officer identified to us as Tseringmekhang (but it has the alternative names given above), Jitchu Drake (also Jichu Dak Keth, Tseringegang, or Chumkang), and Kungphu (6526m), the conical peak due E of Lingshi, which also seems to be known as Takaphu (its NE face, curiously similar to the NE face of Jitchu Drake, is shown in Tyson's illustration 74, *A783*, p187). To confuse matters further, some writers transpose Kungphu and Takaphu, and Tseringmekhang and Chumkhang. Further east the confusion and lack of names is even greater, showing how little the region has been visited by people interested in climbing the high mountains. The list given by Capt Kohli in his article in *A790*, p20 is a brave attempt to rationalise them but the alternative names in his list highlight the confusion. From the Lingshi area we had a distant glimpse of the peaks towards Lunana, but the one that stood out, probably at the headwaters of the Mo Chu, was a formidable mountain mass like a huge molar tooth crowned by several summits with a jagged isolated fang at its N end. This we judged to be Kangcheda (7000m) otherwise known as Kangchita, Gangkhen Tag, or even Jakiengephu!

But I anticipate, as we had to cross the Nyeri La before seeing the NE face of Jitchu Drake and catching our first glimpse of Kungphu and other peaks to the north. On 14 October, on another cloudless morning, we set out to cross this 4840m pass to Lingshi. Across the stream, the highest reach of the Paro Chu, at Jangothang, two obvious tracks zigzag up the E slope. It is tempting to cross the first bridge only to find oneself embarked on a track leading to two narrow lakes in a high valley looking back over to Chomolhari; there are some minor peaks to be scrambled up here. For the Nyeri La it is important to continue past the uppermost house of Jangothang to cross the second bridge, closer to Jitchu Drake, and take a well-trodden zigzag track up the far side of a steep ravine where a broad burn tumbles down from the upper yak pastures. After a steep pull-up of some 350m the route flattens out and it was sheer delight to wander through gentian-studded pastures, glancing back at the full span of the frontier ridge of Chomolhari, Tseringmekhang and Jitchu Drake. Hereabouts, we sighted large herds of shy *bharal* (or blue sheep) through binoculars. After speculating whether the Nyeri La was at the head of one of the broad side-valleys we found that the track twisted sharply upward to the left, wound round some scree and climbed steeply up to the summit prayer flags, invisible until close below them. The track we had followed was well-trodden, but it could be a problem in mist and snow to select the right pass from the south. Crossing north to south would present less of a route-finding problem, since the steep N side follows a narrow valley, albeit subject to avalanches.



From the top of the Nyeri La, a magnificent panorama opened up. To the NW the symmetrical cone of Kungphu towered over an intervening scree ridge, though Jitchu Drake remained hidden. Stretching away to the NE towards Laya and Lunana, was a succession of high, virtually unknown and certainly unclimbed peaks of which the formidable Kangcheda was one. Below us a deep valley led to Lingshi, with a pass opening towards Tibet to the NW, and to the E a series of passes which Ward in 1964 and Tyson in 1978 had followed from and to Laya. As we descended a short distance to lunch out of the wind, afternoon cloud began to obscure some of this splendid view. Over lunch we again saw herds of *bharal* grazing on steep scree slopes, but perhaps they were only snuffling out mineral salts. The rest of the descent to Lingshi is a pleasant walk, first steeply down to the stream crossing, where an older track led direct to the cluster of unremarkable buildings that characterise an army camp and signal station in most of the world. (We were later to be grateful for the existence of that station in this remote spot.) We followed a newly cut track on the level through varieties of gentian and profusions of rhododendron and spiraea. From the ridge at the end of this stretch, we looked steeply down on our blue tents already set up and saw beyond, on its hog-back ridge, the beautifully situated white square of the Lingshi Dzong illuminated by a shaft of sunlight. The tents were pitched on open level ground beside a rather draughty round house shelter with a central fireplace which we later came to know only too well.

Our plan was to spend two consecutive nights at this camp, move up the next day to the foot of the Yale La, 5000m, thus easing the crossing of the pass, and then follow the Thim Chu downwards for three days to Thimphu. This plan was fine for the first day — another lovely clear day. Some rested in camp; the more energetic climbed a high bump early in the day to catch an unclouded glimpse of Kangcheda and the Lunana peaks. I had my eye on an alp close under Kungphu, which led to what was to prove a delightful ablation valley — a grassy hollow squeezed between the cliffs of Kungphu and the crest of the moraine crumbling away into the lower section of the big glacier coming down between Jitchu Drake and Kungphu. I judged this would provide excellent close-up views of the fluted NE face of Jitchu Drake as well as an abundance of flowers. What I had not reckoned with was that the alp would turn out to be a couple of well-built stone chalets, their shingle roofs held down by large stones, which, had it not been for the prayer flags up the slope behind, might have been the subject of any print of 18th century Switzerland. The sole inhabitants were a courteous Bhutanese grandfather, suffering badly from eye trouble, and his small grandson. Calling off his mastiff, he waved me through as if Europeans were a daily occurrence. The next surprise, as I followed a track into the ablation valley, was to find a *chorten* on the edge of the moraine (difficult and dangerous to go round this one clockwise!) and a small *gompa* closely pressed against the cliff above. After this I found myself walking ankle-deep in edelweiss on a level meadow between the cliffs and the moraine, following the ablation trough onwards and upwards, and watching the seracs thunder down from the upper hanging glacier. I was amazed to see the narrow band of pasture winding on upwards past the big icefall. It put me in mind of Alpine tales of the

'forgotten alp' — pastures cut off by advancing ice. I had no time to follow it to the very end but it might provide access to the big cwm behind Kungphu. Our friend the vet, who had independently followed my suggestion of exploring this enchanted valley, was delighted with his day, seeing plants in bloom and collecting them in seed, being dive-bombed by a *lämmmergeier*, sighting a flight of *grandala*, the blue Himalayan rock thrush and best of all, surprising a *bharal* a few yards away. We wandered contentedly back to camp, through a herd of peacefully grazing yaks, some immersed in a shallow pond for all the world like Ayrshire cattle. We felt ready for the approach march to the Yale La the following day.

But one of those sudden changes in Himalayan weather caught us by surprise as it did a number of better prepared expeditions that October throughout the Himalaya. In drizzle and low mist portending snow we started up the track, past the conspicuous *chorten* marking this approach to Lingshi, past a flattened area marked with stones spelling out 'Heli' and then southwards up the steep-sided upper valley of the S branch of the Mo Chu. A fair track wound in and out of the lateral burns and with the yellow-brown vegetation below, the scene closely resembled a roadless Scottish glen with the mist hanging close overhead. Sleet turning to snow decided us to camp on the valley floor rather than climb to the two lakes, from which we had hoped to make a short hop over the Yale La. Snow fell throughout the night and indeed for the next 36 hours; the men were up beating the snow off the tents, and two tents collapsed. Next morning (17 October) despite continuing snow, we decided to try to cross the pass that day, since there was no other way out, save the equally high Nyeri La, or the series of high passes eastwards to Laya. So, after waiting while the skittish yaks were loaded, we set off, first having to be ferried across the stream, flowing cold and fast, by the two so-called riding ponies, led by a solemn little boy of only twelve. The stalwart Nam went ahead to find the way in the expectation that the yaks would take over higher up and beat out a good track. When the yaks caught up, they had different ideas and, despite two efforts to head them back uphill, they (or the yak men) decided that they were not having any more. They spread out in a muddled herd, useless for track beating, and in the white-out the Yale La might have been anywhere over an arc of 120°. Even Nam returned exhausted saying the snow was over 1m deep.

So there was nothing for it but to retreat, not just to our camp of the previous night, but back to the round-house shelter at Lingshi. This decision was taken too late in the day, for the long march back took twice as long in the deep snow. Paddling through the shallow snow-covered lake beside which we had expected to camp, regardless of stream crossings in an interminable trek, it was after dark before we all arrived at Lingshi where we assembled round a fire fed by dry roof planks from the latrines! We spent the next grey and snowy day drying out. The friendly and efficient Deputy District Commissioner (*Dungpa*) Tsa-wang Rinzen came to inspect his unexpected foreign visitors some of whom were in poor condition. He considered that the Army might not be able to collect their supplies for up to 15 days. Our own food supplies were short, being geared only to a three to four day trek to Thimphu and thus were inadequate to stand a prolonged delay. So we decided to ask for rescue by helicopter through



the Bhutanese Army radio station over the hill. Tashi made his way up the 300m of steep drifting snow to send messages to Thimphu. On return he said that he had virtually to 'swim' through the deep snow — skis would have been useful but seem to be unknown to the Bhutanese. Over the next two days messages, painfully transmitted in morse or by crackling voice, were relayed up and down his trail.

Fortunately, after three days there was another abrupt change back to hot sunny days. We were able to complete the drying out process and to make minor excursions. Slots of musk-deer were seen in the snow, as well as the unmistakable pug-marks of the elusive snow-leopard. We had solicitous visits from the business-like *Dungpa*, accompanied by his spiritual adviser, an owlsh-looking monk who simply observed but did nothing. The *Dungpa* offered to lend us some of his exiguous stores and promised to replace the burnt latrine roof planks. Another visitor was the local Veterinary Compounder, English spoken after training in India, wearing a yak hair eyemask against snowblindness. I overheard our own vet giving advice (and development aid in the shape of a syringe and a bottle of dope) for a less painful method of castrating yaks.

Sunday, 20 October was another fine day and an Indian Air Force helicopter, an Alouette, flew in almost on the level to take us out. At 4100m this was almost at the limit of its altitude capacity, and it could only take two passengers at a time (three when the fuel load was reduced). Though the flight to Thimphu or Paro took some 40 minutes, the round trip was never less than 2½ hours so that only 3 flights were possible in daylight. Seven of us, the 4 ladies and the 3 older men, went out on the first day and the remainder followed next day. The Indian Air Force pilots did a superb job and evidently enjoyed the experience of operating in the high mountains. The flight was unforgettable. The helicopter gained what little height it could by flying some distance up the valley towards the Yale La, giving us a glimpse of the slopes deep in snow where we had retreated. Circling back we had stupendous views back to Kungphu and Jitchu Drake, while the ominous bulk of Kangcheda with its accompanying ugly fang filled the horizon at the head of the Mo Chu. Below us, the impenetrable forest, with roaring torrents and steep gorges confirmed how impossible it would have been to escape from Lingshi by the classic device of following the water downstream. Past Punakha, we flew low over the Dochu La and its twisting road and down to the helipad at Thimphu, at much the same time as if we had adhered to our trekking schedule.

A modest trek for the elderly one might say, given that the trek itself was cut short by the weather and we only crossed one 4850m pass on our feet. But we shall all remember our visit to Bhutan and how its courteous and independent mountain people welcomed us. Besides that, we were near the border with Tibet in remote, scarcely explored Bhutan Himalaya. In this troubled 20th century it is consoling to hope that the wise ruler of this beautiful country may succeed in preserving its forests, its traditions and its peace.