Bhutan
Hidden Lands of Happiness

BY JOHN WEHRHEIM
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Reviewed by Susan Walcott

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implementation in both individual lives and government policy. The author includes assertions from people such as the late Robert F. Kennedy on how alternative values other than just those of the developed world are sorely needed.

Sources of alternative information such as websites like the CIA World Factbook and the Bhutan Government’s main site should also be consulted as a corrective for some basic facts and figures in this volume. Examples: The country’s size is 38,394 square kilometers (in both sources), not 46,500 square kilometers (his number), with a population of 720,679 (2011 estimate) or 725,296 (July 2013 estimate), giving a density of 19 (not 15, based on the author’s 670,000 population figure) per square kilometer. Exactitude glitches notwithstanding, the book has other strengths.

The peripatetic author seems to have enjoyed his visits to hot springs, dance studios, and nomad camps, meeting many serenely smiling, self-confident people and consuming doma (beetlenut) in what is portrayed as a place imbued with a high-Himalayan, possibly altitude-affected, “light-headed feeling of well-being.” Many exotic, entertaining folk tales are intermixed with virtuous lessons in these stories. Wehrheim’s hikes put him in contact with some groups, such as the Laya and other nomadic people in Bhutan’s northern border area, who apparently other writers have not described with depth. Because this book is intended as an introduction for general readers rather than a scholarly study, the author is free to relate conflicting accounts as told to him by various narrators he visits and upon whose conversations he relies. The approach is folksy, laced with his dialogue and personal experiences that are interspersed with significant events in Bhutan’s history as related in its tales and pageants. The author met a great many people on his various trips, and readers may very well feel upon finishing the book that they have traveled to a far, distinctly different land and talked with numerous people about their life experiences. After finishing the book, this reader wonders about what lies ahead as modernization via the post-1999 advent of TV inexorably encroaches, rearranging aspirations and attitudes in its wake.

FURTHER RESOURCES ON BHUTAN
Bhutan Government Portal: http://tiny.cc/Bizyw
CIA World Factbook (Bhutan): http://tiny.cc/sizyw


SUSAN WALCOTT is a Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Major research interests focus on urban-economic transition in developing countries, particularly China and Bhutan. Following grant-funded trips to Bhutan, she has published articles about their modernization process in National Identities, Geopolitics, Geographical Review, Cities, Education about Asia, and a chapter on Bhutan in her forthcoming coedited book Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection: From the South China to the Caspian Sea. Her work on China includes a book on high-tech parks and articles on urban development in Shanghai, Xi’an, Chengdu, and Chongqing.
A Peek Inside

“Brilliant photographs and evocative text. I can’t imagine a better portrait of this amazing country.”

—Paul Theroux

