

# Bhutan

## *Hidden Lands of Happiness*

BY JOHN WEHRHEIM

CHICAGO: SERINDIA PUBLICATIONS, 2011 (SECOND EDITION)

278 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1932476514, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Susan Walcott



This large, heavily illustrated book is suitable for a school library collection, supplementing others on Bhutan. Through his photographs and narrative, John Wehrheim presents his personal interpretation of the country based on numerous trips taken over several decades. His presentation pitches Bhutan as the “Exotic Other,” illustrated by photos taken on his trips that carry out the theme that this would be a cool place (in more ways than one) for a special holiday. The Association of Bhutan Tour Operators should like this book, particularly since tourism is a major source of foreign currency—along with colorful postal stamps—from visitors to the country.

Neither Bhutan nor Tibet, to which it is compared, are “hidden”—just remote and rather expensive to reach. The author does a nice job of describing Tibetan Buddhism, the religion practiced by the majority of Bhutan’s people, while also presenting a balanced impression of what he sees and hears, including the practices of pre-Buddhist Bon that continue in remote border areas.

Wehrheim’s narrative of the fairly recent clashes in southern Bhutan that led to the expulsion of the largely ethnic Lhotshampa people and other spillover from groups in India is sympathetic to all sides. His balanced accounts of the incidents, which brought Bhutan some bad press, is also indicative of the author’s empathetic approach in general.

As stated in his introduction, Wehrheim believes Bhutan presents instructive examples for alternative ways of living and value system

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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* (beetle nut) 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/f8izyw>

CIA World Factbook (Bhutan): <http://tiny.cc/y5izyw>

Susan Walcott, “Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness” *Education About Asia* 17, no.1 (spring 2012): 72.

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# A Peek Inside

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

—Paul Theroux

Pages 130–61. Family with horse, Pazzi 2002.  
©John Wehrheim.



Pages 172–73. Tongra village, Laya 2001.  
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Pages 178–79. Old Choeda the astrologer, Pazzi 2003.  
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