

# Connecting Bhutan: Past, Present and Future

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All trails begin with a story.



On the way between Samtengang and Razawa

It was not the first time that an important event took place in the courtyard of the Trongsa Dzong. Taking advantage of a unique quirk in topography, for hundreds of years, every traveller crossing Bhutan has to travel this way. As a result, the history of Bhutan often found its focus on this tight, strategically important ridgeline dominated by a massive white fortress: the gateway connecting East and West in the tiny mountain Kingdom.

On March 25, 2020, just as the world was realising the severity of the Covid pandemic, a ceremony took place here in quiet seclusion. Greeted by Lam Neten, Dasho Dzongda and other dignitaries, two small muddy and tired groups of travellers, one from Trashigang in the East, the other from Haa in the West, entered through the two giant creaking wooden gateways of the fortress. They followed in the footsteps of their ancestors: monks, traders, soldiers, messengers, artists, workers, tax collectors and gurus, who had worn the steps smooth with their passing. After the traditional greeting through the exchange of khadhar (ceremonial scarves) and a blessing from the Lam, something took place which had never occurred in this historic place before. Surveyors from each group touched together two GPS units formally completing the first full traverse of the ancient route in a generation. Thus marking “the end of the beginning” for the restoration of the Trans Bhutan Trail.

The trek, which had taken each group fourteen days, was actually years in the making. Over the subsequent two years Bhutan took on the ultimate Covid project. Thousands of villagers, Desuup (national volunteers), scouts, mountain bikers, tourist guides and others leaned into His Majesty’s Vision – to breathe new life into the pathway which was once an essential lifeline connecting Bhutan from East to West. 403km long, crossing twelve mountain passes, climbing a total of over 20,000 meters, crossing fourteen raging glacial rivers, connecting nine Dzong fortresses, hundreds of communities and over two hundred sacred sites, the Trans Bhutan Trail is now one of the great long distance trails in the world with an extraordinary past and an exciting future.

## Past

One of the best descriptions of travel in Bhutan came from a National Geographic magazine article written many years ago: “Bhutan is a land of short distances and long journeys.”

What was said then remains true today. Standing on a hillside in Wangdue you can see a point across the valley, not 5km away, that might take a day or more to reach, if you can ever find it at all. In Bhutan, if you are not going up, you are probably going down. The country is composed of deep valleys, dense rhododendron forests, twisted canyons and banks of clouds which are as likely to form below you as above. It is also home to a host of playful trickster spirits who take their pleasure in disorienting travellers. Even with modern technology, the many challenges faced by travellers today have changed little from those a thousand years ago.

For early inhabitants of this land, the difficulty of travel was often an advantage. Hidden from site in highly defensible positions, communities thrived for hundreds of years. If enemies came, a small group could hold off an army with thorn bushes, arrows and a pile of rocks. But there was still a need for connection, exchange and mutual secular and spiritual defence. For not only did the Bhutanese have to defend themselves against a host of human invaders, there were also powerful spirits like the Demoneess Srinmo, a fierce she-demon from the pre-Buddhist era whose entire frame spans across the whole of the Himalayan region with her head in Tibet (China) and her feet in Bhutan.

The epitome of savagery, chaos, and pure evil, Srinmo could only be tamed through erecting stupas and temples across the region. This led the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (seventh century) to build a series of Lhakhangs (temples) to subdue her and stop her from breaking through the earth’s crust, protecting the inhabitants of this unstable mountainous region. Among these temples, Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang falls on the left knee and Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro falls on the left foot, along the ancient route across Bhutan.



On the way between Samtengang and Razawa

The Bhutan that we see today owes a great deal to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel who arrived in the 16th century escaping from religious persecution. He established the Drukpa Kagyu School, the state religion of contemporary Bhutan. History has it that the night before his journey, he had a prophetic dream in which he followed a large raven (the manifestation of Raven-headed Mahakala, his tutelary deity and the protector of the kingdom) southward and arrived at an unknown place which was to be Bhutan.

Ngawang Namgyel successfully vanquished numerous Tibetan and Monogolian invaders, subjugated rival religious schools, promulgated a code of law, and established himself as the supreme ruler of the region. Along with this, he built a chain of impregnable fortresses (Dzongs) on many strategic points which were to become central to religious and civil authority not only during his time but also in the following centuries. To this day, these Dzongs are the center of local government and religious practice. To re-enforce the Dzongs, a network of informal trails were improved to establish much of the path we see today. In case of invasion from Tibet, runners could be sent along the trails to call for reinforcements from nearby Dzongs positioned one to three days’ journey away.

From this point on the ancient trail begins to emerge from the mist and we have a much better understanding of how it provided the stage on which much of Bhutanese history played out. Armies and delegations, gurus and caravans of traders turned the route into a busy thoroughfare. Carps were the famous messengers of the trail. Some, like Lungi Khorlo, a giant at seven feet tall, travelled at extraordinary speed with little food or rest. They were said to have “wheels of the wind,” covering distances which would be difficult for a car to cross today. With the rise of the Wangchuck Dynasty in 1907, Royal processions, a kilometer or more long, also frequented the trail. All of these elements are crucial to forging Bhutan as a nation.

But not all travel on the trail was at a grand scale. Within living memory it was not unusual to pass people on the trail undertaking their last journeys.

“When someone from our locality died, we had to conduct the funeral at Punakha,” expressed Agay Passang Wangdi who remembered helping bring his grandfather to the cremation grounds in the 1960s. “We had to carry the body. If we start the journey early in the morning, we would reach Punakha at 11am...People from Chongsaykha are considered as relatives from the same family who were from the same parents. They help each other during times of hardship. The women would offer them tea and the men would help us carry the body.”

Traditions like this, trade and seasonal migration of the monk body, came to an end with the completion of the National Highway in the mid 1970s. Though some sections of the trail remained in use for yak and cattle herding and local pilgrimage, most of the trail was no longer of use. Within a short period of time the trail disappeared into the forest, dense thicket rendering it unfit for any kind of expedition and the path slowly eroded from memory.

## Present

Over the years, the idea of a trail has been kept alive. The 2002 “Move for Health” walk between Trashigang and Thimphu raised millions for community healthcare while encouraging active living in Bhutan. The expedition, led by then Health Minister, Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup, took the old trail as much as possible. But the group was often forced to walk along the National Highway.

The trail project gained laser focus in March 2019 with a Royal Command that the ancient route be refurbished.

Around the same time, in an audience with His Majesty, Sam Blyth Founder and Chair of the Bhutan Canada Foundation (the lead international donor for the project), Honorary Consul for Bhutan to Canada and Founder and a member of the Steering Committee of the Trans Bhutan Trail, offered his support to the project.

“Canada and Bhutan have had a long and deep relationship dating back to the early 60s with Father Mackey and the introduction of the modern educational system. Over the years the Bhutan Canada Foundation has continued this important work. Though the Trans Bhutan Trail might appear to be a little outside of Bhutan Canada’s focus on education, we see it as a real opportunity to introduce experiential land-based education and encourage physical and mental health for young people, while creating real community economic development through sustainable tourism.”

This brings our story back to Trongsa Dzong and the survey expedition sponsored by the Bhutan Canada Foundation and supported by the Tourism Council of Bhutan with partners from Desuung – Guardians of Peace, Local Government, Department of Forests and Park Services and many others. As the two teams, guided by local elders, hacked their way through dense forest or doubled back from false routes and struggled across the landscape, the path began to take shape.

Along the way it was almost as if the path was hoping to be found. The most common remaining signs were trail ruts, deep gouges in the ground sometimes three to four meters deep which could only have been carved by hundreds of years of travel. In some cases engineering works such as staircases, retaining walls and old bridge footings were a good indication of the trail’s past glory. But most of all it was the hundreds of crumbling chortens: ancient wayfinding markers providing prayers for safe passage, buried under brush, which were the tell-tail sign that the groups were on the right track.



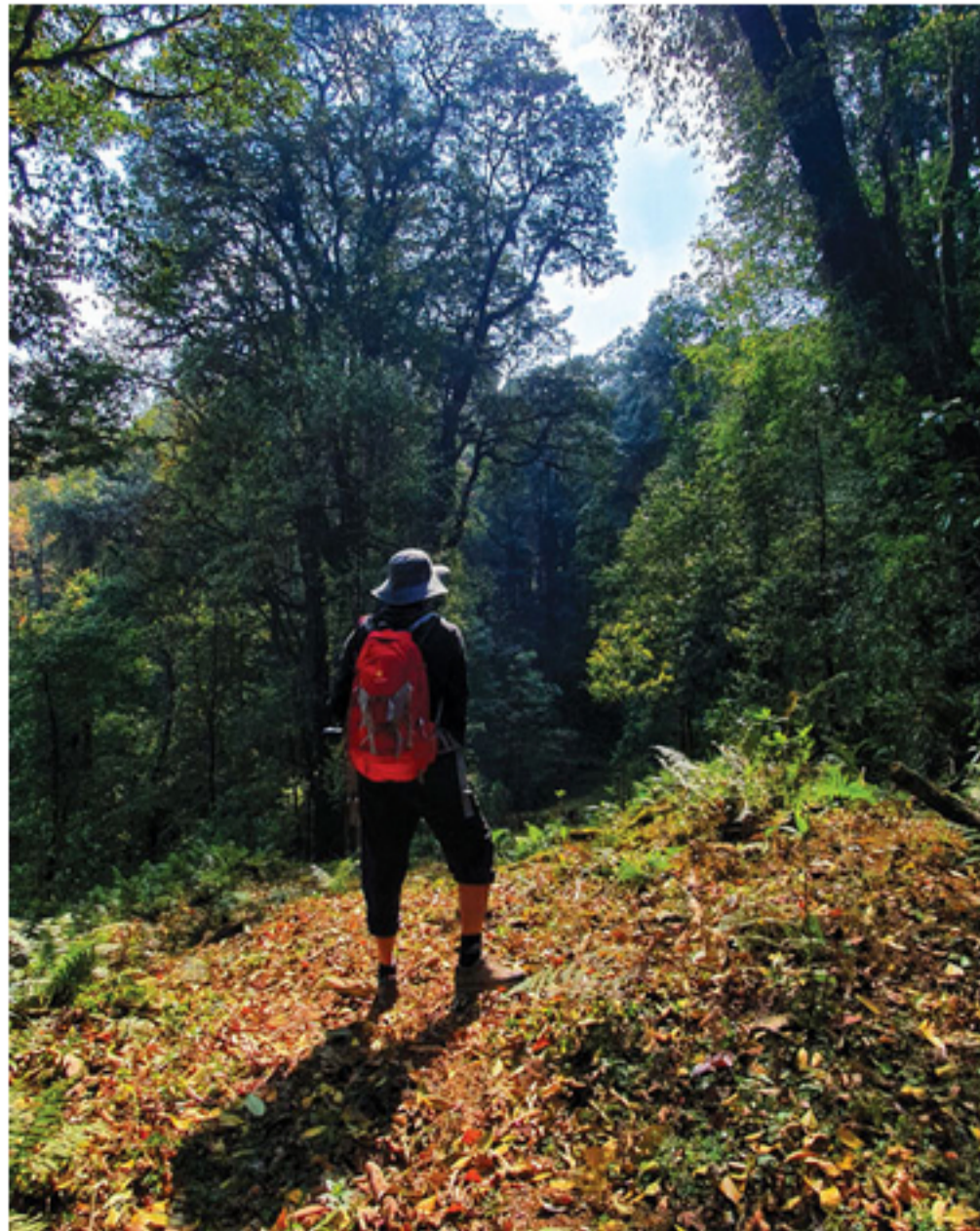
Camping at Razawa along the TBT

routed to avoid sensitive habitat for the many rare and endangered species like the black-necked crane and Bengal tiger, indigenous to Bhutan.

But the physical path itself is just the tangible component of a trail. Those involved with the Trans Bhutan Trail are keenly aware that without story, there is no trail. Bhutan is on the cusp of losing a critical, intangible but equally important, component of trail: the memory of elders who lived before the road. They know the names and uses of traditional medicines, the location and accounts of the spirits, and traditional songs of each region. In this way the trail is, in essence, not just a physical pathway, but a rare collection of untold stories. Gathering these before elders journey on, is an exercise of great urgency.

## Future

We are at the beginning. Even before the official launch, the trail has achieved international recognition as a unique destination and a model for sustainable tourism. Time magazine has listed the trail as one of the top 50 places to visit in 2022. Bear Grylls has included it as one of his destinations and the trail has received a Sustainability Initiative of the Year award from the Travel and Trade Industry.



Trail along Nagtshang

But though Bhutan welcomes international guests to share the unique experience of the Trans Bhutan Trail, its main role remains as a trail for the youth of the country.

“The hike was totally, extremely the best.” shared Tshering Yangchen Dorji, a student at Wangduechoeling Lower Secondary School in Bumthang after a recent trek. “It was a little exhausting but I enjoyed [it] a lot...it motivated me to sometimes travel through the beauty of nature and the biodiversity of Bhutan. I don’t know why people go to other countries to seek a better living despite living in [the] best place. A place where every people dream, rich in biodiversity, culture, happiness, pollution free and peaceful.”

As you walk the Trans Bhutan Trail you are likely to come across youth groups who have adopted sections of the trail near their schools and Desuups in bright orange, who are overseeing regional coordination of trail activities. Preparations are also underway for the Gyalung, national youth service program, to be launched in 2023. As part of Gyalung, youth will have the opportunity to trek and learn about their country, meet their neighbors, sit with elders and walk in the footsteps of their ancestors. By trekking the trail, they will explore nature, their own capacities of leadership, self-sufficiency, resilience, and compassion.

In the fall of 2022 the first expedition to trek the full length of the Trans Bhutan Trail will begin the next chapter in the story. Beginning in Haa, twenty-four young leaders, one from each region and municipality in Bhutan, will undertake the 403km journey. Along the way they will be greeted by local leaders and the many people who helped build the trail and will share their story to inspire their peers. When they complete their hike, tired and muddy, not only will they have walked the Trans Bhutan Trail from end to end, but as the future leaders of the nation they will have connected Bhutan: Past, Present and Future.



Thidangbi, Chorten Kangnyim,



Thidangbi, Gongsu Chorten