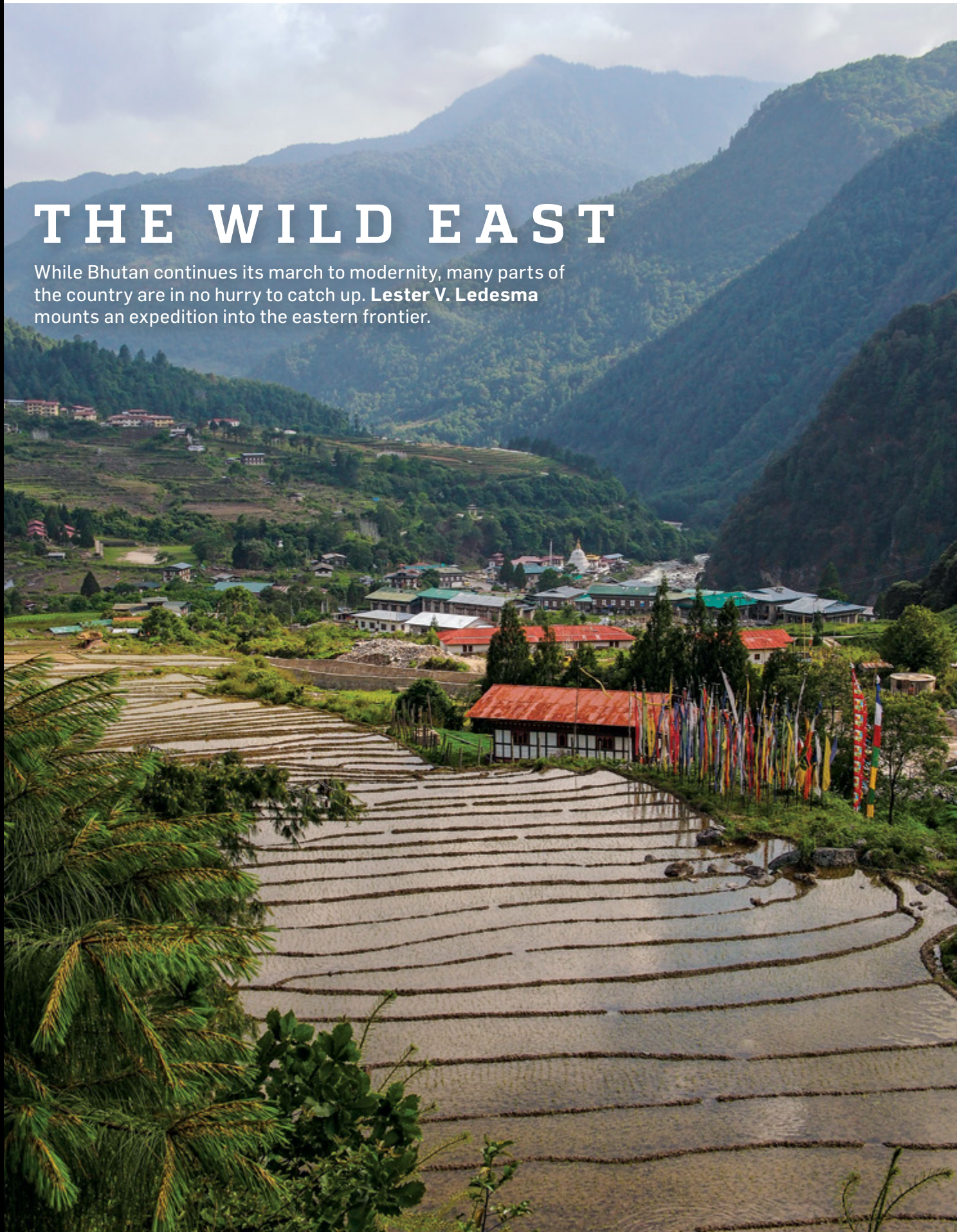


# THE WILD EAST

While Bhutan continues its march to modernity, many parts of the country are in no hurry to catch up. **Lester V. Ledesma** mounts an expedition into the eastern frontier.



◀ Freshly planted rice terraces line the road leading to Trashi Yangtse, one of Bhutan's newest *dzongkhags*, or districts. Compared to the more familiar western side, the east remains largely undeveloped.

▲ Ornate Dzongkha artwork and décor adorn the interior of the Druk Deothjung Resort, one of the few international-standard hotels in Trashigang town.



After several days of adventure in the rough and rugged east, the newly opened Six Senses Paro offers a welcome dose of luxury for tired travelers before they fly home.

## TRAVELERS FROM BHUTAN OFTEN COME BACK WITH TALES

of a land and a people untainted by modernity. It is the kind of place, they say, where a Buddhist saint rides a flying tigress, and where enlightenment for all sentient beings remains a daily wish. However, as a frequent traveler in these parts (I've visited every year since 2012), I've witnessed this small Himalayan kingdom develop at an impressive rate. Prayer flags still fly above its cities and towns, but are now accompanied by 4G and the sound of pop music. Not surprisingly, much of this "progress" is concentrated in the western region—the country's seat of commerce and government, and home to its most popular tourism sites. Recently, I went way off the beaten path, to Bhutan's rugged eastern side.

With a local guide and driver from DrukAsia travel agency, we traversed dirt paths and cliffside roads to areas barely seen by foreign eyes. The drives were long—at least four hours—but were always accompanied by stunning highland views. On many of these steep slopes, landslides are a common occurrence. Mobile-phone reception is unheard-of, and the way of life remains largely unchanged from 100 years ago.

We began our journey at Samdrup Jongkhar, a sleepy town beside the Indian border, from where the rest of Bhutan is an uphill drive. In the village of Merak, some 4,000 meters in the sky, we chatted with Brokpa yak herders while our heads literally swooned from both the thin air and the picturesque setting. In Lhuentse, 200 kilometers away, we played tag with bareheaded novice monks, and paid our respects to Buddhist deities at fog-shrouded mountaintop stupas. The district of Mongar, on the other hand, saw us wading with rice farmers into knee-deep mud—and sharing in their humble snacks of butter tea and beer. We also watched artisans hard at work creating beautiful traditional handicrafts. Thangka paintings were the specialty in Trashi Yangtse, while handwoven fabrics caught our attention in the riverside village of Khoma.

This weeklong eastern sojourn was as intense as it was tiring, and it provided an eye-opening view of what the whole of this country was like before it opened up to the world. By the time we made our way west to Paro, we had traversed more than 1,000 kilometers—and a few centuries in time. ☘



Brokpa kids in the village of Merak smile at this morning's treat—a ride to school on the back of a lorry. Walking remains the go-to form of transport in these highlands.



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A student at the Zorig Chusum School of Arts perfects his skills in painting traditional imagery. Buddhist religious figures are treated with reverence, and are subject to strict guidelines in their features and attire.

▶ Because of their isolated location some 4,000 meters up, Brokpa villagers from Merak typically trek to the lower towns to trade yak meat and milk for everyday supplies like salt, rice and canned goods.



◀ Devotees circumambulate the Chorten Kora, one of the many sacred pilgrimage spots in eastern Bhutan. This Buddhist shrine is said to be protected by the spirit of a princess who entered the stupa in the 1800s.

▶ Prayer flags flutter in the breeze as Sonam, a guide from Six Senses, leads resort guests up the nearby trekking trails. Located on the slopes of Paro, above the country's only international airport, the resort was the last, luxurious stop in our Bhutanese journey.



◀ Young monks head to class in the 16th-century Drametse Lhakhang, the largest and most important Buddhist monastery in the entire eastern region. Damaged by an earthquake in 2009, it has since been restored to its former glory.