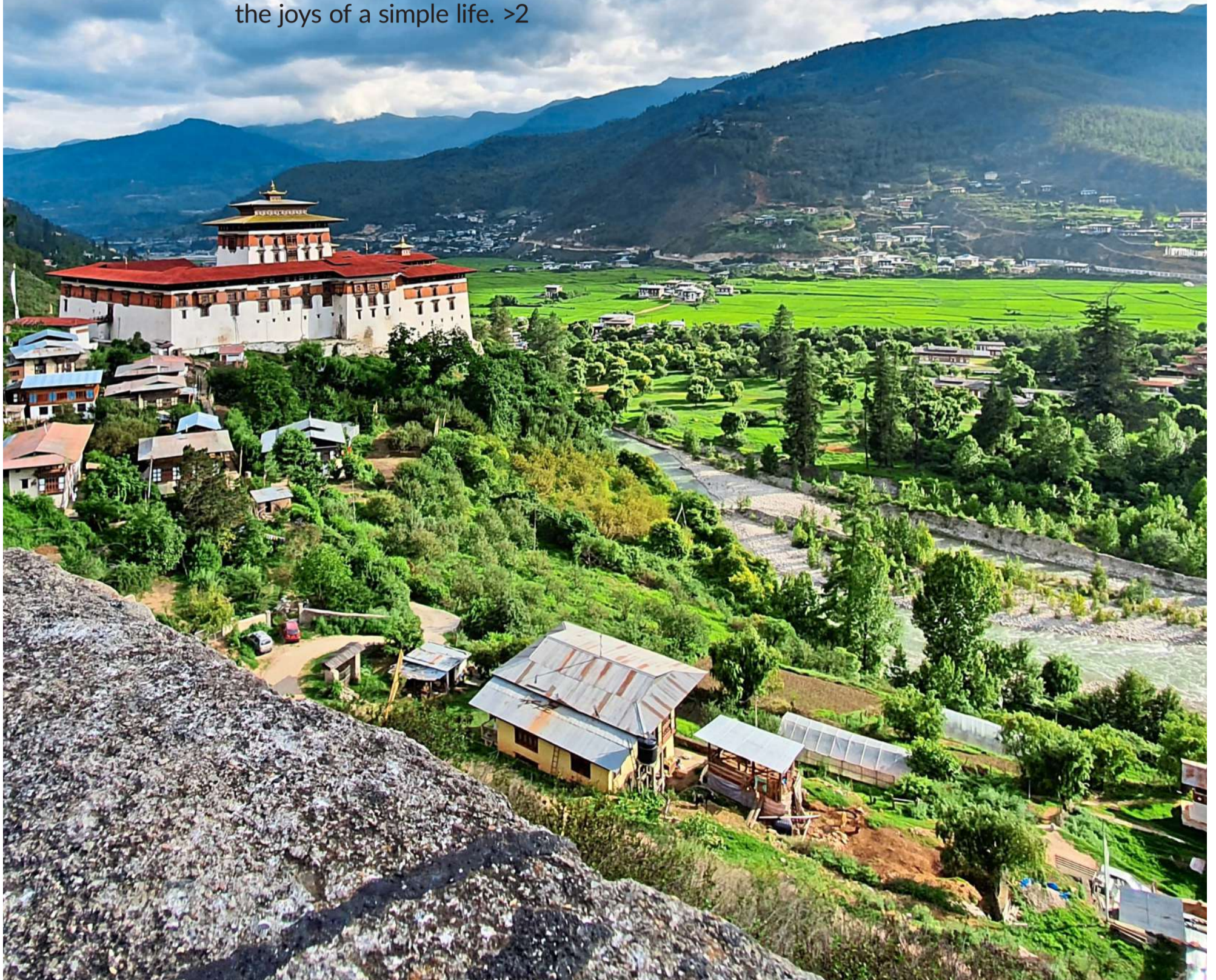




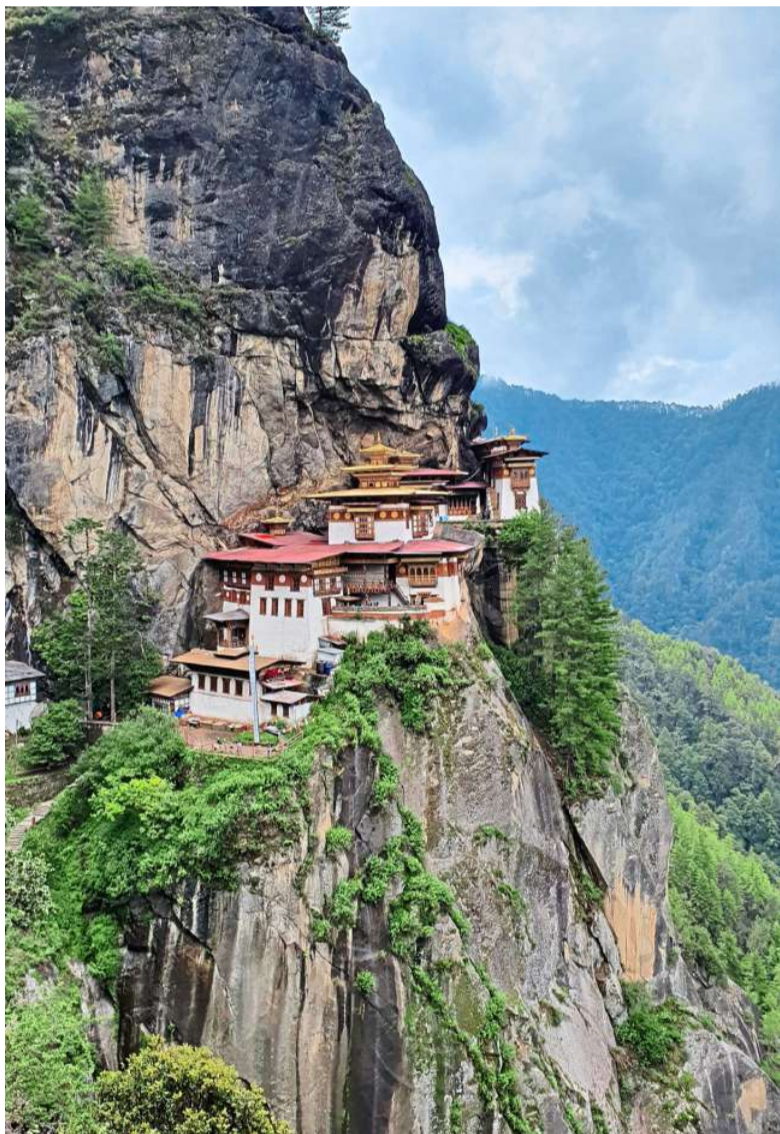
de to happiness

For many, a trip to Bhutan is not just a spiritual one, but a chance to rediscover the joys of a simple life. >2





Phobjikha Valley is one of Bhutan's most beautiful destinations. It is the winter home to a species of endangered black-necked cranes that arrive from the Tibetan Plateau each year. — Photos: MELODY L. GOH/The Star



Tiger's Nest or Taktsang Monastery is one of the most sacred places in Bhutan. A hike up the monastery is a must for many tourists but it is not such an easy feat.



The Dochula Pass located between Thimphu and Punakha offers a 360° panorama of the Himalayan mountain range. If it gets too foggy, don't worry as you can just walk around the 108 chortens for a mini spiritual journey.

By MELODY L. GOH
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THE air is cool and the water in the stream even more so. Wildflowers are everywhere – mostly yellow, though there are some white and lilac ones too. It makes me think of little Laura Ingalls and her sisters running downhill through the field of daisies.

God, I am *that* old.

I pick up a bunch of flowers to make a bouquet for myself. Because that's what you do when you're happy and surrounded by so much beauty. This is the effect that Bhutan has on me. It is a little unnerving, but I am getting used to it.

"Have a strawberry," says one of our special companions, Rinpoche Ugyen Tenzin Thinley Lhendup (or Khedrupchen Rinpoche), who hands me a tiny red berry he happily plucked from among the bushes.

Khedrupchen has joined us on our hike through the beautiful Phobjikha Valley today. Later, we will go to a homestay to help prepare some ema datshi and ezyay, two chilli-and-cheese dishes that are eaten at almost every meal in any Bhutanese household.

"What a beautiful place ... so peaceful. We're so lucky," says Khedrupchen as he carefully walks along the trail in the forest. He has two minders with him, and though they keep their distance, you can tell that they also watch his every move, holding his arm when crossing a stream, warning him of cow pats on the road and so on.

The Rinpoche is only 29 years old, but speaks like a man beyond his years and has the kind of demeanour one would expect from a Buddhist leader such as himself. After all, he is known as the fifth reincarnation of Khedrup Jigme Kundrol, one of the most respected masters of Buddhist teachings in Bhutan.

Khedrupchen's background story is interesting, to say the least. He showed signs of being "special" at age three; at age eight, he was officially recognised as a reincarnation of said master. He graduated from Ngagyur Nyingma College in India in 2014 and usually travels around the world for speaking engagements and conferences. He also has a few monasteries and retreat centres in Bhutan under his care.

He has a cellphone, which he whips out to take pictures and self-

Joy division

Happiness is a place, say the people (and government) of Bhutan.



Khedrupchen is a young Rinpoche who seeks to spread the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. — khedrupfoundation.org

ies from the viewing point at Phobjikha Valley, and then later uses it to Google some random information.

"Ah, technology. It's convenient, isn't it? You get to learn so much," he says at dinner. He speaks English well and claims that he is self-taught in the language.

"Sometimes I don't know the right words to use to describe something. I like meeting people like yourself, because I can learn new words from you. Knowledge is the most indestructible wisdom," he continues.

The Rinpoche collaborates with tour operator Druk Asia to offer travellers to Bhutan a chance to learn more about the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. "Buddhism isn't a religion," Khedrupchen says, "it is a way of life ... a way of living life in the best possible way."

Our meeting with him gives us a preview of what to expect in the Neykor Tour: A Journey of Spiritual Immersion in Bhutan, a seven-day curated trip organised by Druk Asia, happening in December.

Early the next morning, Khedrupchen gives us – together

with the homestay staff and a group of villagers – a special blessing. Before he starts, he takes out his tablet, which displays the holy text. "I'm sorry but I have to use this. I don't remember everything just yet and I can't carry the ancient scrolls everywhere I go. Besides, it's 2019," he says with a cheeky grin.

He's quite fond of smiling and cracking jokes, much like our local guide Ugyen Tshewang and designated driver, Ugyen Tenzin (whom we call Ugyen B). Ugyen, we learn, is a very popular name in Bhutan. Others include Kinley, Dorji, Tshering and Choden, and they are all unisex names.

"The name Ugyen is like 'John' in the Western world. Very popular," says Ugyen.

The Bhutanese also traditionally do not have surnames or family names (except the royals), but each person does carry at least two names. Newborn babies are usually named by a religious leader or teacher. Some go to the Chimi Lhakhang monastery in Punakha to get special names for their babies.

The monastery is also known as the Fertility Temple. Apparently, couples longing to start a family pray at this temple to increase their chances of getting pregnant. Ugyen shows us a scrapbook filled with photos of people from all over the world who have gotten pregnant after their visit to Chimi Lhakhang.

We reluctantly agree to a small blessing from one of the monks there. "Don't worry! A blessing here is not just about fertility but also for good health and overall good life," Ugyen assures us.

Ugyen is a wealth of knowledge. He gives us just enough general information at each temple, monastery or dzong (fortress or administrative centre) visit so as not to inundate us with facts – after all, a trip to Bhutan means a visit to many, many temples, monasteries and dzongs – but he is ever ready to answer all our questions. Even silly ones.

"Do you wear pants under your



Six Senses Thimphu has a meditation room that looks out into the valley.

FOR many, Bhutan is not just a bucket list holiday but a luxury destination, too, due to its daily tariffs for visitors and other charges.

There are only a few accommodation types available there – homestays, lodges and luxury hotels. As per the minimum tariff requirement, international tourists would have to stay at a three-star hotel or lodge, though there are those who could afford to splurge a little and choose high-end hotels like Six Senses, Amankora, Le Meridien or COMO.

Six Senses currently has four properties in Bhutan (Paro, Punakha, Gangtey and Thimphu) with another – Six Senses Bumthang – set to open within the first half of 2020.

A stay at any of the Six Senses

Luxury stays

properties will give you amazing views, personalised service, good food, large comfortable rooms and more. If you're there to celebrate a special occasion, do let your host know and they will try their best to prepare wonderful surprises for you.

What's best about the properties is that each one is close to several tourist attractions. Visit Karma, the lone black-necked crane in the Black-Necked Crane Visitor Centre if you're staying in Gangtey. Apparently, Karma was discovered by some villagers in 2016 somewhere in the Phobjikha Valley. He was injured and unable to fly with the rest of his flock, which descend on the

valley every November to roost, feed and rest.

Unfortunately, the vets are unable to fix Karma's broken wing and he has been staying at the centre ever since.

At Thimphu, you can make a trip to the Kuenselphodrang Nature Park, where the 51.5m-tall bronze statue of Buddha Dordenma sits majestically. It is one of the largest Buddha statues in the world.

At Punakha, walk across the Pho Chu Suspension Bridge, the longest suspension bridge in Bhutan. Stand in the middle of the bridge to get a good view of the Punakha Dzong and the Pho Chu Valley.



Since Bhutan has a 'no-kill' policy, meat, fish and poultry are all imported, mainly from India. This is why Bhutanese cuisine features mostly vegetable dishes. Potatoes, chillies and grains like buckwheat and red rice are staples in Bhutanese cuisine.



A young monk taking a break from his studies at one of the monasteries in Bhutan. It is not uncommon to see young monks becoming so engrossed in their smartphones these days.



Ugyen wearing the gho, the Bhutanese traditional costume for men. Archery is one of the favourite pastimes in Bhutan.

gho?" we ask of the traditional Bhutanese costume for men.

"Just underpants. Some people wear shorts especially if it's cold. In the old days, you don't wear anything underneath," he says, smiling. Both Ugyens wear the gho, which is a robe that's tied in such a way it creates a special "pocket" in the midriff (and paired with knee-length socks and shoes), every day they are with us.

Women wear the kira which is sort of like a sarong. The "half kira" is where the sarong is worn as a skirt, while the full kira looks like a strapless dress. There's a loose short jacket that goes with the kira, too.

Visitors to any of the dzongs in Bhutan, especially important ones like Punakha Dzong or Thimphu Dzong, would need to dress appropriately, preferably in the gho or kira. Locals have to wear scarves that vary in colour which signifies your rank or status in society; the Ugyens wear white scarves. Tour operators like Druk Asia would normally prepare a set of these traditional costumes for guests to use during their visits.

If you want to buy one for yourself, do ask your guide for recommendations. We went to Craft Gallery, a shop that carries souvenirs made by members of charitable organisations like RENEW (Respect, Nurture, Educate and Empower Women) and Gawaling, both of which fall under the Gyalum Charitable Trust. This trust was established by Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, the youngest of Bhutan's four queen mothers.

At the shop, you can find a varie-

ty of gho and kira made from locally-sourced cloth. Much like how songket weaving in Malaysia is an important part of our culture, cloth weaving in Bhutan is also a big deal. The basics of Bhutan weaving is taught to young girls in school, and they can learn how to create intricate designs later in college, namely the Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan.

"Do boys weave?" I ask Ugyen during a visit to a summer weaving class at the National Textile Museum. "They are not restricted from learning the art, but boys usually don't take it up," he says.

From a tourist's perspective, men and women in Bhutan seem to have equal standing in society. Everyone gets to earn a living and have equal opportunities to study. Both men and women share the same responsibilities of caring for their families. But when it comes to religion and politics, apparently, it's a different story.

"There are not enough women sitting in high positions in our government," shares Tshering Uden Penjor, the executive director of the Gyalum Charitable Trust. "It's time to change that, but to be able to do that properly we need to empower today's young girls and women first," she adds.

She chats with us about how the trust and its partner organisations are working together to do this, and reveals a side of Bhutan most tourists wouldn't normally see – the social ills affecting today's youth.

"Drinking and drug abuse is becoming a real problem here. We do struggle to keep this in check and to say that this will completely

go away is just not realistic," she says.

Driving through the winding roads from one town to another (we arrived in Paro and journeyed to Thimphu, Gangtey, Punakha and back to Paro in six days), I see many huge signs warning about driving under the influence that are literally set in stone. I wondered why they would make such a thing at first, but after that conversation with Tshering, I now understand.

Tackling the mountains

Bhutan is a small, mountainous country. There are not many airlines that fly into Paro (the country's only international airport). In fact, there are only two – Royal Bhutan Airlines or Druk Air and Bhutan Airlines. This is because the country is a difficult place to navigate in for a commercial plane and experienced pilots who can do it are very, very few.

Some visitors may have problems with the altitude at first and it would take some time to get used to. This is perhaps the reason why most tour companies would schedule the hiking of Paro Taktsang, or Tiger's Nest, on the second last day of your trip. You would need to acclimatise yourself properly so that you don't get sick mid-holiday.

The hike is not exceptionally difficult though it is long (about 4.5km each way) and there are a few sections that are steep. There is an option to take a horse up halfway to the tea house, but these days most people just make the climb themselves.

Getting there

If you're travelling from Malaysia, book a flight with Druk Air, which flies from either Singapore or Bangkok, Thailand. The airline flies twice weekly to Bhutan from Singapore (daily from Bangkok), although in December, it is offering an extra flight from Singapore. The flight takes about five hours, with a 45-minute layover in Guwahati, India.

Before you start planning, here are some things to consider: Except for Indian nationals, all tourists need a visa to enter Bhutan. Bhutan also requires all tourists to engage in a licensed local tour operator.

There are daily minimum tariffs set by the government too and this varies depending on season.

For example, during high travel season (March to May and September to November), each person is required to spend at

least US\$250 (RM1,045) a night in Bhutan.

The tariff covers your guide's fee (do try to tip them at the end of your trip), entrance fees to all tourist attractions, food at approved establishments and three-star accommodations. Staying at luxury accommodations means paying more.

There are surcharges to take into account too. For example, if you are travelling with only one other person, you would need to pay an extra US\$30 (RM125) per night. Solo travellers need to pay up to US\$40 (RM167) a night.

Planning for a trip to Bhutan can get a little confusing sometimes, especially if you have to go through many different companies or agencies. Druk Asia makes all these arrangements for clients without going through a middleman.

For quotations and more information, email hello@drukasia.com or malaysia@drukasia.com, or call 018-661 7699.

You definitely should go at your own pace but take the time to enjoy the scenery too. Greet other hikers and chat with your guide. "How many times have you climbed up this place Ugyen?" I ask.

"In a month, maybe three times, sometimes more," he answers. Ugyen has been a guide for 13 years. While I struggle to breathe during my hike, he just smiles and walks effortlessly along with me.

Hiking all the way up to the Tiger's Nest is not a must, although

many tourists who have been to Bhutan will tell you otherwise. For me, it is just something I can brag about for days on end.

This is mainly because Bhutan means so much more to me than just a hike up Tiger's Nest. There's so much to discover about the country – culture, history, nature, cuisine, people. And in exploring this world, I discovered a way of life that is so simple and full of joy.

I guess it's true what Bhutan has been saying all this while, "happiness is a place".