

Spring 2012 Bhutan Cross Country and Festival Tour

April 26 - May 11, fifteen Days in Country

Depart Bangkok Thurs April 26, 5:50 AM (Arrive Back in Bangkok May 11, 4 PM)

Day 1, Thurs April 26, Departure to Bhutan: 0350 hrs. meet at Bangkok International Airport for 0550 departure to Bhutan. Robin will have your visa and airlines tickets. Arrive Paro Airport (7,200 ft.) at 0910 hrs. (Gain one hour.) After clearing customs and immigration we will be greeted by Rainbow Tours & Treks representatives, guides and drivers. We then go to downtown Paro for our first Bhutanese meal. After lunch our first excursion will be to the National Museum, once the watchtower for the Rinpung Dzong, located high on a promontory overlooking the Paro Valley. First constructed in 1645, the Rinpung Watchtower was converted to the National Museum in 1968. While photography within the museum is not allowed, there are numerous photo ops of the exterior and the valley below. This first outing is meant to familiarize you with the history of this amazing kingdom in the clouds, and a visit to the National Museum is the very best way to quickly learn the culture and natural history since it houses everything that is Bhutanese in a very different museum style that will delight you.

From this point on and throughout the tour the daily itinerary becomes very flexible. Since we are in cars we don't all have to go to these places at the same time. Our 16 guides and drivers are familiar with this concept and stay in touch with each other to notify everyone of any special events in the area, like "You should go to Kichu Temple because there are a lot of pilgrims there," etc. So as you read down through this itinerary keep this important concept in mind--"...you are the captain of your ship." Each day we rotate through the cars (Robin will provide you with a car schedule) so you can enjoy all the different personalities of the guides and drivers.

We can walk or drive down to Paro Town and walk along the Paro Chu (River) to take pictures of the Paro Dzong and the watchtower above. Here we will have photo ops of the covered foot bridge over the river, the huge wooden gate leading to the bridge, and the interior of the dzong. Built in 1645, this massive building now houses the District Administration Office and the Monk Body. A flagstone path leads to the dzong, rising gradually from the bridge that is abutted by two guard houses. The central tower, called the "Utse" of the Dzong, is clad in superb woodwork and is considered to be the nation's most beautiful tower.

We can also visit the Paro archery grounds where there is always activity on Saturday, usually a formal match. There are many photo ops in Paro so Robin and your guides will continually make suggestions and keep you informed of any special events.

Dinner and overnight at Nak Sel Resort, a new five-star resort owned by our Bhutanese partner, Ms. Sonam Ongmo, also the owner of Rainbow Tours and Treks of Bhutan. Sonam has arranged for many of the special items on our itinerary, such as placing our own prayer flags, two special "mini festivals" performed just for our group, and all the many other wonderful events and sights that you will enjoy during your tour. Her hospitality and bubbling personality ensure a very special evening for us. A multi-

million-dollar property, Nak Sel is situated at the edge of a quiet forest on property that was once an apple orchard--the original farmhouse and many of the trees still exist. It has some of the best traditional hot stone baths in Bhutan so after dinner those who wish to relax in Bhutan's version of the hot tub may do so. The one-person tubs are made of wood and sit side by side in a semi-enclosed bath house. A board with holes at one end separates the bather from the hot stones. With long steel tongs the attendant picks red-hot rocks from the bonfire and drops them into this chamber causing a cauldron of boiling water. The heated water then courses through the holes in the board at your feet and the water around your body heats up until you tell the attendant, "No More Rocks!" You will also enjoy the fragrant herbs that are dropped into the tub, including mint and marijuana--yes, it grows wild in Bhutan and is normally used for pig food.

Day 2 , Fri April 27, Tiger's Nest and Paro: We get an early start to Tiger's Nest to avoid the hot sun and any other tourists that may be there. The morning is spent hiking (or riding a "bony pony"--you decide) up a forested path to Taktsang Monastery, also known as Tiger's Nest, Bhutan's most famous and scenic icon. (Robin wrote a story on Tiger's Nest for Tashi Delek Magazine, which is posted on the Rainbow Photo Tours web site.) The climb is steep and takes about 2 hours to ascend comfortably and we will have our guides to carry our photography gear and urge us on. An important place of pilgrimage and refuge for more than 1200 years, Taktsang Monastery clings to sheer cliffs two-thousand feet above Paro Valley, and from the most popular vantage points on a rocky ledges directly across a chasm from it we will still need a 200 mm lens and a steady tripod to get tight photographs. As of 2004, after the rebuilding from a fire, foreigners have permission to hike all the way to Tiger's Nest, visit some of the altar rooms and maybe get a grand tour from Lam Renzin, the lama stationed there. We have become friends with Lam Renzin, bringing him photographs from previous visits and other gifts such as a Swiss Army multi-tool. In 2007 he requested we bring him a pair of binoculars to look down and see who is coming to visit Tiger's Nest--Robin delivered them in 2008 so he might be watching our ascent.

This sacred place got its name when Guru Rimpoche rode there on the back of a flying tiger and meditated in a cave behind the present-day monastery. Sadly, in 1998, the central temple was destroyed by fire, leaving the country in mourning for their holiest of spiritual places. But religious leaders and the King quickly developed a plan to rebuild Taktsang and donations poured in from Buddhist centers all over the world. Today, the magnificent temple is completely rebuilt to its original glory. Tiger's Nest is once again the subject of cloud-shrouded posters that say, "Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon."

Lunch halfway down the mountain at the "Cafeteria." After lunch we descend to the base of Taktsang where our cars will take us back to Nak Sel by way of any place around Paro that you might have missed earlier. Tonight would be a good night to luxuriate yourself with a hot stone bath and massage.

Dinner and overnight: Nak-Sel Resort

Day 3, Sat April 28, Drive to Thimphu via CheleLa Pass: Rise early, pack up and drive

about one hour to Chele La (*la* means pass) for one of Bhutan's best views of the Himalayas. Boxed breakfast will be served at the pass. On a clear day you can see panoramic views of the western Himalayan mountain ranges. Then we drive two hours to Thimphu where your guide and driver will be available to take you anywhere you desire. On past tours we found that participants had their own ideas about what is interesting in Thimphu so we include here a list of current events and places to see and leave this decision up to you.

Overnight: Hotel Kisa

List of things to see and do in Thimphu: (* = Robin's favorites.)

1. * Paper factory for handmade paper--great for printing photos of Bhutan
2. National Institute of Traditional Medicine
3. Two good book stores for books on Bhutan
4. Paradise Temple (Only if there are pilgrims there--guides will know.)
5. *Check out the National Stadium for archery matches.
6. We recommend the Choki Arts and Handicraft store for souvenirs
7. We recommend coffee and sweets at the Arts Cafe next to the Swiss Bakery.
8. Takin refuge--Bhutan's national animal
9. *Monastery of 300 boy novice monks
10. "Children's Temple" – an antique temple where parents bring their children for blessings.

...or just roam Thimphu's main street and it's many small shops. All of these "factories" and shops are very small with only a few employees.

Day 4, Sun April 29, Thimphu to Punakha to Wangdi: Arise at 0700 (if you wish) and go to the Memorial Chorten, built in 1974 in memory of the third king, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who died in 1972. Local residents flock here in the morning to chant their daily prayers as they walk clockwise around the chorten (temple), spinning prayer wheels as they pass fragrant columns of smoke from smoldering juniper branches that carry a stream of prayers to the mountain deities. Bring a tripod and shoot high ISO because sunlight doesn't hit here 'til late morning.

Breakfast at 8 a.m., then pack and meet your guide and driver in front of the hotel at 9 a.m. We then begin our journey to the East, en route stopping at 10,500 ft. Dochula pass

for our first view of the eastern Himalayan mountains. Here we can spend some time photographing the Druk Wangyal Chortens. Built in 2004 to "...celebrate the stability and progress that His Majesty has brought to the nation," this hill of 108 religious buildings in the middle of the pass reflect Bhutan's spiritual and artistic traditions. Then it's on to Wangduephodrang--shortened to Wangdi by the locals--where the most prominent feature is the Wangdi Dzong sitting on a mountain spur commanding an archer's view of two rivers. But on the way, after lunch at a roadside restaurant overlooking the Divine Madman's Temple, we visit Punakha Dzong where we can photograph the colorful exterior, new covered foot bridge, and interior courtyards with colorful and intricately painted doorways and temple exteriors. Built in 1637 between the confluence of the Po Chu (male river) and Mo Chu (female river,) this fortress monastery is the winter residence of Bhutan's spiritual leader, the Je Khenpo or Head Abbot, and the central Monk Body--350 monks in total. Hopefully the purple jacaranda trees that front the dzong will be in full bloom.

Beyond Punakha and Wangdi, both at 4,260 ft., we check in at Kichu Resort on the edge of the rapids of the Dangchu River. We always get a good night's sleep there, listening to the water tumble over boulders the size of Volkswagens. Kichu is a private resort and there is the slight chance we would be bumped by their own guests, but if that happens the alternative hotel is Dragon's Nest, a classy place overlooking the wide and calm river at Wangdi. Overnight: Kichu Resort

Day 5, Mon April 30, Wangdi to Trongsa: After breakfast, we leave for the long drive to Trongsa. We're not in any hurry so we play a game of leapfrog, passing our fellow travelers, stopping for photographs and meeting at the final destination, Trongsa. We will also make numerous stops to photograph yaks and their herders, alpine flowers, lovely picturesque villages, and other roadside and panoramic scenes. After we go through PeleLa Pass (10,825 ft.) we get our first glimpse of the Black Mountains. This drive between Wangdi and Trongsa is one of the most scenic and exciting legs of our journey into the clouds, crossing rivers and streams, passing farmlands and villages as well as primordial forests that have never been inhabited because of the deities believed to reside there.

An hour away from Trongsa we make our first sighting of the crimson-roofed Trongsa Dzong, with the Mangdechu river cascading in one continuous waterfall down through the valley beneath. You will want to use your long lens to capture this scene, then use it again from Trongsa looking back at the road you were just on--the road at the lookout point is carved out of the solid stone mountain. Just above Trongsa we will check into the first-class Yangkhil Resort where you can stand on your private balcony and enjoy the majestic view of Trongsa Dzong across the valley. Trongsa Dzong represents Bhutan's link with its historical monarchy since it is the ancestral home of the first king of Bhutan, Ugyen Wangchuk. This is also the investiture site for future kings ascending the Golden Throne of Bhutan. (The Fifth King of Bhutan was handed The Raven Crown by his father and ascended the throne in November 2008.) We will photograph its remarkable succession of street-like corridors, wide stone stairs and beautiful stone courtyards. Trongsa Dzong represents the very best opportunity to capture the true essence of

Bhutanese monastic and parliamentary architecture. Here, 25 lhakhangs (small temples, among which is the oldest lhakhang in Bhutan—the Chorten Lhakhang, built by Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk in 1543) house sacred images and religious relics. Intricate wood carvings and beautiful frescos are emblazoned on the walls and pillars. With a little patience, monks will walk in and out of your frame as you photograph these remarkable and rare structures. Overnight for two nights at Yangkhil Resort.

Day 6, Tues May 1: Today we remain in the Trongsa area and after visiting the dzong we will go on a day excursion on the road to the southern border--it lies 147 miles to the south. We will make a stop at Kunga Rabten, the summer palace of the second king of Bhutan which is now a monastic school. The road passes through small villages and under a waterfall that falls onto the pavement for a "Bhutanese car wash." (The drivers are wary of small pebbles in the hard-falling water that dent their cars and chip their windshields.) The beginning of the road is gently sloped allowing for cultivation but as we head further south the road descends into the river gorge and becomes rather wild. Along this route are beautiful landscapes and we are likely to encounter monkeys and a wide variety of birds. After a picnic lunch at a nearby temple we will visit a remote nunnery. When we return to Trongsa and if time permits we will visit the Trongsa Museum. (Robin wrote a story for Tashi Delek Magazine on the Trongsa Museum, on the Rainbow web site.) Overnight and dinner at the Yangkil Resort.

Day 7, Weds May 2, Trongsa to Bhumtang via Domkhar Festival: Rise and pack at 6 a.m. and after breakfast we leave for the Domkhar Festival, one of the highlights of the tour. This drive is about 3 hours and another feast of photographic opportunities—most likely we will find our favorite yak herder's hut near YutongLa Pass (11,155 ft – 3400m) for tea and cultural exchanges. Over the years we've made friends with this family and their 50 or so yaks and are always warmly received to sit on the straw-covered floor and sip butter tea. (That might have something to do with Cathy making a gift of a large aluminum pot on a previous tour, our guests buying yak bells and yak yarn, and our guides and drivers buying yak cheese and yogurt.)

Around 10 a.m. we leave the paved road and take a short side road to the village of Domkhar where we will spend the entire day attending the third and most photogenic day of the Domkhar Festival. This is one of the smallest festivals in Bhutan and as such not many tourists go there—last year I counted just 30 foreigners among 500 villagers and festival dancers. We are good friends with the lama there and will have lunch with him in his private grandstand overlooking the small courtyard where the festival takes place.

We get very special treatment from the festival committee because we sponsored the rebuilding of the kitchen house that burned to the ground just one day before the 2009 festival. Also, Robin wrote a story about the Domkhar Festival that was published in the 2009 Spring issue of *Tashi Delek*—see the Rainbow web site to read that story in preparation to attending the festival. Unlike the larger festivals in Paro and Thimphu where thousands of villagers and tourists sit in grandstands in huge courtyards, making good photography near impossible, the quaint and intimate festival in Domkhar allows us total access and closeness to the dancers. You can sit or stand on the edge of the

cobblestones and work with your tripod and equipment to get great close-ups and wide panoramas.

We are allowed access into the dressing room and are invited into the temple to take photos of the lama and his entourage of musicians and chanters during ceremonies. But best of all, we stay late into the afternoon when most everyone has left and get to photograph dancers that will stay behind and pose for us.

Overnight: River Lodge, Jakar Village, Bumtang Valley

Note: We can leave laundry here and pick it up in three days when we return from Ugen Choling. We should pack only essentials for the two nights at Ugen Choling as the rooms are quite small and bulky luggage will get in your way. Couples should condense to one bag and leave the other at River Lodge. Singles should condense to a smaller bag. But everyone should bring every single piece of photo gear you have. Further explanations to follow while at River Lodge the night before.

Day 8, Thurs May 3, Bhumtang to Ugen Choling After breakfast we will depart for our first destination in the remote eastern side of Bhutan, the Tang valley and the village of Ugen Choling. Our journey is 20 miles, 13 miles of which is on an unpaved road. We stop at a roadside temple and a nunnery at Bapzor village then drive to the end of the road at the village of Kesum. After a roadside picnic lunch by noon we should be at the end of the road where those who want to can take a one-hour hike over a suspension footbridge, through farm fields and cluster villages and up a "hill" to the mystical Ugyen Choling Palace where we will spend two nights in the owner's guesthouse. The road and bridge over the river were recently completed so those who want to can ride all the way to Ugen Choling. (Robin wrote a story on Ugyen Choling for Tashi Delek magazine, available on the Rainbow web site.)

Ugyen Choling is a national treasure, privately owned by the same family for hundreds of years. It's remote location makes it one of the less frequently visited historical sites in Bhutan, hosting fewer than two hundred guests per year. One of the owners wrote a book on Bhutanese folk tales of the Yeti and her brother is the property's caretaker. The best part of the Palace is the quaint museum housing permanent exhibits on three floors in the main building and the Utse, the central tower. Traditional living quarters are recreated to capture the realistic ambiance of the ancient lifestyles and conditions of the households. Everyday kitchen and weaving utensils, war weapons--including gun powder made from petrified yak dung--tools and farming implements are the main part of the exhibits.

Overnight: Ugencholing Guest House

Day 9, Fri May 4, Ugen Choling cluster village: After breakfast we each raise a personal tall colored prayer flag on the grassy terrace that has a panoramic view of the Tang Valley. You can write the names of loved ones on your flag prior to hoisting and planting it around the small chorten that is there. A local gomchen (lay monk) will conduct a ritual and read prayers for good health, remembrance and prosperity, a traditional Bhutanese ceremony that is enacted thousands of times each day across the

country.

Then it's on to a day of much celebration and frivolity as our guides and drivers have a formal archery match in the center of the village and a formal lawn dart match next to the Palace--you are invited to attend and participate at whatever level you feel up to. It's an all-day event that the villagers look forward to every year, with lots of laughter and singing, dancing and revelry. We pack in things that are not available to them including beer, sodas, prizes and archery equipment and after dinner meet for the awards ceremony in the village hall. The cluster village of Ugen Choling rarely gets visitors who meld into their lifestyle like we do and they truly enjoy our interaction. They have even started calling Robin, Dasho Robin. (Dasho means *the important one* and is normally reserved for those who hold high government posts.) You might also want to explore the village of Ugyen Choling and the surrounding countryside. Just take a guide to carry your gear and strike out from the guesthouse in any direction--all paths lead to photo ops. Beyond the village are farmhouses and fields for cultural exchanges, mountains and meadows for landscape photography. You can leisurely stroll through the village and observe the daily life of the Bhutanese. You will feel very welcomed to enter any farmhouse as the Bhutanese see it as an honor that you would want to see how they live their lives.

Shortly after lunch the National Dance Troup stationed at Jaker (or maybe the monks stationed at Jaker Dzong) will come to the courtyard and perform traditional festival dances. Since we sponsor this event we are allowed special access to the temple and dressing room for close-up photos. The courtyard there is quite intimate so you can also take close-ups of the dancers while they perform. Local villagers, especially pre-school children and elders, hear the noise and come to watch. You will enjoy serving them liquid refreshment from a bucket, ladeling into their tea cups that they pull from their ghos and kiras. Overnight: Ugencholing Guest House

Day 10, Sat May 5, Ugen Choling to Jakar: After breakfast and farewells we hike back down to the suspension bridge to meet our cars and drive back to Jakar--we will arrive at River Lodge for lunch. After lunch and a hot shower we spend our second afternoon taking in the sights of the Bhumthang Valley, including touring Jakar Dzong, numerous temples and monasteries, and the beer/cheese factory.

Day 11, Sun May6, Bumthang to Mongar: After an early breakfast we gear up for a thrill-ride 127 mile all day drive from Jaker to Mongar on the National Highway. This is the longest drive on the tour. Each car will carry a picnic lunch, with tea/coffee breaks along the way, usually in the high passes. Along the leisurely route there will be plenty of time to make frequent stops for photo ops and we should make it to Mongar in time to roam the streets and interact with locals. The journey takes us through mist-covered ThumshingLa Pass, which at 13,500 feet is the highest motor-able pass in Bhutan. On the eastern side of the pass the three-hour drive plunges down through a sunless forest almost 10,000 feet! to the village of Sengor. Then after a few miles of level road we plunge again through what is considered by many to be the most "white knuckle" 12 miles of national highway in the country. Here the road was blasted out of sheer cliffs with a guard-railed edge that drops clear out of sight.

After crossing the bridge over the Kuru River, 15 miles further on the climbing twisting road, we come to the ancient trade route stop of Mongar. Since the area is very mountainous with few valleys, Mongar is built on the side of a mountain. The true homeland of the Eastern People, the Sharchogpas, begins from Mongar. We will explore the 19-century Mongar Dzong and overnight in the Hotel Wangchuck, the classiest place in the entire district. Overnight Hotel Wangchuck for two nights

Day 12, Mon May 7, Day Excursion Around Mongar: Today we halt for the day and enjoy the sights in and around Mongar. At breakfast we will discuss options and you can each decide what to do with your time, in small groups or alone, each with car, guide and driver to carry you about and serve as translator and cultural guide. Overnight Hotel Wangchuck.

Day 13, Tues May 8, Mongar to Trashigang: This morning we make the sixty mile, three-hour drive from Mongar to Trashigang. We will cross at the 8,000 ft. KoriLa pass and stop for tea and cookies as we have all along the way whenever crossing a pass. Beyond the pass, driving through corn fields and patches of banana trees, we come to the village of Yadi where we will stop at a farm house and photograph weavers making natural dyes from native plants. After Yadi the road zigs and zags in what seems like never ending switchbacks descending to SheriChu village at the Sheri River. After SheriChu we come across roadside sheds where oil is extracted from lemon grass. After crossing two more rivers the road climbs up to Trashigang town at 3,775 ft.

In the afternoon we visit Trashigang Dzong and roam the streets of Bhutan's second largest "city." The Dzong precariously hugs a huge long spur, jutting out over the GamriChu river and commands a remarkable view of the surrounding countryside. Built in 1659 A.D. it is practically impregnable, protected on three sides by the river and ravines and from behind by the mountains. Today it serves as the administrative seat of the district and houses a Drukpa monastic community.

Overnight at the charming and quaint Kelling Lodge, with views over the top of the dzong and valley below. We will spend two nights here.

Day 14, Weds May 9, Exclusive! Brokpa Cultural Program: Today is a very auspicious day for us as we rise early and drive eastward through Rangjung and Radi to Phongmey village. Sonam is a Brokpa by birthright--her father was the hereditary lama there and she is treated like royalty whenever she visits. Sonam and her company, Rainbow Tours and Treks of Bhutan, have organized a special cultural program by the Brokpa people of Merak and Sakten, that our group hosts in the ancient temple courtyard at Phongmey. A group of fourteen Brokpas will make the two-day walk from Merak and Sakten, a district that foreigners were not allowed to visit until 2010. They will bring by horseback all of their cultural trappings as well as festival objects and costumes. Local villagers hear the noise and turn out for the free food and festivities--we usually feed 150 people. We bring a large portion of pork, sacks of rice, chilies and vegetables and cook it all up over an open fire in huge black cauldrons in a typical Bhutanese style. (We eat Western food

brought from the hotel.)

As in Ugen Choling, we will seek the services of a local lama to ensure that the sanctity of anything religious is protected by prayer and ritual. The Brokpas are yak herders from this remote region and have a language, culture and lifestyle that is unique even in Bhutan. An example of cultural uniqueness is the burial process--the body of the deceased is hacked to pieces and allowed to float down the river to be eaten by scavengers. Also, the dating process is something that young suitors call "night hunting"--we'll try to get to the bottom of that when we meet them in Phongmey.

Of this unique and exclusive event, Sonam writes: They will perform the Yak Dance, the Achi Lhamo in honor of Goddess Penden Lhamo and Lady Jomo, folk dances by Maidens, other dance with songs by Maidens, and other cultural items to be discussed with the Brokpas. The dances and singing are not done as in a stage but what they normally do in their village during festivals. It will be a recreation of the festival on a smaller scale the events will not be timed as such but can roll on the whole day with breaks for rest, festive drinking and eating, and posing for photographs. Your tour group will not be seeing the event merely as spectators but participating actively in the festivities – dancing, singing and drinking, etc. The idea is for guests not only to see the cultural performances as such but to experience a crash course in a part of Brokpa culture.

We will have the distinct honor of being some of the first Westerners to witness Brokpa folk dances, including the famous Yak Dance which narrates the story of how the Brokpas first arrived from Tibet led by Lady Jomo, revered as one of the most powerful deities of the region. Included too is the Achi Lhamo, a lion dance performed in honor of Goddess Penden Lhamo and Lady Jomo. Brokpa maidens will also sing and dance as they do during festivals in their highland home.

The Sakten and Merak region remains mostly unexplored by tourists—only about 50 trekkers made the journey in 2010 when the region was first opened to foreigners. Sakten and Merak were previously closed to foreigners in an effort to stall modernization of one of the world's last remaining "living cultural museums." Sonam has tried for years to get the government to open her ancestral home as she feels her people should not be denied the modernization that has come to the rest of their countrymen in the form of electricity, roads, schools, and hospitals. Now that the constitutional government is in place she feels strongly that the political representatives of her region will soon convince the government to build the road that is so important to modernization. One can only imagine that Westernization that will take place once the road and electricity are in place. Overnight Kelling Lodge.

Day 15, Thurs May 10, Trashigang to Samdrup Jongkhar This is our last full day in Bhutan and we spend it mostly driving to Samdrup Jongkhar on the southern border with India. Along the way we will visit several sites and make plenty of roadside stops for photos, lunch and tea/coffee. We will also meet Sonam's eldest sister, Chhimi Dolma, near Kanglung Temple. Chhimi is the eldest and remembers the old days when their

family lived in the highlands of Sakten. Overnight and farewell dinner with our guides and drivers at the best available hotel in Samdrup Jongkhar.

Day 16, Fri May 11, Departure, Guwahati Airport Breakfast at 0700 then three-hour drive to Guwahati airport for a 12:25 pm Druk Air departure to Bangkok, arriving BKK 4:55 pm.

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Day 6, Tues May 1: Day excursion around Trongsa

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