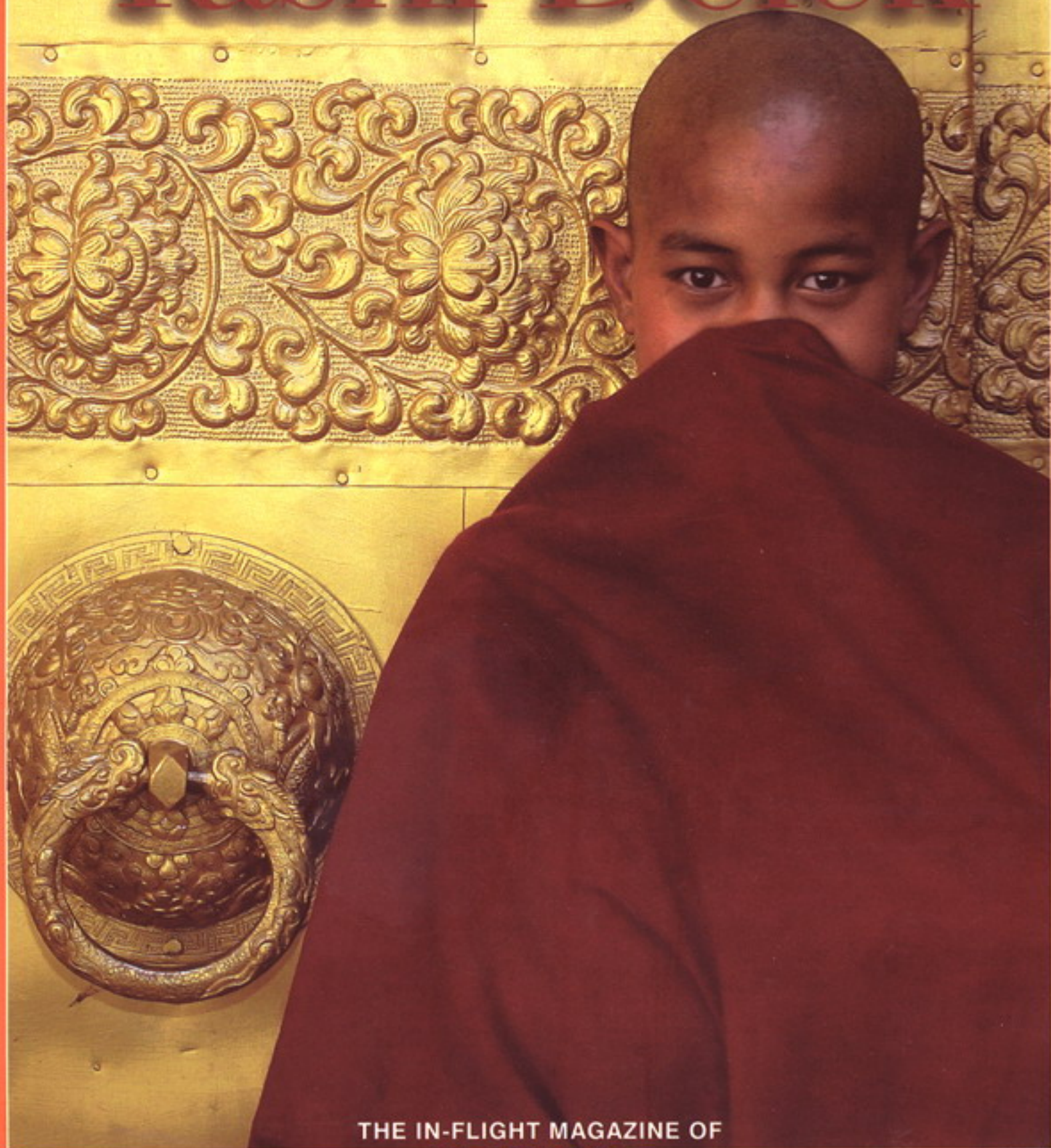


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Tashi Delek



THE IN-FLIGHT MAGAZINE OF

DRUK AIR



ANCIENT CULTURE MODERN CAMERA

TAKING GOOD PICTURES
IS A TECHNICAL AND PUBLIC
RELATION EXERCISE
ESPECIALLY IN A COUNTRY
LIKE BHUTAN WHERE PEOPLE
ARE VERY SHY. HERE A
PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRA-
PHER GIVES TIPS ABOUT
HOW TO TAKE GOOD TRAVEL
PHOTOS IN BHUTAN.
TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY: ROBIN SMILLIE

The connection between Bhutan and travel photography started in 1914 when *National Geographic* published *Castles in the Air*, the first illustrated articles of this mystical Himalayan kingdom to reach the West. The article featured 67 illustrations — photographs taken on heavy film plates with a bulky wooden box camera, all packed in from India over high mountain passes on the back of a sturdy horse. The photographer, John Claude White, reported, "It is impossible to find words to express adequately the wonderful beauty and variety of scenery, I met with, during my journeys — the grandeur of the magnificent snow peaks, and the picturesqueness and charm of the many wonderful jongs (dzongs) or forts, and other buildings, I came across; but I hope my photographs may give my readers some of what I saw."

White's monstrous camera was difficult to set up and required long exposures, so his monochrome photographs were extremely posed, with group pictures of dignitaries standing at rigid attention, not a smile on any face. Today's travellers have the advan-





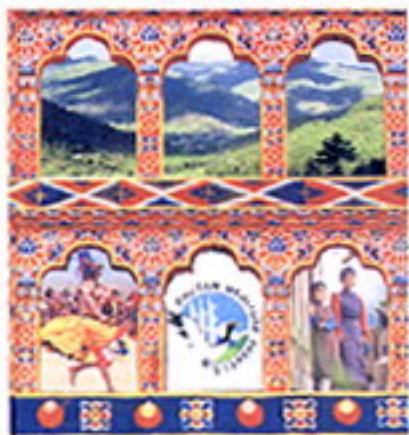
tage of high-tech equipment to document authentic moments and capture the essence of our brief relationships with far-flung people and landscapes. Automatic cameras can "grab" shots that catch people in serendipitous moments with telephoto lenses that reach out to capture candid portraits or open wide to record lush landscapes.

But still, just like in White's day, when the subject of an otherwise great photograph notices the camera, activities stop, clothes are straightened, and the familiar "say cheese" expression is struck. The people of Bhutan are shy, but just as curious about us as we are of them. They enjoy cultural exchanges and feel more at ease when posing for photographers who are friendly and show interest in their lives rather than someone who just points to camera and shoots and walks away. We must always be sensitive to the fact that we are invading the subject's space when we snap their photos. We take away something of theirs for which we must leave a reward. I'm not





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referring to tipping or a payment for modeling but just the simple reward of a smile and respectful pointing to the camera and then pointing to them as if to say, "Can I take your picture?" Seldom will anyone refuse.

If people stop doing what you think is interesting and strike a granite pose, go ahead and snap their photo, but then engage them in conversation. Reveal your true interest in their lives by asking questions like, "Where are you going?" or "What are you doing?" or "Did you grow that wheat on your farm?" Since they may be too shy to ask questions of you, respond with your own experience that relates to your question—you will sense an immediate interest in all things beyond Bhutan's borders. You never know when your new-found friends may invite you more deeply into their lives, back to

their home to meet the family, or to take a shot at the target in their archery match, the national sport of Bhutan.

By the time the camera is pointed, everyone is relaxed and you can comfortably ask if they would go back to the task that first drew your attention. They won't mind when you focus in close on the weathered hand holding the prayer beads or ask the monk to move in front of the colourful door. Most people enjoy having their picture taken, especially by a friend, and by this time, just a few minutes after meeting, you are a friend. After a few shots, invite your subjects to view their picture on the screen of your digital camera or jot down their address. (But do follow through and send them a print.) Then take a few more pictures at different exposures and angles as insurance against closed eyes, poor

exposure, or bad background.

Photography causes me to focus on the details of life: The handle of the knife sticking out of the gho; the grain in the 400-year-old floorboards of a monastery; the gestures and expressions of a lama during a Buddhist ceremony. It also prompts me to form relationships and settle into a scene so as to get the most out of my travel experience. You, too, will find yourself seeing more of Bhutan if you slow down and look more closely for good photo subjects and landscapes. You will take with you not just captions for your photos, but a travelogue of cultural exchanges, and at the same time you will leave something of yourself with these gentle people who live in the *Castles in the Air*. ♦



Tips for better travel photos

Viewpoint and background

Don't look only at your subject through the lens. Let your eye cover all four corners of the frame to see if the background is cluttered. A background element like a power line or a modern car will ruin a shot that otherwise would speak of a scene from the middle ages. Just move around, changing your viewpoint and thus your background. Stoop down on your knees to include the sky or ask your subject to move in front of a colorful door. Consider kneeling down to eye level when taking pictures of children.

Portraits

When taking portraits, side lighting is best. Rather than using harsh flash, ask your subject to move closer to a window to catch natural light breaking from the side.

Protocol in religious settings

Your Bhutanese tour guide will keep you informed of when and where you are allowed to take pictures in dzongs and religious buildings — the use of flash in interiors is usually strictly forbidden. When in doubt, always ask your guide.

Festivals

Use long lenses to isolate dancers from the cluttered background. A photo editor's favorite admonition is, "It's not tight enough!" Don't be a part of someone else's photo by encroaching on the cobblestones or joining in to a procession. And always be considerate—these ancient religious festivals are for the Bhutanese people and not for a tourist's frivolity. I've witnessed rude behavior at festivals, such as a film crew with sound booms walking in amongst the dancers sticking video cameras in their faces, causing them to change their centuries-old choreography and walk around the cameraman. At one festival, I saw a foreign visitor dancing the hokey pokey on the cobblestones with the masked dancers.

Composition

The rule of thirds: Don't put your subject or a horizon



line in the middle of the frame, but rather on an imaginary line that divides both the horizontal and vertical plane into thirds. (This leaves nine imaginary squares in the frame, like a Tic Tac To game.)

Flash

Harsh sunlight can cast shadows on a face and white clouds in the background can stop the shutter down so that the picture appears dark and gray. In either circumstance, much like you would with a beach or snow scene, adjust your camera to fire the flash even when its computer thinks it shouldn't.

Camera shake

In low light situations or with long telephoto lenses, in the absence of a tripod, prop your camera against something stable to prevent camera shake and blurred photos. Don't hold a camera by both sides, but use one hand to hold and trip the shutter and the other palm as a platform, locking the elbow to your side as if it were a tripod.

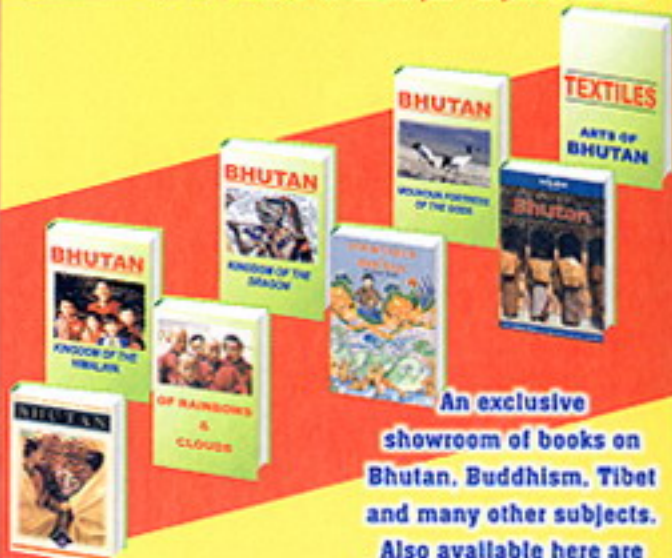
Landscapes

Place something in the foreground that gives your landscapes a sense of scale, like a horse, a boulder or a flower. In forcing this perspective, don't be afraid to let the foreground element take up 50% of the frame.

(The author is President of RainbowPhoto Tours.com based in Tampa, Florida)



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