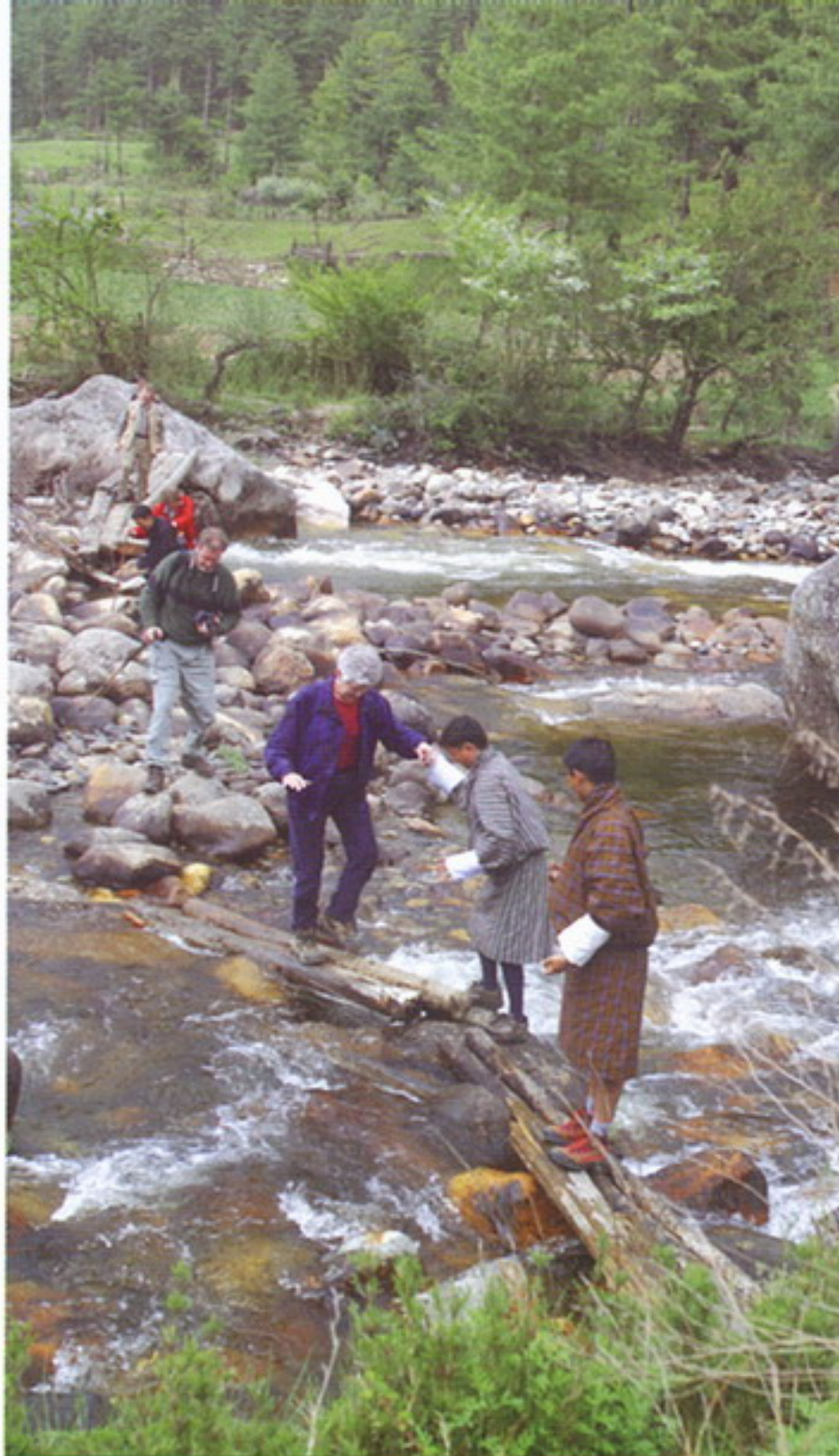




A devotee in a farm house temple



Tang river crossing



A Tang valley farm

Ugyen Choeling Palace

A long time ago a queen in the province of Tsang in eastern Tibet had three sons, but all of them got drowned in a river. To comfort the queen who had gone mad with sorrow, a divine son was sent to her. He was the first of a religious nobility that eventually settled in Bhutan. Over the centuries the family spread in different directions.

In the 14th century, Dorjee Lingpa, one of its descendants became a famous Tertön, or revealer of treasures. He established several temples in central Bhutan.

He also built a palace on a promontory overlooking the Tang Valley.

It was known as Ugyen Choeling.



Chortens leading to Ugyen Choeling Palace

Ugyen Choeling became an important religious centre rather than a seat for political power. The structures seen today were built by Jakar Dzongpon Ugyen Dorji between 1898 and 1903 after the earthquake in 1897 destroyed the previous buildings. Descendants of Dorje Lingpa still own the Palace and maintain the buildings as well as the grounds. In 2001 they added a quaint museum that rivals local village museums in England and other parts of Europe.

Our trip to the Tang Valley began from Jakar with a 20-mile drive to the north, 13 miles of which were on an unpaved road, and ended in the village of Kesum. From there we hiked for an hour, through farms and cluster villages, up a hill and crossed a river, hopping between stones and logs.

The palace's remote location makes it one of the least visited historical sites in Bhutan, hosting fewer than three hundred guests per year. The guesthouse is set in an old but comfortable

building in the garden, with branches of weeping willow brushing the upper porch. Recent modernisation includes western toilets and a shower. When we were there in May 2004, workmen were busy finishing a new four-bedroom cottage on the sloping field of flowers beneath the guesthouse, with completion planned for early 2005.

Ugyen Rinzin, the direct descendant of Dorje Lingpa, is now the property's owner, caretaker and curator. In order to share the heritage of Ugyen Choeling with as many people as possible, Ugyen and his sister Kunzang Choden built what most visitors consider the best part of the Palace—the museum that houses dozens of permanent exhibits on three floors of the main building and in the Utse, or central tower. Ugyen talked with me as we strolled from room to room, admiring such antiquities which include among other things religious scrolls, warrior's shields, and the furnishings in a high lama's bedroom.



Scenes from Ugyen Choeling village





A high lama's bedroom

"Completing and maintaining the museum is a labour of love for me. We recreated traditional living quarters to capture the ambience of the ancient lifestyles and conditions of the households. We have everyday kitchen utensils, war weapons, weaving and farming implements – all the things used by every segment of Bhutanese society."

I found Ugyen to be a walking historical library of the Tang Valley. He patiently explained everything ranging from how yak dung was used to make gunpowder to the significance of masked dances in Buddhism.

A written English narrative explaining the traditional use and meaning accompanies each exhibit. The rooms capture the style of life in the palace household, as it was a hundred years ago – utensils and implements of everyday use juxtaposed with the



Fresco on the wall of Ugyen Choeling Palace

tools of artistic expression like weaving and wood-carving.

In the trade room on the first floor are specimen of rock salt, borax, dye and brick tea from Tibet. Items associated with trade, such as saddle packs and horse bells, are placed about the room with ample narration which throws light on Bhutan's trade relations with India and Tibet through the centuries.

Also on the first floor are tools used for agriculture, carpentry, wood-carving and leather processing. These are displayed alongside original grain silos and woven bamboo containers. The ladies on our tour showed keen interest in the display of an authentic Bhutanese kitchen, complete with noodle press, tea churn, and cooking pots.

On the second floor is the war room, housing ancient match lock guns with a display that shows how to make gunpowder.



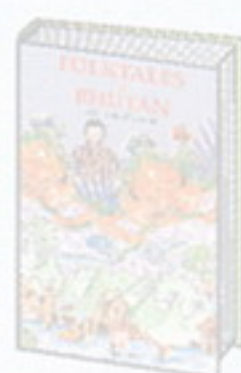
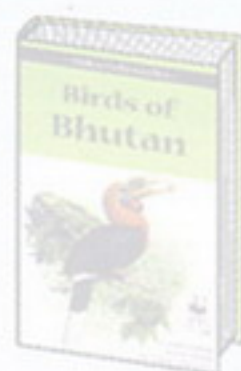
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Gun powder exhibits

“We recreated traditional living quarters to capture the ambience of the ancient lifestyles and conditions of the households.”

The bedroom with attached bathroom exhibits period clothing. There is also an administrative-cum-living room with an altar, a rare seat with a back rest, a writing table with stationery, telescope, charcoal brazier, hats, travel bags and a wooden chair which is said to have been used by the second king of Bhutan.

The third floor houses a library with over 500 manuscripts and xylographs. Collected over generations, these rare documents were recently catalogued and are now available upon request to interested scholars. Next to the library is a printing room with a collection of wooden blocks used for printing some of the manuscripts and prayer flags found in the



Ugyen Choeling Palace



Yarn and combs used in weaving



Kitchen exhibits

museum. Also on display are carving and printing tools. This floor also houses one of the most extensive religious mask and costume collections. During tsechus or festivals, monk dancers wear carved wooden masks and elaborate brocade costumes to re-enact episodes from Buddhist history. These costumes and masks usually stay locked away in inner chambers of temples most of the year, but here at Ugyen Choeling visitors can closely examine the weaving patterns of the costume material and centuries-old chisel marks on the masks left by skilled workmen as they painstakingly replicated masks that their forefathers designed.

In the evening, after a dinner of locally grown seaweed soup made from river algae, buckwheat pancakes, and potatoes, followed by a dessert of canned pears, we retired to the village meeting room. There our guides and drivers danced the night away with local girls, singing folk songs and drinking the native wine, ara. 🍷

The author is president of www.rainbowphototours.com