

LAND

Off the Bhutan Path

Walk along the same route used by royals, monks and traders for thousands of years.

[by Sunny Fitzgerald]

THEY SAY MESSENGERS known as *garp* traveled this ancient path at superhuman speeds, carrying crucial messages between fortresses across Bhutan's mountainous terrain, with little food or rest. I walk the trail at a much more reasonable pace—after a good night's sleep and with a belly full of *ema datshi*, a chili cheese dish with red rice—yet I still lose my footing a few times on the muddy slopes. Mere moments into the journey, it's clear I'm not cut out for messenger duty.

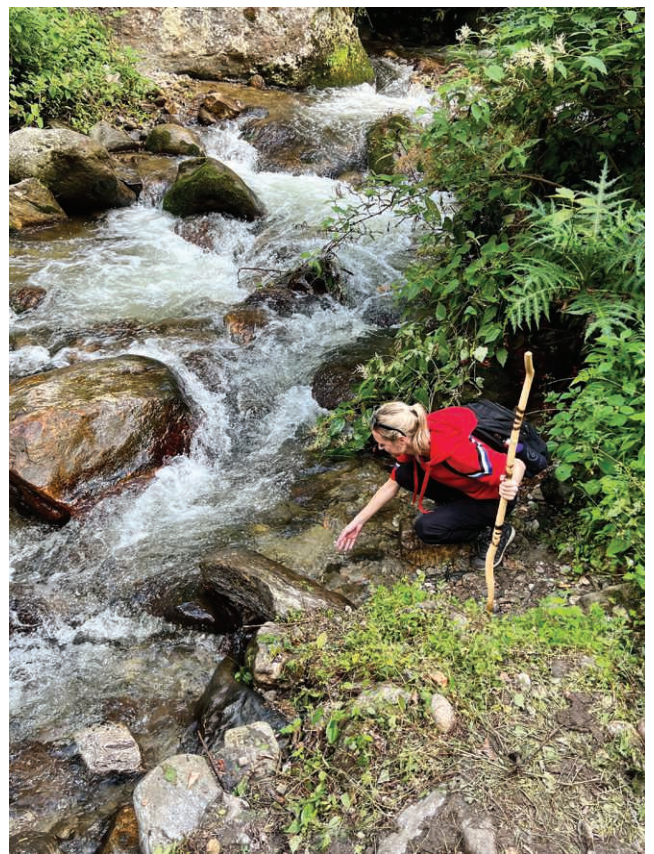
Fortunately, no one's relying on me to ferry important info (or even a tent) across Bhutan; I'm responsible only for the pack on my back. I've joined G Adventures on its inaugural small group hike to some of the highlights of the Trans Bhutan Trail, a path that stretches 250 miles across the country, from Haa in the west to Trashigang in the east.

A city is born

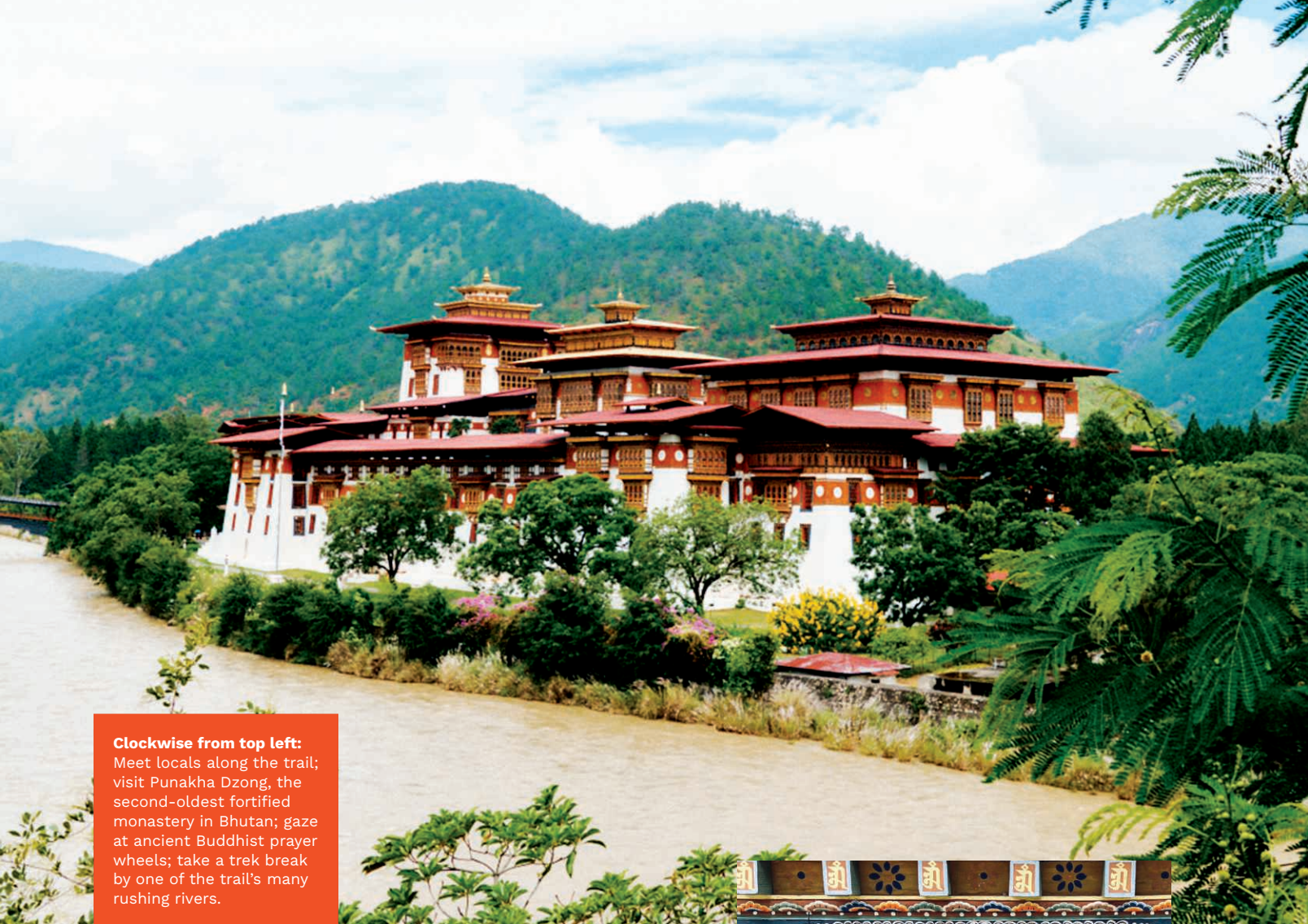
For centuries, the route was used by people from all walks of life, including messengers, soldiers and even royalty

relocating between residences, explains our local guide, Dorji Bidha. These ancient footpaths were also frequented by Buddhist pilgrims and served as trade routes for isolated *gewogs* (villages), separated by the imposing mountains and dense forests between them. The original trail fostered connections that contributed to the birth of Bhutan—and even Dorji herself. “The elevation in my grandfather's village was too high to grow rice,” Dorji shares. So her grandfather carried goods along the trail to trade with rice-producing villages, and one of his treks led him to a village where he met his future wife. “They fell in love—that's how I'm here in front of you, and now you are hiking the trail, too!” Dorji says with a grin.

Despite its role in shaping Bhutan, the trail fell out of favor in the 1960s when the national highway was built. Left to the elements, the once well-trodden track faded into the wilderness. Bridges and stairs collapsed, forest foliage obscured the path, and economic opportunities



PHOTOGRAPHY [DOOR] KEN SPENCE PHOTOGRAPHY; [TEMPLE] BHUTAN TRAVEL; [OTHERS] SUNNY FITZGERALD



Clockwise from top left:

Meet locals along the trail; visit Punakha Dzong, the second-oldest fortified monastery in Bhutan; gaze at ancient Buddhist prayer wheels; take a trek break by one of the trail's many rushing rivers.

and connections between *gewogs* deteriorated. “When people use the road, they have no reason to drop by the remote villages,” Dorji explains.

A hike like no other

With my legs wobbling from navigating the steep terrain and my heart racing at the news that Bengal tigers have been spotted on the trail ahead, traveling by car is certainly enticing. But that kind of comfort and convenience comes at a cost. You’ll arrive at your destination more quickly (and sans the jelly legs), but you’ll miss out on incredible experiences and views that are accessible only

when on foot: Impromptu conversations with local elders. Brilliantly colored wildflowers blooming in seemingly impossible conditions. Prayer wheels spinning slowly at hushed temples. Grey langur monkeys swinging playfully between tree branches. Stories shared over a traditional meal in a remote village home. Neon-green rice paddies glowing in the soft sunset light of the forest.

The Trans Bhutan Trail takes hikers to mountain passes, temples, chortens, stupas and bridges, and through multiple villages and cities (including the capital of Thimphu). You’ll walk through rugged wilderness and far-flung



regions, across innumerable waterways, and into the heart, history and culture of Bhutan. And, much like the original trail, the newly reopened trail is once again fostering connections—between villages, generations, hikers (local and international) and the country’s past, present and future. “It’s not just connecting Bhutan to

the world. It’s also connecting us all to each other,” says Dorji. On the Trans Bhutan Trail, you can once again trek in the storied steps of the *garp*—but thankfully, you don’t have to travel like them. Talk to your travel advisor about booking a guided small group or private tour, and feel free to take a much more leisurely pace. 