

October 1, 2007

We are now in beautiful downtown Thimphu, Bhutan, the Switzerland of Asia. You Google Earth users can use the attached link to determine where on earth Thimphu is found. It is about four days traveling from Canada provided you have done all the homework required to get a visa.



I am traveling with Wolfgang Weber, a young, retired businessman with a heart for the world. His daughter Stephanie works in the Partners International office in Brampton. Wolf is a great traveler, although Calcutta was a little overwhelming for him as it is for most on the first time through. The mass of humanity and utter destitution is difficult to absorb. Photographs are hard to take, with 'take' being the operative word. So many in Calcutta have nothing but the amazing human dignity that every human being seems to possess. An unwanted photo seems to remove that last vestige.

We stopped for one day in Calcutta to catch our breath on the way to Bhutan. We flew north to Badogra and Siliguri and then drove east. The normal drive is 2 hours. It took us 7. This area has been devastated by floods from the Himalayas and unusual monsoons. The damage is extensive to all the roads in the area. Only the railway, after the tracks were repaired, is running normally.

Bhutan is a Buddhist Kingdom, an Indian protectorate, on the north eastern border on Indian, sandwiched against Tibet and China. It has been difficult to gain entry but the country is opening up to 'high end' tourism. No backpackers please. We are here to investigate a dynamic new ministry that is reaching Buddhists through a careful strategy of evangelism and specific training. Partners is looking to provide financial backing in an area where Christians are scarce.

The capital is a surprisingly clean, relatively prosperous city. It is absolutely gorgeous in a high mountain valley, totally isolated from the surrounding countries. Only one road allows access from north India and I use the term road loosely. Wolf has had experience traveling many Alpine roads in Europe, but this one was different. Throw in; fog year round, no pavement, one lane and the most extreme verticals imaginable, then you have a glimpse of the indescribable 7-8 hours of driving into this place. We arrived late in the evening for a surreal border crossing from India to Bhutan. First the Indian border guards summon us with automatic weapons to get our passports stamped. The Bhutanese, much gentler and accommodating check all our papers at the next stop. Moving from India to Bhutan is like crossing a line between chaos and the serene.

We stayed at a passable \$20 per night Hotel in Phuentsholing before driving up the mountains. We thought we had arrived in Scotland as most of the males wear something akin to a bathrobe with knee-high socks. It looks pretty simple until you try it on. It took two people to dress Wolf and I (picture below)

The Far Side



“Little did he know that by wearing long black socks with brown Florsheims, Phil had committed the ultimate Bhutanese fashion faux pas”

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Phil Dempster