



To Dugtsho – trekking into the clouds



▲ Icicles welcome trekkers at high altitude passes



By Jesse Montes



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After living in Thimphu for a few years, one can get a little restless. Compared to other cities in Asia, Thimphu is like a small village. But as one spends time in Thimphu, get to know the alleyways, shops, and restaurants, it develops its own sense of enormousness. As charming as it is though, one longs to 'get out'. There is a therapeutic benefit of getting outside the city and back to one's village, as many local Bhutanese do on an annual basis. Once again experiencing a slower pace. Once again experiencing silence. As a foreigner working in Bhutan, I don't have the benefit of a home village to retreat to. But the forests, hills, rivers, and lakes

hold this special place in my heart. It is in these elements that I find my slower pace, and find silence.

The Phajoding Monastery has recently become a very accessible site. Many locals and foreigners alike have flocked to this monastery for day trips, overnight stays, and multi-day treks (the location serves as a starting/ending point of the Druk Path). I have developed a love for this location, not only because it has served as a base camp for my nature excursions, but also because many members of the monk body now recognise me and they are eager to show hospitality and practise their English with me. Sitting down and enjoying rice and *ema datshi* with the monks



▲ **LEFT:** Morning sunrise over Duntsho Shama

CENTRE: Members of the Phajoding monk body, staying warm near the newly installed *bukhari*

RIGHT: Nearing the final pass that separates Duntsho and Duntsho Shama

is a cherished pastime that I have had the opportunity to experience on more than one occasion.

It was on one of my 'silence seeking' excursions to Phajoding that I first heard the name Duntsho. This lake is said to be a few hours of detour from the well-travelled Druk Path trail, making its diversion near Simkotra Tsho. Not knowing anyone who had actually been there, the lake almost seemed like a myth, until I did a bit of my own investigation on Google Earth and found Duntsho clearly visible. At that point, a trek to Duntsho was put on my 'to-do' list. Two friends and I made a plan to explore Duntsho from March 24-26, 2015.



We departed from Thimphu on the scheduled date despite forecast of rain for the following three days. After briefly considering cancelling the trip, I realised that if I made a habit of cancelling due to rain, I probably wouldn't get out of Thimphu for the next several months. Rain is a natural element that seems unavoidable, especially when it is least desirable. Shop 7 in Lower Motithang served as our last pit stop to grab supplies, and then we were dropped off with our bulging packs on the trail.

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bloom offering an array of colours. The five kilometre trail leading to the monastery took mere two hours. This was a personal best with full packs (tent, stove, sleeping bag, etc.), which gave me a great feeling of accomplishment to start the trip. We dropped our loads and were greeted by friendly monks, many of whom I had met before. However, there were many new faces. Over the last few years, the monk body has been growing, in part due to funds that have been infused to aid in education and living standards. What used to be a body of less than 30 monks was now approximately 60 individuals. The well-loved

cook, who has served there for many years, welcomed us in and fed us well. The nourishment was more than enough to regain our strength and make our last ascent of the night to Thuji Dra. Thuji Dra is the topmost temple in the family of shelters that make up Phajoding and serves as the final resting place before the 4084 m pass that leads to the mountains above. The caretaker of Thuji Dra showed us to the guest quarters and shared tea and biscuits with us while watching Druk Superstar singing contest on television before calling it a night. The night was cold. Although we were yet to see snow, which



▲ **LEFT:** After a morning of photographs, our party retreats for a hearty meal before breaking camp

CENTRE: Phajoding contains a number of historically important chortens for which measures have been taken to preserve

ABOVE: Our campsite covered with the previous night's snow, overlooking Dungtsho

would accompany us for the remainder of the trip, we shivered in our sleeping bags not fully appreciating the comfort that the walls of the guest quarters provided.

4:45 am. I don't usually get up this early. However, it's not every day that one can see sunrise from over 4,000 m. We readied our packs and left Thuji Dra to head into the mountains that tower over Phajoding and the rest of the Thimphu Valley. Clouds engulfed the mountains and the sunrise was non-existent. A small stupa had been recently erected at the top of the pass and we enjoyed looking at the clouds as they raced across the sky.

We took rest to catch our breath, not able to fully acclimatise to the change in elevation. And then the snow began. Lightly at first, it dusted the fields of rhododendron that were yet to bloom in contrast with the colourful flowers of lower elevations. We were reminded that in the mountains, it is still winter. The snow continued for the remainder of the day, picking up momentum, accompanied by gusty winds.

I found myself thinking, "Is this what I left home for? Is this really how I want to spend my time off work?" My internal response was an unequivocal 'YES!' This is part of what I love about being surrounded

by the elements, not only to be pampered by the hot sun, but also to experience the outdoors and to be challenged physically and mentally by its harshness. Something about it makes me feel alive.

But of course, there are limits to the amount of raw nature I am willing to experience. I know that nature can be horribly harsh and unforgiving. It was during this portion of our trip, March 25, 2015, that Nepal experienced a devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake that killed thousands of people. We did not feel the tremors during our hike and we would remain ignorant to these events until our return to Phajoding the following day.

We continued our trek from one pass to another until we reached a marked junction just before the pass that overlooks Simkotra Tsho. The sign that warns travellers of the detour to Dungshtsho is new, signalling that this was no longer a hidden gem of the Himalayas. However, due to the increasingly violent weather on that day, the path belonged solely to us. Already covered with at least a foot of snow, we began to ascend above the Druk Path to a territory that was fresh and foreign to my companions

and me.

Two more hours brought us through yet more rhododendron forests and a peak at an elevation of 4,300 m before finally setting eyes on the famed Dungshtsho.

To the southeast lay its sister Dungshtsho Shama, literally translated as “Lower Dungshtsho”. While Dungshtsho was free of ice, Dungshtsho Shama was completely frozen, probably due to its shallower depth. Our GPS data showed that we were approximately 10 km from Phajoding.

Setting up a camp was no easy task as winter was ever present. Finding a firm flat base for our tent was our first order of business, and it required three of us to cut snow blocks and level the dynamic surface that was still accumulating snow. Our chosen site was located just below the peak of a ridge that offered views of Dungshtsho to the north and Dungshtsho Shama to the

southeast, a strategic point for capturing photos of each breathtaking panorama.

After our shelter was erected, the next activity on our list was preparing warm food. Trail-mix is always a great thing for the trail, as the name implies, yet it does little to satisfy a body taxed by hours of trekking. We prepared a simple curry and then entered our tent to rest in the embrace of our sleeping bags. The day was yet early, containing many more daylight hours, but the fog and snow that engulfed us forced us to retreat.

The remainder of the evening consisted of staying warm, eating, and small excursions

out of the tent to check visibility of the mountains around us. Unfortunately, the fog and snow continued throughout the night. The temperature dropped and the ice beneath our tent permeated throughout our enclosure creating a constant chill. One of my companions remarked what an adventure this was - freezing in our tent in the middle of a Himalayan snowstorm. It was indeed

an adventure. And while the comforts of home seemed sweet at that moment, I would not trade this experience away for a second. It is these very events, these experiences, which stick with us and serve as a divergence from our day-to-day living. These memories would stick with us forever.

▲ A panoramic view of the hills beyond Thuji Dhra, the uppermost structure of Phajoding



▲ **ABOVE:** The famed Dungtsho with a panoramic view opening to the north

RIGHT: Trekking partners Sonam Adhikari (left), and Sonam Tshering with Maha Mind Travel



4:45 am. Another early start greets us on our second morning. This time, as I stuck my head out of the tent and expected a mask of white, a clearing in the clouds pleasantly surprised me. The sun wouldn't rise for another 45 minutes, but the soft radiance in the east gave us hope and we erupted from our dwelling. As I readied camera equipment, my colleagues took in the mountain vistas slowly coming into focus as the light increased. After a day and a half of the weather beating us down, we stood on a ridge as the first beams of light shined on us.

The sun rose showering the landscape with a golden glow. This was the highlight of the trip. Basking in the sun, we smiled and tried to take in this experience as best as our senses would allow us to. We felt the warmth of the sun, heard the wind blowing, smelled the freshness of rhododendrons, and saw the sun paint colours throughout its domed tapestry.

Yet, no matter how hard we tried, our senses did us an injustice. They were not able to fully comprehend the beauty that was before us. This is likely why seeing a postcard or watching a movie of a similar scene doesn't have the same impact. It is something beyond what the senses could capture. It is something that brings true 'experience' to such an event, it is our presence. I think that is why I love being outside. I

become a part of the scene and not merely an observer. This is how the experience becomes that much more real, by being part of it. Presence.

Within an hour, our party is again consumed by fog and snow. We prepared for the return trip, taking down camp, being careful to not leave a trace in order to preserve this scene for future onlookers. This short adventure has matched me against weather and exhaustion, but it is exactly what I needed. ■

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