



# A TRIP TO LAYA AND BEYOND

*By Jesse Montes*



**L**AYA is not the easiest destination to get to, although many would say it is a lot easier now than it used to be. While road access to Gasa is a recent development, it will still be a number of years until the road to Laya is completed despite significant progress. The first 12-kilometre stretch that runs past Gasa is carved out of the densely forested sub-alpine terrain. Many sections remain treacherous for the standard taxi, especially during the rainy season, and require a more robust four-wheel drive vehicles. Getting a ride from Gasa town is easy enough, and the fees are reasonable.

From the current road end, which seems to be extending on a regular basis, begins

a 23-kilometre trek up a picturesque river valley with waterfalls and numerous river crossings, some across bridges and others requiring fording. About four kilometres before Laya, the trail passes through

an army checkpoint where foreigners are required to present travel permits before venturing further. The post serves as a welcome rest stop as the valley widens and reveals glimpses of the lined fortress of







mountains that guard Bhutan's northern border.

The trek continues another kilometre north along the river before stretching west, up a smaller side valley, for the last three kilometres. These last few kilometres, with an elevation gain of 400 metres, test the will of the trekker. At a near 4,000 metres of elevation, un-acclimatised lungs are challenged and more rests are needed. In the event that one has a late start to the day and the daylight hours are gone, flashlights are required for this last approach to the Laya town site.

When I arrived late one evening in October 2016, the small town site was bustling in preparation for the first Royal Highlander Festival. The festival had been highly publicised and was promised to



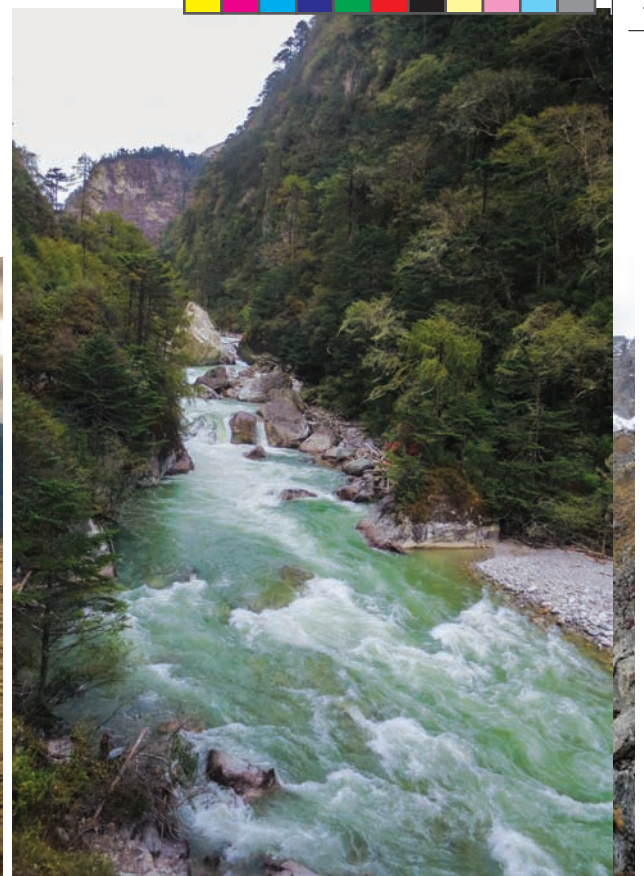
be a spectacular cultural event that gathered communities from across Bhutan to display dance, crafts, products, yaks and culinary delights. From Haa to Merak, the people of northern Bhutan had gathered in this small mountain village.

Adding to the celebratory event, the next day would also be the inception of a two-day 53-kilometre marathon between Gasa and Laya that coincided with the festival.

As I walked through the energetic village, small shops







were bombarded by travellers, mostly from other parts of Bhutan but with occasional foreigners as well. Local Layaps either served as onlookers to the spectacle or were oblivious to the change of pace while they took part in a local game of “*Carom*”.

Settling into my homestay, Ap Tshering and his family welcomed me in with the expected warmth of Bhutanese hospitality. The home was reminiscent of traditional architecture, a two-story wood frame house with storage rooms on the first floor and living space above. A number of small rooms were accessible at the top of the stairs along with one large living space containing a “*bhukari*” (wood stove). On top of the *bhukari* were a number of silver pots, which I covertly

eyed, hoping a meal was in my not-too-distant future. A carpet was spread out on the wooden floor and I was gently invited to sit near the warmth of the stove as tea was served. Soon after, the silver pots were uncovered revealing numerous dishes to rejuvenate my famished body. I

ate well. I slept well.

The next few days were spent joining the Laya community and those from across Bhutan celebrating highland culture. The traditional black tents were erected on fairgrounds just above Laya town, each tent exhibiting the products of their







home region. Being a foreigner, I was happy to sit back and watch each event unfold. However, the organisers had other plans. Before the official 'Strong Man' contest, random festival attendees were asked to join a number of laymen events. I was partnered with a

local Layap woman, positioned against a number of opponents, and instructed on a series of relay tasks.

First, the male partner was to carry a bag of grain from the starting line to a checkpoint. From there, the bag was to be transferred to the female

counterpart who would carry it to the next checkpoint. Upon completion of these two tasks, the partners would run hand-in-hand up to a high point overlooking the fairgrounds to claim their position in the relay race - a gold/yellow banner being the coveted prize for the







first place.

Moments before the start of the race, I remember looking down the start-line at my opponents, most of them local Layaps, and scanning the crowds of Layap spectators that humorously heckled and

thought to myself, "I will remember this for the rest of my life."

That evening around the *bhukari*, Ap Tshering renamed me "*Wangchen*" ('the powerful') and shared his perspective on my victory earlier in the day.

While the relay was miniscule compared to the tasks given to the official 'Strong Man' contestants, I couldn't help but feel a bit flattered by the commendation. Even more, I was honoured to have been part of this unique cultural event.

The following day, I decided to indulge in an altogether different experience. Donning my trekking boots once again and ensuring that I had proper water and food, I set out. A small lake, known simply as "*Laya Tsho*", rests beyond the saddled ridge immediately north of the village. Numerous locals warned me to be cautious in my approach not to disturb local deities that call this lake home. "Do not make loud noises" and "do not burn







any garbage” are prescribed behaviours to be followed strictly. The trail up the hill was non-existent and I scanned the terrain above taking note of potential hazards as I chose my route. Well above 4,000 metres, a new landscape presented itself moving from sub-alpine to alpine topography. While out of season, remnants of the famed Chuka Meto revealed itself along with Yellow Poppy.

Working my way through rhododendron was difficult, so I tried to stick to worn yak paths, where available, and

felt a rush of relief whenever patches of scree were found. While scree and boulders come with the risk of twisting an ankle, it is a welcome wager compared to the abrasions produced by rhododendron bushes. Atop the saddle ridge, at 4,720 metres, Laya Lake could be seen below in a small cirque sanctuary surrounded by mountains. Prayer flags lined the ridge thrashing frantically in the wind that seemed angry at my presence. After a short rest, I worked my way up the snowy ridge a bit further to improve

my visual advantage. Peaking at 4,754 metres, I decided my lungs had experienced enough torture and I should just enjoy the view. I sat. I rested. I enjoyed.

The way down was less arduous and offered a new vantage point for observing the festival below. Crowds were shifting from the Tibetan Mastiff competition and preparing for the upcoming yak procession. I reflected on the nexus of cultural and natural beauty that lay before me. The Layaps call home what could





quite easily be understood as an Edenic landscape. While Bhutan has often been touted as the 'Last Shangri-La', Laya epitomises this characterisation with mountain peaks, alpine lakes, grassy meadows, and a life that literally 'lives off the land'.

Yet, such a portrayal does an injustice to the people, imposing expectations of the passersby upon the people that call this home, failing to understand the true nature of daily life experienced in such a

setting. However, while life in these mountain valleys comes with hardships associated with rough isolated terrain and a fluid semi-nomadic lifestyle, the people of Laya have given me a brief glimpse of the joys as well. My experience with the Layaps has been unmatched in my short-time in Bhutan. It is an experience that I hope repeats itself in years to come.

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