

Dagala – A thousand lakes and **more**

By Jesse Montes

Chorten at Tsarila. 4,185 metres of elevation.

WHEN tourists come to Bhutan, they often have a limited perspective of what the country has to offer. Cultural tourism is the primary motivation, with many groups engaged in visiting *Dzongs* (fortresses), *Tshechus* (mask dance festivals), and Buddhist temples. Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) is often at the top of one's list of 'must-see' attractions, and rightly so as it is a magnificent site to witness. As a result, however, multi-day trekking

in the country is often not considered as an option in the majority of tourist itineraries. If this is your first visit to Bhutan, please do enjoy all the cultural attractions that await you. You will not be disappointed.

However, I urge you to consider returning in the future to experience the natural beauty of Bhutan beyond Thimphu, Paro, Punakha, and even Bumthang. Stretch out beyond these centres towards even more isolated rural destinations

that very few have ventured to explore. At the top of my list is the Dagala trek, also known as the 'Trek of a Thousand Lakes'.

The adventure is often completed in four to five nights, although shorter or longer excursions can be planned. It is a 43km hike, depending on your entry and exit points, with a number of 4,000+m passes and the majority of campsites also above this elevation. Due to this, it is highly recommended that some time be spent



acclimatizing at lower altitudes when first arriving in Bhutan. My first visit to Dagala was in mid-December 2016. My party departed from Thimphu at 5:30 am heading west towards Paro. After 20-30 minutes we diverted from the main highway towards the small village of Genekha, then driving an additional 30 minutes to the trailhead. A small suspension bridge welcomed us as we donned our packs and prepared for the journey ahead. While Dagala is traditionally attempted with a horse caravan, it was late in the winter and ice on the trail made it impossible to have horses accompany us on this adventure. The initial climb consisted of approximately 11km starting from 2,800m and rising to 4,240m of elevation.



May 2017 party hiking towards Laba Jhun

While it can be broken up into two days, we were eager to get to the famed lakes that made the trek such an attraction. So, after reaching the 4,240m pass known as 'Pagalaptsha', we continued an additional 5.5km of gently sloped terrain to reach

the first of many lakes, *Yum Tsho*, nestled in the mountains at 4,329m of elevation.

The next day, we spent time exploring five of the lakes in the area that were conveniently stationed along a 5km loop. *Yum Tsho*, *Tsha Tsho*, *Dajay Tsho*, *Bjagoe Tsho*, and *Ser Tsho* were all originally named after precious treasures that were thought to have come from the lakes. Salt, silver, and gold were said to have been in plenty years ago. A folk story of the area depicts a conflict between three sister deities in which the oldest departs temporarily, and in her absence, the younger two steal the treasures and distribute them to nearby regions in China and India. Local yak herders in the area attribute modern economic woes to such ancient cosmological



Campsite



Water fall below lake region



Singing prayers at Tsarila, 4,185 metres of elevation

clashes. As we finalized our loop around the lakes, we saw the last of the semi-nomadic families migrating their yak towards Wangduephodrang (a central district of Bhutan). Ice had begun to cover the lakes signalling the annual transition to lower pastures.

The next day, we

begrudgingly bid farewell to the lakes and departed for the highest pass of the trek, which is known as *Laba Jhun*. Views of the Himalayas looking towards the eastern side of the country served as our prize as we reached the 4,508m summit. Jomalhari's distinct peak (2nd highest in Bhutan) rose above

the host of 7,000m giants that govern the northern border shared with China. A short rest was then followed by a quick descent to a number of other lakes and yak herder shelters that dotted the landscape. As we dipped below 4,000m of elevation, vast rhododendron bushes surrounded us. With winter upon us, the bushes were wilted, lacking their full glory, and we imagined how colourful a springtime visit would be. At camp that evening, I couldn't help but feel another trip would be in my near future. A few more days on the trail and we descended to the small village of Chamgang where we were welcomed with transport back to Thimphu, only 25 minutes away.

Five months later (mid-May



Yum Tsho





2017), I found myself back at the trailhead with a new group of travellers. This time with a horse caravan that allowed for more ease of travel and enabled more exploration and side-excursions. While the previous trip was blessed with blue skies and views of the Himalayas, this spring venture was cloaked in grey skies yet dazzling colours of wildflowers. Multiple species of rhododendron exhibited tones of red, pink, yellow, and white. The lakes were free of ice and dazzled with fluctuating tones of green and blue depending on their depth, many of them accented with ripples from rising trout. The nearby peaks were painted with remnants of snow, revealing that winter still lingered in this remote region.

On this second undertaking, I scheduled additional time



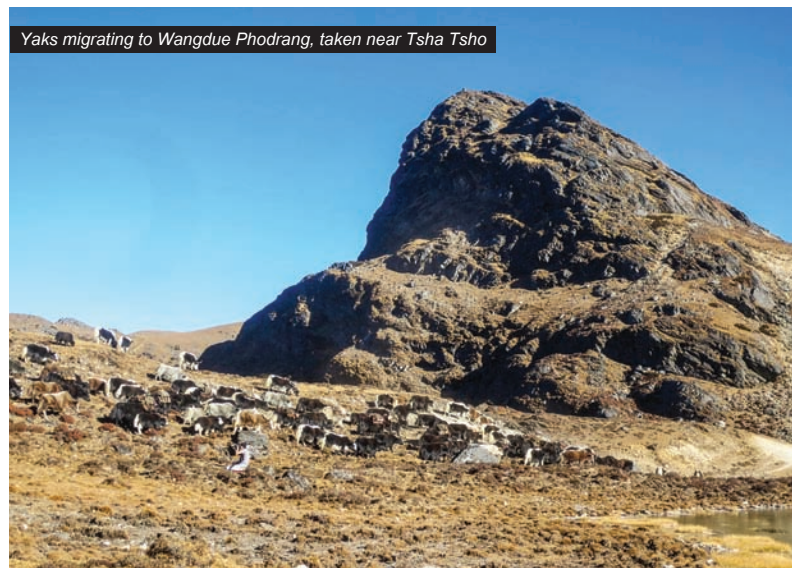
Lhaba Jhun at 4,508 metres of elevation

to explore areas away from the main trekking path, as the previous visit felt brief and underutilized. On one afternoon, a hidden gem revealed itself at the bottom of the uppermost valley. The stream that originates from the lake-region flows towards the district of Dagana and descends in cascading style over varying levels of bedrock. In one particular location, the

stream forms a 20-foot waterfall culminating in a small emerald pool. Trout can be seen patrolling the pool, likely the result of fingerlings migrating from the lakes above. The falls proved to be a mesmerizing feature as I rested to take in the site. A while later, I rose to also explore a smaller fall nearby. Local residents had stockpiled supplies, such as bamboo fencing and firewood, in nearby



Warming by the fire in a yak shelter



Yaks migrating to Wangdue Phodrang, taken near Tsha Tsho





Looking back at Genikha Village after initial ascent



Wildflowers

caves, obviously thinking that the water feature was unreachable by the wandering tourist.

The small oasis is relatively inaccessible except to the inquisitive explorer willing to take the path less travelled.

After our visit to the waterfall, we began our return to camp later than expected, so we put on headlamps and navigated the darkness. On our way, we ran into other travellers who had set up camp in the area. A team of Bhutanese, made up of researchers, photographers and a famous folk singer, were investigating the origins of a famous folk song from the area. We sat to hear about their research ambitions and were serenaded with lyrics that recalled an ancient love affair between a famous Dagana woman called

Penzo Buthri, and a Layap man. The Layap man came from the northwest region of the country to look upon her beauty. The lyrics speak of the physical features of the valley that we ourselves had come to see. *Yum Tsho* and *Ser Tsho* were lakes thought to be primary drinking

water sources for Penzo Buthri and her family, and an existing set of ruins is thought to have been where the Layap man first sung the lyrics.

I began to realize that this isolated region of Dagala was more than a trekker's paradise with beautiful scenery, but



Yak herding shelter at night with star and moon trails





also contained a rich cultural landscape. An ancient history of cosmological intervention intermingled with modern tales of love and a unique herding culture that continues to call this place home. In a turn of events, my drive to explore Bhutan's wilderness became an unexpected interaction with the thing I thought to avoid. Culture/society and nature/wilderness were reframed, not as opposing forces, but as something unified. Dagala embodies such unification when one realizes the significant interactions that occur between the land and its residents. The people rely on the summer grasses for yak grazing, the hidden caves for storage, the lakes and mountains serve as abodes for deities, ruined shelters overgrown with plant life serve as historical accounts

of ancestors, and so on. This land is intimately tied to a resident culture and way of life. My small window of exposure to Dagala is not enough to comprehend this unique relationship, but it is enough to gain an appreciation for the complexities that exist.

As I finished my 2nd visit to the area, I realized I had gained so much more knowledge than the previous visit, yet still felt there was so much to learn and see. To put it simply, Dagala is a hidden gem of Bhutan. The attractive lakes that this region has become known for are only the beginning as it encompasses both natural and cultural beauty that leave one in awe. A few travels to this destination make it a place of serenity, while it also has a sense of charm created by the local semi-nomadic residents. It is a place

that contrasts the traditional tourist centres of the country, not diminishing them in any way, but rather serving to add to the rich diversity of travel opportunities in Bhutan. With this, I welcome you to Bhutan, and invite you to explore Dagala, the 'Trek of a Thousand Lakes'and more.

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Near the final ascent to the highest point of the trek, Laba Jhun