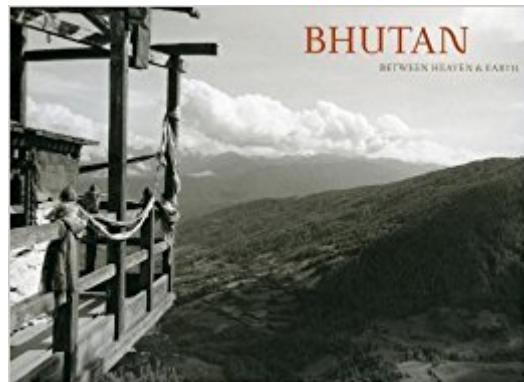


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Bhutan: Between Heaven And Earth



Synopsis

From visits to this Himalayan kingdom totaling seven months from 1999 to 2005, Mary Peck's fifty-six black-and-white photographs command attention and allow the reader to look at the landscapes, people, ceremonies, and architecture as if witnessed firsthand.

Book Information

Paperback: 144 pages

Publisher: Merlin Press (November 16, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0615499333

ISBN-13: 978-0615499338

Product Dimensions: 12 x 0.5 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #2,075,712 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #66 in Books > Travel > Asia > Bhutan #1366 in Books > Arts & Photography > Photography & Video > Nature & Wildlife > Landscapes #2456 in Books > History > Asia > India

Customer Reviews

Mary Peck has been photographing landscape in various parts of the world for more than thirty-five years. Her work has been exhibited widely and her photographs are held in many collections. She is the principal author and photographer of Chaco Canyon: A Center and Its World (Museum of New Mexico Press).

From visits totaling seven months from 1999 to 2005 to this Himalayan kingdom, Mary Peck's fifty-six black-and-white photographs, each on its own right-hand page facing a blank left, command attention. Many have captions placed as endnotes; a few do not. This removal of words from image (except four brief poems, one by Gary Snyder, another by W.S. Merwin, and a pair of his translations from Muso Soseki) allows the reader to look at the landscapes, people, ceremonies, and architecture as if witnessed first-hand. In her afterword, "The Curve of Time," Peck relates how directions were given by Bhutanese. Each of her inquiries led to a local range of instructions--by a resident. "Just walk into that cloud." one man told her. (130) Beyond circumscribed limits, hemmed in by gorges or peaks, paths or landmarks, the estimates faded, and new ones emerged with the next encounter, the next person down the trail. Karma Ura situates his nation within these same

furrowed contours. As a distinguished civil servant charged with the think tank implementing the nation's evolving Gross National Happiness policy, Ura explains in his thoughtful forward the scope of GNH. He sums up the country, full of micro-climates from one valley to the next. He notes how "the food chain is more or less completed within one's own valley." (5) Therefore, the mythology, community, and the land are integrated over generations to support the people in an intimate, in-depth knowledge-- differing from the fragmented skills promoted today as a solution to education and modernization. GNH philosophy, holistic, seeks value beyond quantification. Documents back to 1729, Ura reminds us, mention happiness as "the purpose of government." (8) If people are happier locally, their relationships thrive. Goods, houses, and money might not matter as much as personal and communal fulfillment. Certainly a fresh perspective, contrasted with the relentless, increasing, and often sole pursuit of economic growth posited in our own societies as the ultimate indicator of success. With television approved only just before the millennium, and the Internet now making inroads as electrification accompanies roads into more of the previously remote interior where most Bhutanese still live, the challenges already faced in its rapidly expanding capital, Thimphu, may repeat in villages and hamlets. India and China trade exert enormous pressures on a region with a fragile ecology and strategic situation, combined with its agricultural, hydroelectric, and forested resources. "All that Bhutan has is a very long history of isolation," Ura observes. (11) It lacks "our own huge center of gravity," and its culture and traditions must not only be preserved, but kept integrated into everyday life. Not as trinkets or dances for tourists, but as decentralized, sustained, and relevant ways of living as arranged by those best suited to do so: the local people themselves. Ura concludes with a reflective rationale for GNH. He registers the alleviation of poverty, the rights given both genders, and the control of environmental impacts. He argues against "a comfortable standard of living" measured by income or expenditure as the truest marker of well-being. Instead, he links the potential of his fellow citizens to "integrity, wisdom, and foresight." Perhaps surprisingly for readers of this book, Ura avers that such qualities may emerge even today from an historically "orally based culture" where the best and the brightest need not be literate to be community leaders. (13) For him, in the Buddhist perspective, this study via each person's "incipient" nature as a potential Buddha enables the Bhutanese to probe into understandings of the mind and perception, desire and its origins, which transcend the monetized frenzy of the rest of the world. While a short read, this combination of Dr. Ura's essay with Mary Peck's photographs, enriched by a more eclectic reading list that goes beyond Bhutanese borders for regional eco-criticism, is recommended. For images in complementary tones, with a longer narrative that delves into similar issues, see (my Nov. 2012 review of) "Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness" by

John Wehrheim.

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