



BHUTAN: I WENT IN SEARCH OF ONE HORSE AND GOT THREE

By Philip Merry

SUCH is the incredible hospitality of the Bhutanese people that when her usual sources could not find a horse, my hotel manager sent me in her own car to the start of the trail which led up the mountain to Tiger's Nest Monastery to see if we could find a horse.

Arriving at the beginning of the trail to the monastery, my hotel guide set about the task of horse hunting. Firstly, he asked the delightful ladies selling their tourist goods who then pointed him to a group of buildings. He quickly disappeared only to return just as quickly.

He said they had a horse but it could only take you up the mountain one way as the return journey was very slippery and the horse could fall.

How much is it? I asked.

500. I quickly calculated that this was about US\$ 11 and I easily said yes.

He came back with another man with a slight limp and we agreed terms. The man with



the limp then went off into the forest to find a horse.

He came back with two horses and a foal. My hotel guide explained that my horse needed friends. The friends turned out to be the mother and a foal and my horse the father. So, we would have a family outing.

Very soon, the horse was saddled and I mounted. The mother set off with the guide

but my horse would not move until the foal moved, and once that was accomplished we were off.

Words could never really explain how I felt. Earlier in the day, I had abandoned the idea of reaching the summit of Tiger's Nest as I had developed a cold and even climbing the hotel stair left me breathless. Then at breakfast, the hotel manager suggested that I take a





horse.

The perfect answer, our friends from the animal world would help me. And here I was, on my way to the top.

Beautiful pine trees adorned our way and the buildings were getting smaller and smaller and the air chillier and chillier. All I could do was to say thank you to the gods for the kindness of my Bhutanese hotel owner for making this possible.

However, those heavenly thoughts began to waver as I noticed my horse was walking on the edge of the small trail, inches from the drop into the valley. One misstep and we would plunge into the valley below. I voiced my concern to the hotel guide who conversed briefly with the horse owner, who smiled an answer. The hotel guide said, "The horses always walk close to the edge on the way up." As you can imagine, these words did not

lend me much comfort.

So, I grappled with my fear and came to the conclusion that the horse probably did not want to die today and that he had travelled this road many times. I had a choice to stay with my fears or trust my horse. Thankfully, I chose the latter. I

let go and relaxed my body into the rhythm off the horses' steps.

And in fact, this led to an attitude of gratefulness to my horse, for the path was very steep in places. I gave thanks for him, for without his willingness to carry my weight I surely would not have been able to make the trip. My fear disappeared.

One stunning view after another assaulted my senses. This was truly awe-inspiring.

We turned the corner and there was the monastery. I was speechless. I did, of course, marvel at how it was even possible to build such a structure on the side of a mountain.

But there was something bigger, much bigger.





TREK | ON A HORSEBACK TO TIGER'S NEST

It was a feeling that I could almost reach out and touch the divine.

So, the simple answer as to how humans could build this wonder: they were inspired by the divine.

The horse now needed a rest and I dismounted on a raised platform which also housed a giant prayer wheel. We drank water and rested.

Very few words were spoken. We didn't need to. The monastery, though still an hour away, silenced the chatter both inner and outer.

We re-mounted and began our journey again. The air was now thinner and I could feel the lungs of my horse bursting beneath me, or so I imagined. Occasionally, he would stop for a few minutes to regain his breath. At least, that's what I thought he was doing. He could, of course, have been meditating.

Suddenly, there was a large dog high on the path ahead looking down on us. It's as if he was the welcome party. With no bark or noise, he walked in front of us.

Then it was time to say goodbye. I stroked my four-footed chariot and he and his family returned.

After gazing in silence at the monastery, we set off back down. My hotel guide was so alert. Whenever we came to



more slippery slopes, he came alongside me ready to catch me should I fall.

I felt surrounded by care and kindness.

Whenever he could, he picked up litter left on the trail. He found a bin that had fallen over with its plastic bottles spilled, and he spent time carefully picking up each piece of litter and replacing the bin in its correct position. He cared for his beloved mountain.

I was grateful to reach the bottom as my muscles had begun to tremble and my T-shirt was soaking with sweat.

I was overwhelmed once more with gratitude.

First: grateful that my hotel manager had made it possible for me to see this treasure. She could have said, "there are no horses available" but she didn't.

Second: grateful to my hotel

guide for the way in which he cared for me, at all times making me feel safe.

Third: grateful to my horse who, without complaining, took my weight and introduced me to his whole family.

Bhutan: where unexpected friends come together to go the extra mile.

Photographs by Namgay Tshering



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