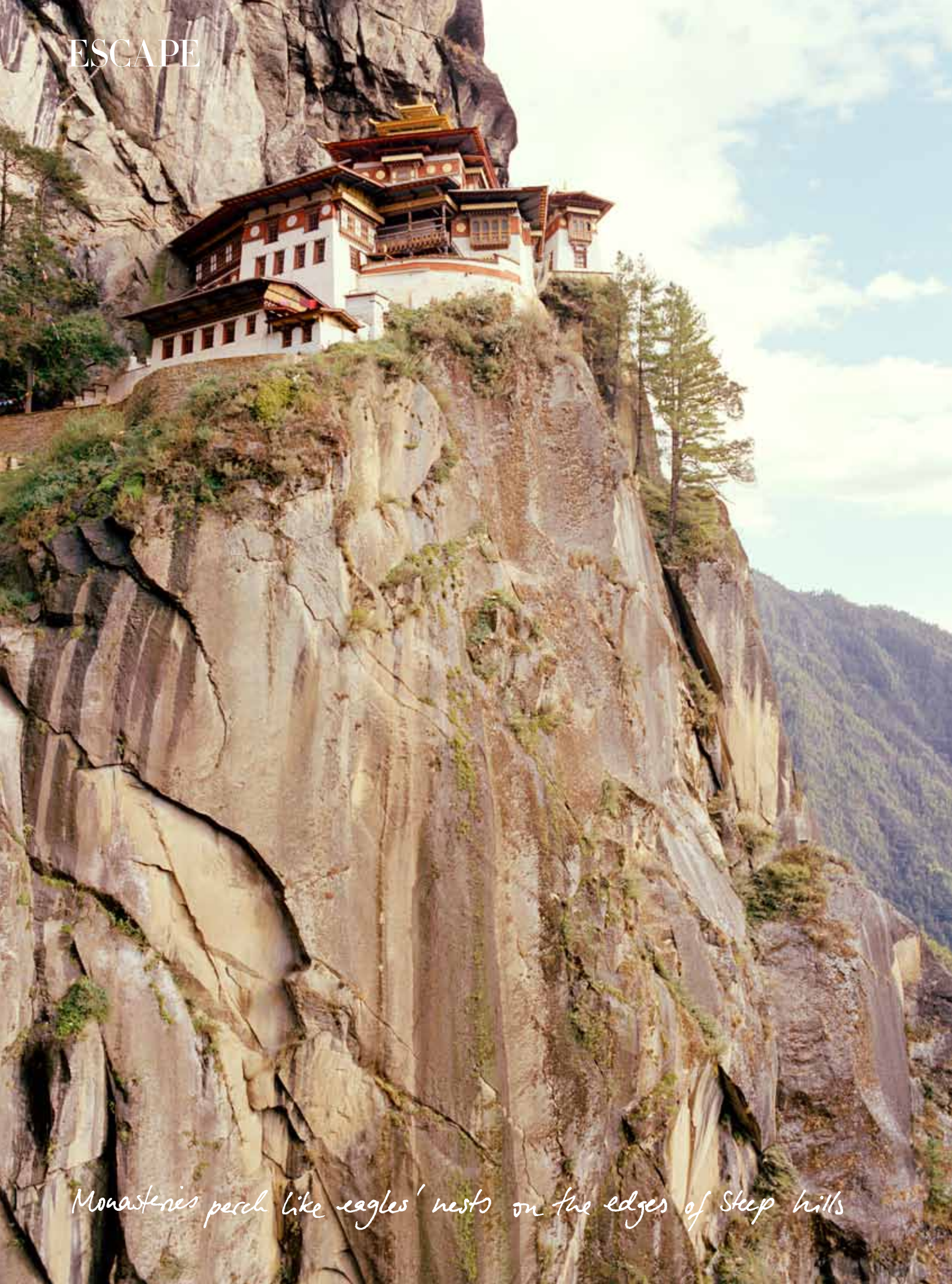


ESCAPE



*Monasteries perch like eagles' nests on the edges of steep hills*





COLOURS OF THE WIND  
Clockwise from far left: one of Bhutan's Amankora lodges. Buddhist prayer flags at the top of Chele La Pass. Monks in red robes. Buddhist prayer wheels. A monastery seen from Amankora's Paro lodge. Opposite: Tiger's Nest Monastery, overlooking the Paro Valley



One walk, up to a monastery, was festooned from start to finish with colourful prayer flags

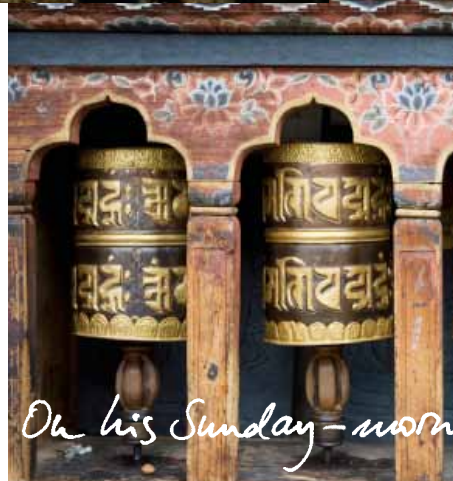
# THE KING AND I

HANNAH ROTHSCHILD chases her dreams to the tiny Himalayan country of Bhutan – and meets a monarch in pursuit of the Yeti

Leaving his bicycle at the gate, His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck of Bhutan walked up the narrow path toward us. As he approached, a phalanx of servants and subjects, all dressed in traditional costume, covered their faces and folded their bodies like human flick-knives into deep, respectful bows. I looked at my friends nervously – no one had explained how one greets a reigning monarch in a windswept apple orchard, particularly when His Majesty is wearing cycling shorts and looks like Elvis Presley.

'How do you do?' asked the Oxford-educated King in slightly accented English. 'Well, thank you,' I replied, attempting some vague mutation of a head-nod-cum-curtsey. Formalities over, we followed HM into the cottage where his beautiful Queen Jetsun Pema sat waiting. She bowed deeply to her husband and referred to him throughout as 'Your Majesty'; he called her darling. The couple had recently returned from an official visit to London where a highlight had been seeing her favourite musical, *Wicked*.

Our host, Michael Rutland, came to Bhutan in the 1950s to tutor the former monarch, King Jigme the Fourth; he never left and is one of the few foreigners to be granted residency. His traditional painted house is hung with school certificates and mementoes from his home town in Surrey. These days he acts as the British Honorary Consul in Bhutan; oozing geniality and propriety, Rutland is a Graham



On his Sunday-morning bicycle rides, the King encourages children to join him



PHOTOGRAPHS: FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE/TRUNK ARCHIVE, GETTY IMAGES

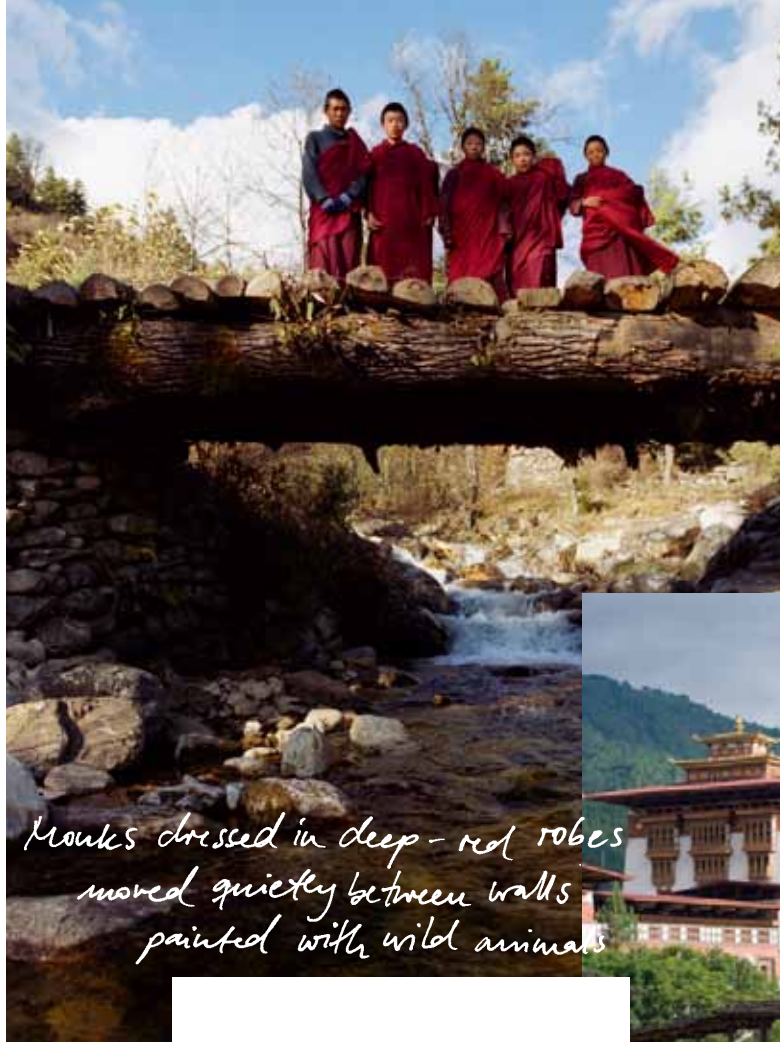


Greene character apparently without the foibles.

Over a lunch of pizza and Coca-Cola, the King (known as K5) told us his hopes and fears for Bhutan, one of the smallest and least-developed economies in the world, where a quarter of the populace lives on less than 80p a day and 70 per cent survive without electricity. When, in 1972, the last King, his father (K4), suggested that countries be judged on levels of Gross National Happiness rather than socio-economic indices, many raised a polite, if cynical, eyebrow. But thinking has evolved. Happiness used to be seen as a personal goal and hence a subjective, unquantifiable condition; increasingly it is acknowledged as a powerful political tool. In 2012, the UN adopted Bhutan's call for a holistic approach when quantifying a country's status and achievements.

After his father's abdication, K5 travelled his tiny mountain kingdom to convince his subjects to give up the idea of an absolute monarchy in favour of a democracy. This was a big step for a country where slavery was still legal in the 1950s. Most of his subjects were perplexed. 'Who should we vote for?' they asked. But K5's efforts were successful – there are now five political parties, two led by women. In the past 50 years the country has doubled life expectancy and enrolled nearly all children in school. The march of progress has also led to deregulated TV. One of K5's worries now is how to temper the runaway success of Indian popular culture saturating the airwaves – will the next generation become goggle-eyed couch potatoes? On his Sunday-morning bicycle rides, K5 encourages children to join him.

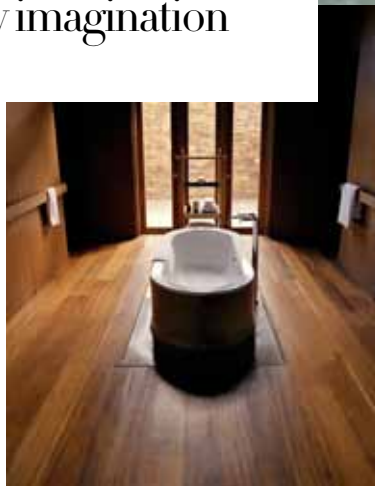
Towards the end of our audience, the King told us that he has one big dream. We leaned in – what could it be? A way of ensuring happiness? A plan to build a hydroelectric power station? The secret



*Monks dressed in deep-red robes moved quietly between walls painted with wild animals*

*WATERS OF LIFE  
Clockwise from left:  
young Buddhist monks. Punakha Dzong palace. A bathroom suite at one of the Amankora lodges*

For years this tiny country was a kind of talismanic Neverland in my imagination



of eternal peace with Bhutan's regional neighbours, China and India? The King revealed that he is determined... to find the Yeti. The Yeti? Yes, he assured us. A keen amateur wildlife photographer, K5 is convinced that noises emanating from the jungle and sightings of unclassifiable paw prints mean that locating the elusive Abominable Snowman is simply a matter of time.

For me, getting to Bhutan was the realisation of a dream. For many years, this tiny Himalayan country

was a kind of talismanic Neverland in my imagination. Since the heady days of my gap year, travel had become a feat of scheduling and itineraries with set starts and finishes. Each trip had to fulfil many functions: R and R, vitamin-D booster, exercise, romance, camaraderie and mini adventure. Later, I had children and got divorced. Travelling solo with three small daughters demanded a whole new set of criteria, a hybrid of military planning and maths. Everywhere I went I counted passports, suitcases and tiny heads. Inevitably, these highly prescriptive, pressurised holidays became



exercises in managing hope over experience, and none ever quite lived up to expectations – how could they?

So this trip to Bhutan, with four friends, was the first child-free adventure for many years. There were slightly ominous auguries in our booking forms: we were to have set itineraries under the watchful eye of a driver and guide; hotels and meals would be assigned to us for a flat fee of \$250 a day; even the trekkers kept to organised trails. For the Bhutanese, this is a way to ensure only a certain type of traveller ever comes (no backpackers) and that visitors stay on piste. No one can blame them for wanting to charge visitors a premium and to keep voracious experience-hunters to a marked path. Protecting their environment is key to ensuring Gross National Happiness. But this kind of controlled travelling is not everyone's idea of adventure.

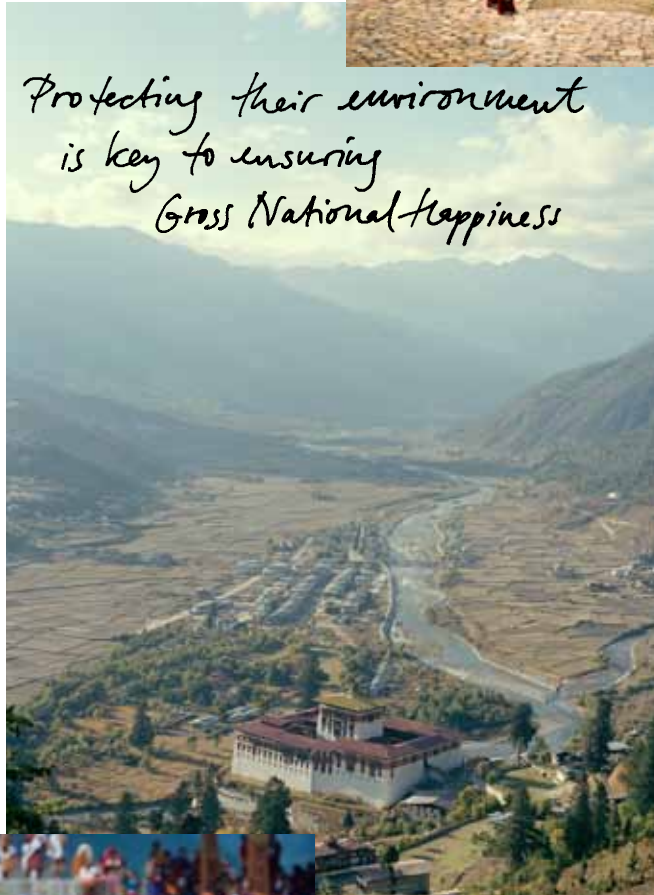
In hindsight, we should have saved up to stay at one of the five Aman-owned Amankora lodges that criss-cross the country, or at one of the Como retreats, Uma in Paro or Uma in Punakha, the latter magically situated on an S-bend of the Mo Chu River in one of the less-visited valleys. These hotels are expensive, but they also serve as tour operators, organising flights, visas and guided treks to some of the remote mist-veiled monasteries. Sadly, our funds stretched only to state-run tourist hotels. The ones we sampled were dirty and run-down and served almost inedible food with a strange consistency and indeterminate flavour. At night, the country's gargantuan population of dogs kept up a relentless barkathon.

Often, the landscape was compensation enough. Rugged and romantic, the craggy snow-capped mountains plummeted down to icy blue rivers. Monasteries were perched like eagles' nests on the edges of steep hills or splayed along rich green valleys. Monks dressed in deep-red robes moved quietly between walls painted with wild animals and penises (Drukpa Kunley, the man who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, was a lascivious, hard-drinking sybarite). Brightly coloured prayer wheels lined many buildings and spun their lamentations into

*Protecting their environment  
is key to ensuring  
Gross National Happiness*



*SPIRITUAL JOURNEY  
From top: a nunnery in central Bhutan. Rinpung Dzong, a Buddhist monastery and fortress in the Paro Valley. Prayer flags on a mountain trail. Bhutanese dancers in traditional costumes*



crystal-clear air. One walk, stretching several miles from the town up to Kyichu Lhakhang, a pre-seventh-century monastery, was festooned from start to finish with colourful prayer flags. We took another walk in a forest of flowering magnolia and gaudy rhododendron, oak, blue-pine and hemlock-trees. The air was scented with daphne and the ground littered with tiny blue

primulas. Throughout, our guides were charming, knowledgeable and utterly inflexible – there were itineraries to keep to, passes to be crossed at certain times, reservations to honour. 'But what if we arrive a little late, or forego lunch altogether?' 'Out of the question.'

Leaving Bhutan, I felt relief mixed with failure. When so many had loved it, what had I missed? Was it my unrealistic expectations and refusal to accept that Bhutan does not operate like most modern democracies? Imagining that I would rediscover my inner traveller by climbing into an aluminium tube and hurtling at 550mph across timezones, cultures and continents was unrealistic. But I am happy I went. As Mark Twain urged: 'Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.' □ *Amankora* (00800 2255 2626; [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com)); *five locations, from about £515 a person a night full board, including transfers and visa processing. Uma by Como, Paro* ([www.comohotels.com/umaparo](http://www.comohotels.com/umaparo)), *about £200 a room a night B&B. Uma by Como, Punakha* ([www.comohotels.com/umapunakha](http://www.comohotels.com/umapunakha)), *about £265 a room a night B&B. Philip Bowen offers bespoke walking tours; book with Guides of Bhutan* (020 7193 5239; [www.guidesofbhutan.com](http://www.guidesofbhutan.com)).

