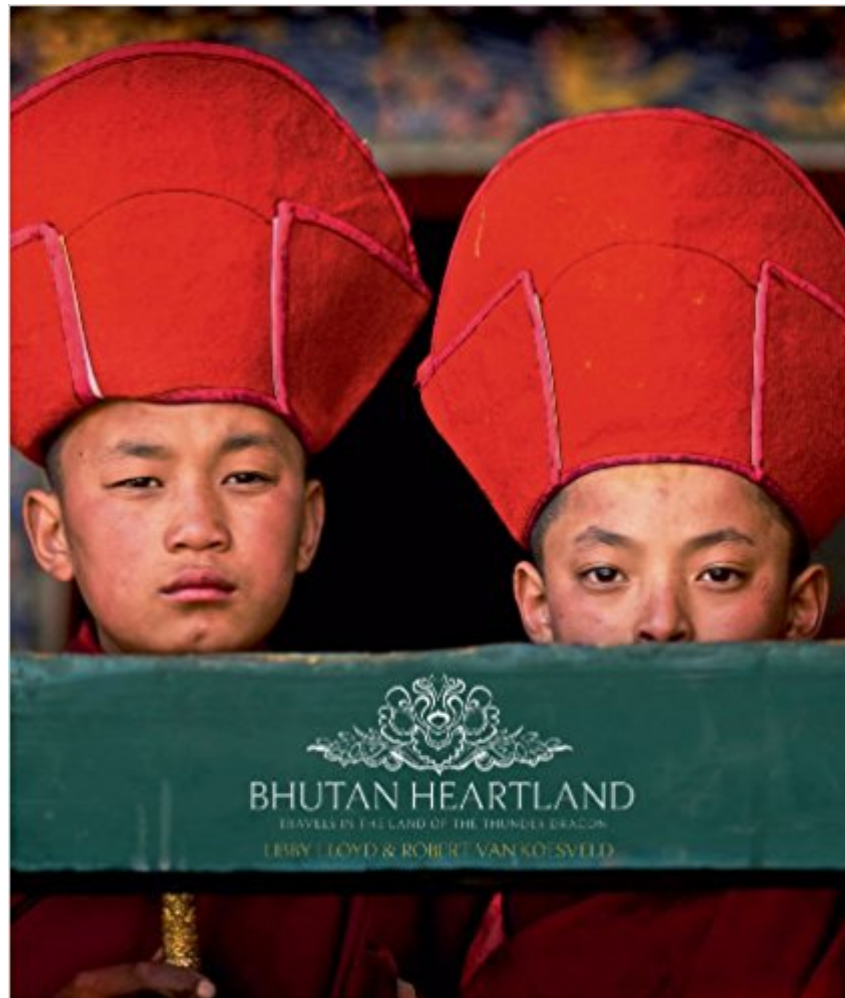




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Bhutan Heartland: Travels In The Land Of The Thunder Dragon



Synopsis

Introducing a small, little known country in South Asia, this stunning photographic journey pays tribute to Bhutan's beautiful ancient culture and landscape. Based on travels from west to east, the text and photographs focus on themes such as history, lifestyle, beliefs, democratization, and environment. This is a visual, informative, and personal account of Bhutan at a time when its government is changing from feudal to democratic and its people are deciding how to balance materialism with spiritualism.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"An evocative book which captures the transition from tradition to modernity in the world's newest democracy . . . brilliant and evocative photographs and stories." — Courier Mail "An outstanding photo journal on the life and times of Bhutan . . . breathtaking scenery and fascinating stories of the Bhutanese people." — Sunday Times "More than just an armchair travel guide . . . a sensitive and almost meditative book . . . Bhutan Heartland paints a fascinating picture of the country's culture at a grassroots level." — Have-A-Go News

Libby Lloyd is a former medical social work manager and a former lecturer in social work and social policy at the University of Western Australia. Robert van Koesveld is a photographer, a psychotherapist, and an educator of counselors.

Libby Lloyd and Robert van Koesveld report from spring times on the Lateral Road, the east-west

connection across the vertiginous valleys and high passes that furrow between the Himalayas and the subtropical plantations. As these Australian-based photographers and social workers explain early on, the choice they faced, to move from west to east, is repeated, if perhaps in reverse, by the natives of this kingdom daily. That road, and increasingly the feeder routes paved along what have been yak trails and footpaths, represents for this constitutional monarchy's Gross National Happiness plan a way to increase access to within a day's hike of most of its still largely rural citizens. However, unlike previous photographic accounts from the 1980s and 1990s--such as "Bhutan: Kingdom of the Dragon" by Robert Dompnier, "Bhutan: Fortress of the Mountain Gods" by Christian Schicklgruber and FranÃ§ois Pommaret, or "The Dragon Kingdom: Images of Bhutan" by Blanche Christine Olschak with photography by Ursula Markus-Gansser and Augusto Gansser--the themes for Lloyd and van Koesveld explore not only traditions and crafts and native garb, but, as its 2010-published photos show people in "modern" dress and lifestyles, on the nation's attempt for as one schoolgirl champions as "Westernisation without modernisation." This adds value to "Bhutan Heartland." It's set along the great road, and it doesn't look into the tropics as Dompnier does, or depart for the high country treks as does Dompnier or "Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness" by John Wehrheim. The former book handsomely presents traditional styles but little text and the latter black-and-white and verbal portraits taken of people and landscapes both customary and contemporary. The present book meets a compromise: moderate, intelligent text, many photos. (And a beautiful binding with a weaving pattern under the dust jacket.) It prefaces sections which follow what by now's the customary approach taken by a traveler. Paro's scenery, for the first time I've seen in a book, shows the modern town and not only the dzong (fortress-monastery center of local control): you get a better sense of why the airport occupies the flat space. And, with double spreads for this, Taktshang Gompa "the tiger's lair," or the capital Thimphu with its Trashicho Dzong's courtyard, you appreciate more than other collections their scope. For instance, while the interiors of dzongs and monasteries may not be as featured as in Dompnier (maybe access is more restricted twenty-odd years later?), you see the path to Taktshang, the hermitage, the prayer flags, and the visit in words is more in-depth and thoughtful than many descriptions emphasizing the difficult climb more than the destination itself, 3000 meters up a cliff. The authors also take time to give sidebar profiles of some Bhutanese they meet along the way. The chapters move over the passes into central Bhutan, and then into monasteries, valleys, and the eastern districts (if too briefly--this seems a hazard of many books, but compare "Bhutan: A Visual Odyssey Across the Last Himalayan Kingdom" by Michael Hawley, if you can find a copy, for more details). Such expansion deepens the relationship you feel to them, more than the passing or

anonymous mentions in some narratives. For instance, you hear from writer Kunzang Choden about her restoration of her family's former feudal estate at Ogyen Choling in the east, and you meet those old enough to have grown up under the old regimen, and listen to them compare an easier life today, as the roads reach the remote areas. Whether these can balance the modern with the traditional depends on educated people like Choden coming back to their villages and estates to improve local lives. The capital, as the civil service booms, attracts more internal migration: Thimphu's now over 100,000. A minor observation--"the lesser vehicle" is outmoded as a way to define "Theravada," which means "the way of the elders," even if this is contrasted with "the greater vehicle" as Mahayana. As in other accounts, you don't get much sense of the east by comparison, but this may be a necessary hazard with itineraries planned in advance vs. the difficulties of expenses and getting into challenging terrain. For example, the Bumthang three-day trek by pony and foot passes rapidly, without enough sense of how an excursion by foot differs from one by jeep. Readers may want to consult Choden, or the well-known memoir from an earlier decade, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth: A Journey into Bhutan* by Jamie Zeppa, for more on life off-road in the regions farther away from the Paro-Thimphu-Punakha itinerary favored by short-term visitors. The authors efficiently intersperse a lot of background (a glossary and too-short reading list are appended, and a link to van Koesveld's Bhutan Heartland website) that some earlier authors have struggled at length or brevity to include. It's the right amount for a newcomer: less academic and weighty than the "Fortress" study but more in-depth than Dompnier, and less-dated than "Dragon Kingdom." It's closest to Wehrheim's intimately scaled excursion to get into the mindset and talk to the locals more. For that, and the handsomely reproduced photographs and accessible text, a recommended addition to a short shelf, and a great place to begin an armchair adventure to Bhutan. (See my reviews of all titles mentioned on US, mostly Nov. 2012; Choden's novel "The Circle of Karma" reviewed Dec. 2012. For two other reports by Australians on longer contracts to advise in Bhutan, see my reviews of "With a Dzong in My Heart" by Launsell Taudavin and "Dragon Bones," Murray Gunn.)

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