

FESTIVAL SPIRIT

WITH OVER 100 PHOTOGRAPHY TOURS AND WORKSHOPS UNDER HIS BELT, **LEE FROST** IS ALWAYS ON THE LOOK OUT FOR NEW AND UNUSUAL DESTINATIONS. HIS LATEST TRIP TOOK HIM TO BHUTAN. HERE, HE TALKS ABOUT HIS ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON...



LEFT: "Monks gather in the courtyard of the Wangdue Phodrang Dzong to perform the Black Hat dance."

TOP LEFT: "A typical carved wooden mask."

ABOVE: "The best photo opps were backstage."

ABOVE RIGHT: "A young monk watches the festival."

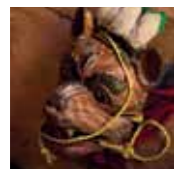
"WHEN I FIRST STARTED leading workshops back in the late '90s, there were few photographers doing it. Today, it's a crowded market and while there's nothing wrong with a bit of competition, demand for the short UK workshops I used to run has dropped considerably. So, in the last few years, I've started concentrating on longer overseas photography tours, including trips to Morocco, Cuba, Namibia, Zanzibar, Venice, Iceland, Tuscany and Turkey.

"One place top of my to-visit list was Bhutan. I'd wanted to go there ever since seeing a book by photographer Tom Owen Edmunds in the early '90s. That interest was sparked again when fellow pro Pete Adams visited Bhutan a couple of years ago. After talking about his trip, Pete and I decided to team up and lead a photographic tour together.

"Bhutan is one of those mysterious 'hidden' kingdoms that few people know much about. Also, it's not a country you can just jump on a plane and turn up in. Bhutan was closed to tourism completely until the mid-'70s, which is how it managed to remain isolated and secretive for so long. Slowly, Westerners started to trickle over the borders – India's to the south and Nepal to the west – in small numbers, and even today, the King has restricted the number of tourists to just 25,000 each year in order to

preserve the unique customs and traditions of his people. It's this that makes Bhutan so fascinating: it's stuck in a time warp, and a cap on tourism has helped minimise the exposure local people have to the trappings of the West. Buddhism is central to the lives of pretty much everyone and religion is practised to a level unseen in Europe for centuries, which encourages spiritual wellbeing and promises of a decent afterlife. Everyone wears national costume (it's the law), advertising hoardings and polythene bags are banned, smoking in public is illegal and Gross National Happiness (GNH) is considered more important than Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Bhutan is officially one of the happiest countries in the world.

"One of the main reasons why tourists visit Bhutan is to attend its festivals, or Tsechus. These take place pretty much every month of the year in different parts of the country, usually in the courtyard of the local Dzong (fortress), and consist of a series of elaborate masked dances put on by the monks to honour Guru Rinpoche, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan in the eighth century. When there's a Tsechu in town, it's like a national holiday: schools close, everyone dons their finery and local people travel from all over the district to attend. Photographically, ➤



ABOVE:
"The quality of light was often fantastic, but shooting conditions tested both photographer and equipment to the limit."

TOP RIGHT:
"Bhutanese architecture is distinct and striking. This building is part of the Gangtey Dzong."

ABOVE RIGHT:
"While visiting a school in Ura Village we were invited to a spelling competition."

OPPOSITE:
"A young monk posing for my camera before heading into the courtyard for a masked dance."

"Bhutan is one of those mysterious 'hidden' kingdoms that few people know much about"

these festivals are fantastic, so we planned our trip to allow us to attend several over the course of our 11-day stay.

"The first one we attended was a great photographic experience – but hard work. Trying to get good shots of the performances in the main courtyard was tricky due to harsh light, crowds of people and constant movement. Shooting with my 70-200mm zoom at 200mm and wide open at f/4, I could just about throw the background far enough out of focus, so I set AF to Servo, Drive to Continuous High and fired away, hoping that a few of the frames would be keepers! Exploring the inner courtyards and rooms off the main courtyard was more productive – better light, cooler and far less frantic. I found one room where the light flooding in through an open door onto a painted wall was amazing, so I just hung around and asked people if I could photograph them as they entered or left.

"Our second festival was the Tamshing Phala Chhoepa Tsechu, complete with spectacular dances, lavish costumes and amazing carved wooden masks. Everyone had a much better idea of what to expect this time and quickly scattered in search of inspiration. Most of that came from a small courtyard where the monks were resting after one dance while others prepared for the next. It was amazing to be in the thick of it all. Some of my best shots were portraits of locals standing in an open doorway, their faces flooded with soft light as they gazed in awe at the performance. To us, these festivals were fantastic photo opportunities, but to the Bhutanese, they are living manifestations of a long tradition and national faith, and by

attending and watching the ritual dances, they believe they will gain merit that benefits them in the afterlife.

"Although it wasn't on our itinerary, the Gangtey Tsechu was impossible to resist and it proved to be the most photogenic festival of them all: a great place to put into practice the lessons we'd learned along the way. Having the confidence to walk into a room or courtyard, even if you didn't know whether tourists were allowed, was perhaps one of the most useful. More often than not, no one minded a bit, and it was usually in the places where tourists didn't stray that the best photo opportunities existed.

"The climax of the trip was a walk to the Taktshang Goemba, or Tiger's Nest Monastery, perched on the edge of a sheer cliff 900m above the floor of the Paro Valley. It's a two-hour hike, upwards all the way, to get there – hard work with a backpack full of gear at those altitudes. The best light on the monastery comes late in the afternoon, which meant we had time to rest, wait and find good viewpoints, with the building framed by fluttering prayer flags. But with the sun sinking fast, all too soon we had to descend and by the time we reached the bus, darkness was falling and cold beer back at the hotel beckoned!

"Bhutan proved to be everything we expected and more. It's a fascinating country full of interest and inspiration. I, for one, have never taken so many photographs on a single trip, though I failed to beat one member of the group: he took over 8,300 images. Now that's impressive!" 📸
Lee and Pete Adams are planning a photo tour to Burma in late 2012. Email Lee at info@photoadventures.co.uk

