

Trans Bhutan Trail

Tracing the Footsteps of the Ancestors on a Path to the Future

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The Trans Bhutan Trail's (TBT) vision is the creation of a link between Bhutan's past, present, and future. We preserve this trail out of respect for our ancestors, as a symbol of National Unity.

We celebrate this trail as a connection between communities across the Nation.

We protect this trail as a gift to future generations.¹ (TBT Vision)

Introduction

On March 25, 2020, an event took place at Trongsa *Dzong* (Fortress). Like ancestors from generations gone by, two groups of travellers, from Haa in the West and Trashigang in the East, entered from opposite sides and faced each other in the courtyard of the *dzong*. Unlike expeditions of the past however, these men and women did not carry messages or goods to trade.

Each group carried a satellite (GPS) survey unit. The two devices carried by the expeditions, each containing electronic survey tracks of a 14-day trek, were connected with a simple click in the presence of the Lam Neten, the *Dzongdag* (Governor), and other dignitaries. This joined the 28-day TBT across the country, bringing to life His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck's plan to restore the ancient trekking route for posterity.

Sponsored by Bhutan Canada Foundation (BCF) and supported by Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), two teams of *De-suups* (the guardians of peace volunteers), land surveyors, foresters, local government officials and guides, representatives from the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS), and community volunteers, worked their way

¹ "2020 Trans Bhutan Trail Annual Trail Report", Bhutan Canada Foundation & Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021; Retrieved from - http://bhutancanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/TBT-ATUM-2021_Annual-Report_v3.pdf

across the country. They cleared the jungle, forded rivers, and recorded historic and cultural sites, avoiding motor roads and the national highway as much as possible.

In some places, the paths were well-maintained; in others, the routes had not been used since the late 1960s and early 70s after the highway was constructed. Along the way, local spirits and deities had to be appeased, communities provided hospitality and assistance, elders shared stories of the past, and children marvelled at a successful venture, even as Bhutan and the world were enveloped in the COVID crisis.

In an era when it is possible to drive this distance in days, or fly over it in hours, why would people carry a heavy load, bear the sting of blistered feet, and taste sweet water from a trailside spring? Is there anything worth seeing from a trail that cannot be seen from a car? Why would anyone spend days walking in the footsteps of the ancestors?

What is the Trans Bhutan Trail?

One day in Mongar, the TBT Eastern survey team came across an elderly herder.

“Where have you come from?” he asked.

“From Trashigang.” replied Cheki, one of the *De-suups*.

The old man looked quizzical. “Why?”

“We are looking for the ancient route across Bhutan,” said Cheki.

The herder roared with laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

Waving his hand across the horizon he croaked, “They’re all ancient routes!”

The herder makes a simple but important point. The TBT is an ancient route across Bhutan, identified by local elders as being of historic significance. But where one old route has been subsumed by the road, trekkers can use many other ancient paths that go past important sites and include stunning views. In this sense, there has never been one route, but an intricate web of trails connecting all of Bhutan. They are the original communications system.

In his book, “Two and Two Halves to Bhutan”, Dr. Peter Steele recounts the journey of six months he and his family made across Bhutan on a

medical expedition in 1967. The motorable road went as far as the bridge at Wangdue Phodrang. From there, they used ponies, stopping along the way, for weeks at a time, to run clinics and research the goiter problem.

Because of a smallpox epidemic in Mongar, their planned route from Jakar to Trashigang was closed. Instead, the group took the northern route, over Rodang La. This experience shows the importance and extent of the trail network system before the construction of the national highway. If certain villages had disease, or a route was blocked by snow or landslide, there were always alternatives. Today, TBT captures one of these possible routes. Hopefully, with time, more trail networks will create many trekking options.

For the time being, the journey is a 430km thread across nine *dzongkhags*, 28 *gewogs*, two municipalities, and one national park. It crosses 12 passes with an estimated 20,000m of accumulated vertical climbing from East to West, equivalent to ascending five and a half Mount Everests. Initial survey work has identified 400 historic and cultural sites along the route. However, as research continues, this is likely to increase dramatically. There is barely a bend in the trail that does not conjure up stories of passing warriors, a heroic *garp*, a local spirit, or a lover's journey to happiness.

This trail is not as remote as many others in Bhutan. It crosses motor roads daily, passes through villages, and follows some busy streets in Thimphu and Jakar. Some sections are familiar and well-used by people moving cattle for grazing, visiting temples, or mountain biking. Others have been cleared and re-opened for the first time in decades.

Some short sections still run along the road, but survey crews and villagers have been able to map a route that is about 90% off the road. Over time, as the TBT secures the optimal route, this will increase. However, like many of the other great long-distance trails in the world, the intention is to make it a mix of wilderness and urban, a rich cultural experience for Bhutanese and visitors.

History

Bhutan is located in the folds of the Himalayas with steep mountain ridges and deep valleys with sparsely scattered settlements of people living in agrarian villages and small towns. Traditionally the Bhutanese people

travelled from one settlement to another on foot, sometimes with mules and yaks to carry loads. People had to travel through thick forests and cross high mountain passes even in treacherous weather conditions while undertaking multi-day journeys. For centuries, and even today, these trails serve as an important network, connecting people from all over the country.

In books like “The History of Bhutan”, by Dr Karma Phuntsho, and “The Hero with a Thousand Eyes”, by Karma Ura, there are few direct references to the ancient paths. However, when one looks closely, they are the stage on which most of the action, fictional and non-fictional, takes place. There is still treasure along the trail in the form of stories, legends, and myths, revealing a culture of its own. There are accounts of epic battles where combatants were sent in circles or plied with local hospitality, so much so that they were not able to fight when the time came. Tales of lovers, Gurus, and spirits are still held in the fragile memories of elders along the path.

One such legendary story was the adventures of a man named Garp Lungi Khorlo who was a *ngagoe* (strong man) at Trongsa *Dzong*. He is believed to have walked from Trongsa to Punakha and back in a day, the same time that a car takes today. It was said that he had gained the ability to “ride the wind”.

These legendary characters live through folk tales, poems, and songs about Bhutanese traditions, history, and geography of the past. In the 1960s, the construction of roads began and the use of old trails slowly disappeared. With the deterioration of the ancient trails, the history and generations worth of culture and stories are in danger of being forgotten.

A modern re-imagining of the TBT came with the initiative “Move for Health Walk”.

In 2002, Bhutan’s Minister of Health and Education, Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup, and some colleagues walked from Trashigang to Thimphu. In addition to promoting healthy living through exercise, the walk was a tribute to Bhutan’s health workers, who walk daily to remote, hard-to-reach areas to deliver immunisation and other health services across the country.²

² “Bhutan Move for Health Walk Mobilises over \$1 million.” UNICEF, 2002; Retrieved from - https://www.unicef.org/media/media_19227.html

The 2002 walk and a subsequent 2014 walk along the same route by the former Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, also supported the development of the Bhutan Health Trust Fund to finance essential medicines and vaccines in Bhutan.³ These walks raised millions for health care in Bhutan. They also fostered awareness of the importance of fitness for physical and mental health.

Along with its success at generating public awareness and fundraising, the Move for Health Walks demonstrated the modern possibility of trekking across Bhutan, and supported His Majesty's vision of a permanent path. This vision was shared by the Bhutan Canada Foundation, which has been the lead donor to the revival project.

In partnership with the TCB, BCF, a long-time contributor to national education, has committed to supporting trail development. In doing so, the Foundation helped to co-ordinate a network organisation, comprising Local Governments, Department of Forests, *De-suung*, Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators, Royal Society for the Protection of Nature and Bhutan Sustainable Tourism Society. The National Land Commission, Guides Association of Bhutan, Department of Youth and Sports and approximately 40 contributors from the *dzongkhags* and *gewogs* have helped complete the project.

The venture has benefited greatly from a Nu. 20.06m contribution from the Royal Government of Bhutan, which has been administered by TCB. Of this, all but approximately 3.5% has gone directly to *gewogs* and the Phrumsingla National Park for trail construction, creating employment opportunities for over 700 individuals, many of them tourism workers, impacted by the pandemic. Countless bridges have been reconstructed, forests cleared, and ancient stonework and drainage systems uncovered and re-built to create a viable path across the nation.

Within the year, travellers will be walking, running and cycling the ancient route once again.

³“Move for Health Walk with ‘Invest in Health’ theme to be held on 11th October.”The Bhutanese, October 4, 2014; Retrieved from - <https://thebhutanese.bt/move-for-health-walk-with-invest-in-health-theme-to-be-held-on-11th-october/>

Building a Trail Community

“A trail forms when a group of individuals unite to reach a common end.”

-- *On Trails, Robert Moor*

Since the TBT is created along the routes used by ancient commuters, it passes through many rural communities. This will create new socio-economic opportunities for the people, and make a significant contribution towards sustainable development in rural areas. This will help build a healthy ecotourism setting.

When hikers start walking the trail, there will be several economic benefits. The local communities can run homestays and other services. The hikers will also have to buy food supplies locally as they take multi-day trips, or arrange for luggage to be shuttled to accommodations along the way. Some hikers might also engage local guides to better understand and connect with local stories and culture, thus creating employment opportunities.

The TBT will give hikers a sense of appreciation for nature. The huge range of ecosystems and the variety of flora and fauna, offer an educational experience along the trail. The local people will also get the opportunity to meet people from different cultural and social backgrounds.

In recent years, Bhutanese people, especially the younger generation, have taken up travelling and hiking. TBT will also offer something new and exciting to these sections of the population with a “trail passport and stamp system”. Using the passport, hikers can challenge themselves to trek the entire TBT on one trip, or sections of the trail at different times. So far, TBT has engaged over 40 local trail ambassadors to help with this programme. This will act as a balance to the modern lifestyle characterised by a huge amount of time spent on gadgets and junk food. TBT will thus have a positive social and environmental impact.

All these experiences align with Bhutan’s developmental policy of Gross National Happiness.

With the launch of *Gyalsung* -- Bhutan’s National Service for citizens when they reach 18 years -- in the next few years, the trail will be busy throughout the year. Within a decade, more than 100,000 *Gyalsups* will have walked

across the entire stretch or a part of the TBT, as part of their *Gyalsung* training programme. As they trek, *Gyalsups* learn about ancient and modern history and see first-hand innovative development and entrepreneurship projects. They will also undertake vital community services along the way. After a certain period, almost every Bhutanese will have walked on the TBT, becoming familiar with different regions, common stories, diverse experiences, and rich reflections about Bhutan.

Trekking and Tourism

The TBT is first and foremost a trail for Bhutan. However, the intention is that it becomes one of the world's great trekking routes. In this sense, the TBT is closely aligned with the TCB strategy. Of the 315,599 visitors to Bhutan in 2019, just 4,780 were registered for trekking expeditions, more than half of them for two or three nights.

Among leisure travellers, 68% visit for five or six nights and 0.8% for 15 nights or more.⁴ Most of this time is spent in Paro, Thimphu, and Punakha. The TBT's future plans focus on seven priorities, supporting high value tourism:

- Create new and enhanced trekking options.
- Extend the trekking season.
- Promote travel to Eastern Bhutan.
- Support domestic tourism.
- Contribute to local economies.
- Increase the length of stay.
- Increase the number of return trips.

The development and implementation of this plan will take time, especially as we struggle out of the biggest crisis to impact global tourism since the Second World War. However, we have the benefit of learning best practices from friends, through membership in the Asia and World Trails Networks. Each of these trails has its own unique story and a focus for learning. Some examples include:

- The West Highland Way, Scotland (154km) -- Demonstrates the value of heritage paths and public, private partnerships.

⁴ "Bhutan Tourism Monitor 2019", Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2020; Retrieved from- https://www.tourism.gov.bt/uploads/attachment_files/tcb_K11a_BTM%202019.pdf

- The Bruce Trail in Canada (890km) -- A UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and sustainable trail development and the protection of nature corridors.
- The Appalachian Trail in the Eastern United States (3,500km) -- Sustainable trail development and the protection of nature corridors.
- The Jeju Olle in Korea (422km) -- Development and promotion of local products and social enterprises through the associated Jeju Olle Foundation.
- The Camino De Santiago in Spain (780km⁵) -- UNESCO world heritage status with large-scale community-based tourism and economic development.

These trails attract hundreds of thousands of hikers annually, protecting nature and contributing to local and national economies. With time, the same will be the case for the TBT. Some intrepid tourists will hike the entire TBT. But introducing guests to a short section of the trail -- say, walking the section from Dochula to Hongtsho, rather than taking the bus -- will enhance the visitor's experience. This kind of active trail use will not happen overnight, and it would be a mistake to squander resources by overbuilding infrastructure and raising expectations in communities. Organic growth is best. We must plant the seed for a new tourism economy.

What does a Trail have to do with Policy?

Like the path itself, the TBT project weaves through many aspects of policy in Bhutan, both practical and metaphorical.

Tourism -- The TBT is one part of TCB's high value tourism strategy. When tourism re-starts in the coming months, it will be one of the high-profile attractions drawing more travellers for longer stays. It will also hopefully contribute to a focus on trekking infrastructure in the country. Trails require resources and strategy to be maintained, especially those which receive heavy usage and are located in mountainous and monsoon prone areas. A co-ordinated approach to trail maintenance, enhancement, and sustainability is essential to ensure high value tourist experiences.

Health -- The TBT was born out of Move for Health. Roads, cellphones and packaged foods come with modernisation, as does a sedentary lifestyle,

⁵ The Camino is actually a network of many trails stretching across most of Europe. The main branch through France is 780km. In 2015, 172,243 trekkers and pilgrims walked this section alone.

depression and obesity. Most nations struggle with these issues and the associated costs. Walking will not solve this, but active, healthy, and fit citizens require less medical care and contribute more to society. Many jurisdictions are currently exploring ways to integrate hiking and other physical activities into health policy. Re-introduction of community “Move for Health” walks and initiatives such as nature and exercise prescription programmes are low-cost investments in community health.⁶

Education -- The TBT is a living classroom for students on Bhutan’s history, culture, and environment. The trail, and others like it, hold additional value for experiential learning, helping to form the next generation of leaders. Along the path, hydro projects, modern forestry, innovations in agriculture, and entrepreneurship activities all provide opportunities for students to walk and learn. These are considerations for curriculum and education policy.

Collaboration -- As they grow and age, all organisations and bureaucracies have a tendency to silo. To combat this, we must actively seek out ways to collaborate with unlikely partners. More than 50 government, community, private and international organisations have worked together to build the TBT. This has not been easy and far from perfect, but selfless commitment and leadership by partner organisations have created opportunities for collaboration and creativity, and brought the project to this stage -- ahead of schedule and under budget. This is one of many examples of organisations successfully working together in Bhutan. There could always be more.

It is just a path through the woods, past paddy fields and over hills, but there is a reason that the ancestors created this route and why, in a changing world, His Majesty’s vision is so important. We are at a critical moment in time to protect and celebrate the culture and history of Bhutan, to ensure a legacy for generations to come.

The TBT, Snowman, Rodang La, Druk Path, Jhomolhari and other extraordinary trails are rare treasures in the world today. Protecting and refurbishing these routes is a gift to future generations, for their health, well-being, and national pride.

⁶ “Take 2 Hikes and Call me in the morning”, Z. Metcalfe, National Observer, December 7, 2020; Retrieved from <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/12/07/canada-nature-prescription-programme-outdoors-health>

After the recovery from COVID-19, and with increased interest in nature-based sustainable tourism, there is great opportunity for Bhutan to be one of the premier trekking and mountain biking destinations on earth. The TBT is not a solution to everything. There is much more work to be done and many hills still to be climbed. Although much has changed, some things have not. The ancestors knew that there were few sensations in the world as good as a long challenging trek, followed by a hot stone bath.

We will see you along the trail.