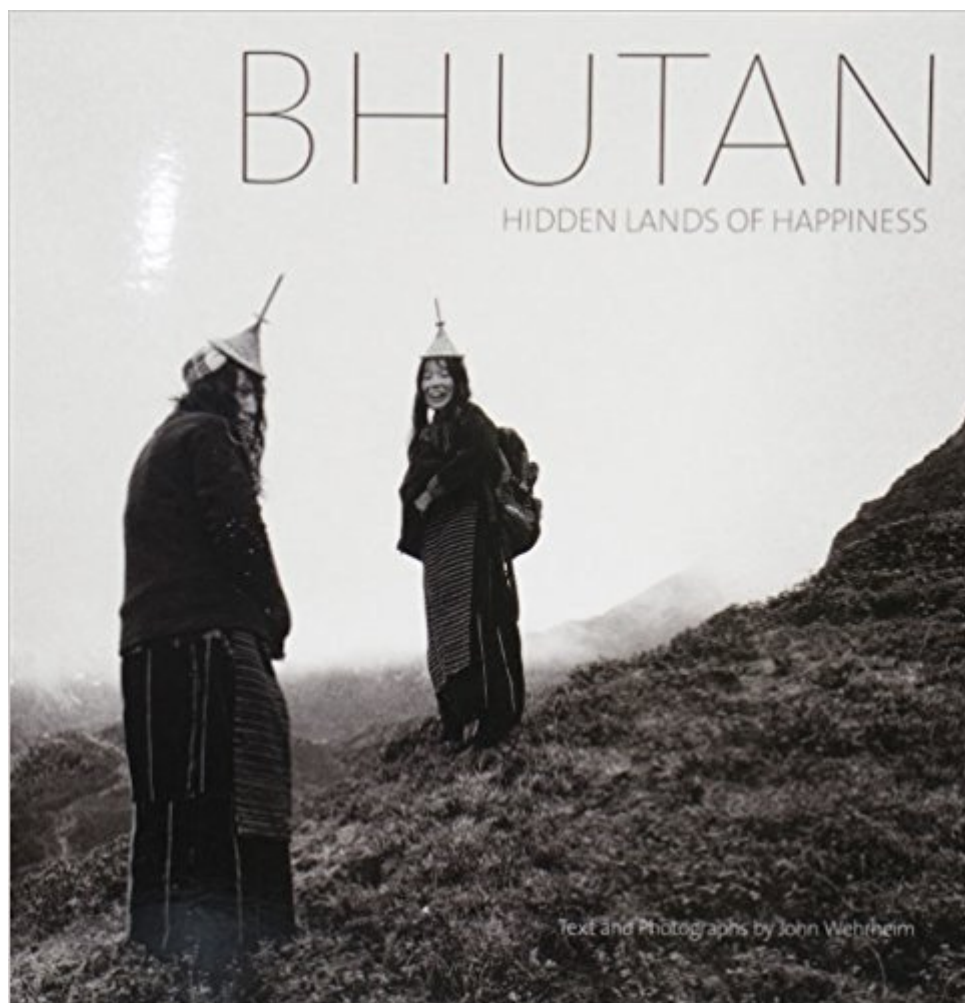


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# Bhutan: Hidden Lands Of Happiness



## Synopsis

**BHUTAN: Hidden Lands of Happiness** by John Wehrheim, now a revised and updated edition in new, softcover format - beautiful black-and-white portraits of Bhutan unlike any other book with lively texts exploring the lives in Bhutan. Wehrheim guided the reader through the districts of Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Gasa, Laya, Lunana, Wangdi, Bumthang and Trongsa, revealing remote hot springs and isolated hermitages and ends in the streets and nightclubs of the country's capital, Thimphu Town. This book is now a classic - a time capsule of the fast-changing decade in Bhutan. Tibetan folksongs sometimes sing of beyul hidden lands that can only be seen by those of pure heart and mind. Tucked into the towering peaks and steeply forested valleys of the Eastern Himalayas, the Bhutanese believe their country to be such a place. **Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness** is a geographical and cultural passage from the yak pastures along the Tibetan border to the rice lands in central Bhutan. Guiding the reader through the districts of Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Gasa, Laya, Lunana, Wangdi, Bumthang and Trongsa, the book reveals remote hot springs and isolated hermitages and ends in the streets and nightclubs of the country's capital, Thimphu Town. 108 black and white images narrated with stories, journal entries, folklore, dharma teachings and oral history create a portal across centuries. Clear, skillfully composed and rich in depth and detail, these flawless images illustrate an intimate tale of Bhutan told by an artist who is deeply familiar with his subject.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

...brilliant photographs and evocative text. I can't imagine a better portrait of this amazing country. -

Paul Theroux Beautiful book . . . The photographs are fine and the text is full of good detail, lively and intriguing and well-written... - Peter Matthiessen --Paul Theroux and Peter Matthiessen This coffee-table journey through Druk Yul, as the Tibetans know their lucky southern neighbour - Land of the Thunder Dragon - is a terrific collection of photographs and traditional lore woven into John Wehrheim's engaging travelogue. The American - who unabashedly lists cannabis sativa horticulturalist among his prior occupations, thus proving that former potheads can indeed produce works of art - has visited Bhutan several times over the past 15 years, primarily as a consulting hydrologist, and he's seen pretty much all of it the hard way, on foot. Wehrheim's text represents a very personal account of wending his way across the interior, meeting the locals and listening to their stories. It is straightforward, but can't help but be compelling given the beautifully illustrated landscape and the rural realities of living in it. He is also as good a writer as he is a photographer, at once vivid, meditative and playful. But amid the fun and good cheer, Wehrheim is careful not to romanticise Bhutan too much. All the photos in this book are black and white. Certainly the tones serve the documentary maker well and give the portraits inarguable nobility, but I would have loved to see the landscape in colour. Apart from that tiny murmur of dismay, this is a wonderful book - for anyone who's visited Bhutan and for those who see it in their dreams. --The Nation Newspaper, Thailand

You may be jet-setting Bhutanese official, a world-weary expat, or a newcomer planning your first trip -- no matter who you are, you will discover images and stories in Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness that will surprise you, delight you, and give you a glimpse of the secret corners of a country and culture never before revealed. Each chapter presents a place carefully detailed in portraits and landscapes -- scenes set against a backdrop of history, myth, architecture, and memory as told through the lives of the people who live there. One hundred and eight photographs, gathered from 1991 to 2006 and narrated with journal entries, folklore, dharma teachings, and oral history, create a portal across the centuries. Not a travelogue but a lyrical work of creative non-fiction, this book is an intimate tale told by an artist deeply familiar with his subject. The book reads like fiction with an added dimension of characters and settings illustrated with outstanding images -- clear, skillfully composed, and rich in depth and detail. The author traveled with the Crown Prince, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, now Bhutan's fifth king, on his tours of Wangdi, Trongsa, and Bumthang. We learn the untold story of how, in 2003, his father the fourth king fought and won Bhutan's 'war against terror'; in just three days, with little loss of life. The book ends with a look at Bhutan's relationship with its giant neighbours, India and China, telling the stories of the 'Indian Chicken Man' Bhutan's struggle with globalization and 'God Bets Buddha', a saga told by Tashi, a Tibetan refugee who escaped to Bhutan. In the author's own words, the book has '... tried to present

a vision of a people consciously living in the realms of both the spiritual and the material worlds. Bhutan is a land like no other yet a part of our world. There's a saying among expatriates working in Thimphu, 'Bhutan could become just like any other country but no other country could be like Bhutan.' --Tashi Delek Magazine --Tashi Delek Magazine

Born in Chicago, educated at Notre Dame, John Wehrheim's dabbled CV reads like a career consultant's nightmare -- the professional dilettante: writer, photographer, journalist, commercial diver, teacher, fisherman, farmer, unemployment insurance professional, cannabis sativa horticulturalist, contractor, land developer, hydropower consultant, utility engineer. While black water diving through drilling mud in the sewers of Honolulu, John decided to get back into photography. He specializes in exotic locations with beautiful women. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Here's a deeper look into these pages. Previous reviewers laud John Wehrheim's evocative b/w photographs; these compliment his sensitive, lively, insightful text. A companion to the DVD he co-produced, "Bhutan: Taking the Middle Path to Happiness," about the modernization-by-moderation Gross National Happiness project in this Himalayan kingdom turning constitutional democracy, the last land ruled under a Tantric Buddhist ethos, this book--originally in hardcover 2008, but slightly revised for the better 2011 in paperback--transcends its coffee-table appearance. That is, after fifteen years as a hydropower consultant working in Bhutan, 1991-2006, what he presents peers into the Bhutanese, many of whom he honors as "my friend" in the calm, steady narrative. As in his similar pairing of story and image, "Taylor Camp" from Kaua'i, the clash of the recent with the traditional underlies his perspective, allowing him to record patiently the varying reactions from the natives to a world that wants to barge in, attracted to an Asian area's remote charms and natural wonders. But this does not mean he romanticizes a place where television in 1999 brings unwelcome temptations, and advertising tempts people away from the Buddhist admonition to let go of desires. Fittingly, after a deftly conveyed history of Bhutan and its context within Indian-fueled border struggles where the nation its novel way wins a recent war on terror, the geographically east-west path begins in Paro, where one lands at the airport. Wehrheim explores the Drukpa heartlands, in western and central regions, and treks follow drives into the northern interior near Tibet. A climb up to Taktshang doesn't seem to faze him. We learn of the Divine Madman and patron saint Drukpa Kinley, and the girl turned goddess Yeshe Tsogyal. In the Thimphu chapter, we visit his hosts Jack and Karma; she relates her family's saga which shows the

difficulties of many in this land where subsistence farming exacts its toll, and which in its abandonment the capital lures some young folks eager for civil service and bright lights. "TV ruined my life," laments a bumper sticker. Wehrheim as an engineer observes astutely how the modern buildings in traditional style gloss over concrete and steel the folk patterns but the structures cannot sustain the shapes that have evolved gracefully with organic materials. In Punakha, Wangchu takes him into the forests. A yellow dog, one of the ubiquitous barkers, hassles him one night. A yelp is heard later. A leopard has taken off the cur, like a cat with a rat, the beast hanging limp in firm jaws. Bhutan's predicament might be akin to that of small prey between big beasts. Glacial melts worsen conditions; the fate of Nepal and its deforestation, and of Tibet with the loss of its timber, overshadows this nation as it tries to balance sustainable growth with a reluctance or eagerness (the capitulation of Sikkim lingers as its doomed neighbor) to rule one's self. The central regions of Wangdi, Trongsa, and Bumthang give the author a chance to join a royal celebration, that goes on for weeks it seems. The king having abdicated at fifty for his son's reign, the son urges his people to further democracy. But, they fear the corruption and graft of their neighbors will infect the Bhutanese polity. Before this event, my favorite chapters take us nearer the northwest frontier with Tibet. First, Wangchu and companions escort Wehrheim into Gasa. A hot spring, and elegant portraits of its bathers, enhance a bawdy set of exchanges, as if the Wife of Bath reincarnated. The territory of Laya and then rival Lunana follow. The Layap, more laid-back, exemplify a "hidden" people tucked away out of sight of the Tibetan trade routes, 12,000 feet up. Conical hats perched on the women and the forthright, practical attitude of the locals make them a memorable bunch. Their "night-hunting" custom of matchmaking seems a twist on my Lao or Hmong students' tales of similar "abduction" where all the family are complicit! As with the Lunap, the people over in Lunana, they seem far removed from what we know as neighbors. The Lunap have practiced polyandry as the men are away so long and this kept the population low in a harsh terrain. A more reticent and gruff lot, they contrast with the Layap. In a moonscape, Wehrheim, a water expert, knows that he cannot get sick from a "sacred spring" that high up. He drinks a cold draft. He gives in as his heart stops and energy invades his body. He relates a terrible and powerful afternoon spent coping with the aftereffects of the "naga." Reading these encounters, the vivid and textured photography interspersed to often comment directly or subtly on the narrative, you learn about the sensibility of the people. Gradually, your own time and space retreat, as with the impact of the "naga's water," if not so dreadfully. Receding from our own surroundings, the harsh and gentle notes mingled in this account merge and rise. Unlike more heavily promoted reports from Bhutan, falling into New Age rapture or (see my reviews of "Radio Shangri-La" by Lisa Napoli and Jamie Zeppa's "Beyond the

Sky and the Earth" for a relevant pair) "I went there and fell in love" revelations, "Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness" allows a longer gaze than a first-person voice, through the camera. While limited of course to his choice, the added visions open up the reader to become a viewer. He tells us in an afterword: "The words and events are true but not always in the order and sequence implied." In Wehrheim's last chapter, in a bar in Thimphu Town, he tells an ambitious Indian who wishes to push Bhutan twenty years forward that such a jolt will leave it like Sikkim: invaded by immigrants, overrun by India, touristed and commodified. Forty years behind Bhutan may be, but better than the fate of Tibet after that period. In a parallel conversation with a Tibetan-descended man, whose family in part escaped, Wehrheim sums up his subject jauntily. "Happy peasants in bountiful fields. A King who's too good to be true. The usual. I'm making photos, shooting video and collecting stories. Everybody in Bhutan's got a story--some of them might even be true." (See my reviews of "Taylor Camp" and the Bhutan DVD)

John clearly has a deeper understanding of the Bhutanese people. Fantastic publication from someone who truly cares about the subject(s) captured in a bygone era.

Excellent picture of a beautiful country! I especially enjoyed having it all come to life even more when I visited. Everything the author describes is so true.

John's window into another culture, his new book entitled Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness, is bright and clear. His book is filled with marvelous stories of his travels and the legends and history of this amazing country. His exquisite photographs look through the lens into the very soul of a traditional Tantric Buddhist culture and its remarkable people. His stories are filled with great humor and portray the Bhutanese people - of all ages and stations in life, from a child to a Senior Abbot and the soon-to-be King - as playful, respectful and devoted to their culture. I've followed his work for more than thirty years, and this book - together with his new film "BHUTAN -- Taking The Middle Path To Happiness" - make a bright and welcome package into a world "where happiness is the guiding principle of government. Imagine a people who see all life as sacred and the source of their happiness, a place with an abundance of clean and renewable energy, a nation committed to preserving its culture. Imagine a Kingdom where the King lives in a simple wooden cottage and judges his progress by the country's `Gross National Happiness.'" John Wehrheim's book "Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness" is marvelous!

There is something qualitatively different about the happiness depicted in this book. The people of Bhutan have a quiet, bemused look about them that is so different from the forced, frenetic smiles we see in photographs of ourselves in the west. We see their rustic dwellings and simple clothes and think of them as backward, yet their peaceful countenances speak of values different from our own. While they're satisfied with taking care of their basic needs, we clamor incessantly for more. I was so initially taken by John Wehrheim's photographs of the Bhutanese that I couldn't wait to discover what he had written about the culture. His telling character sketches whetted my appetite for a deeper understanding of the Buddhist way of life. With a book so beautifully packaged, the danger is to judge it as mere travelogue, memoir, or coffee table bric-a-brac. Rather, it is an opening on a true Shangri-La culture that points in its simplicity to missing aspects of our western way of life.

Congratulations to John Wehrheim and the publisher to this book. Black and white photography is very rare in the field of illustrated books from exotic countries nowadays. You feel on every page how close John was to the people and how he loves them. Great portraits are accompanied by fantastic landscape photographs. John not only is an excellent photographer. He is a very good writer too, a rare combination. I hardly can remember when I read the text in a photographic book from the first line to the last one. John's humour and knowledge made the reading a great fun! My own travels to the places John visited became present as if they would have happened yesterday. It is the best book on Bhutan I ever had in my hand!

This Bhutan book is an absolute must to have. I lived 4½ years in Bhutan and travelled all over this beautiful country. John Wehrheim has picked up many fine details of all facets of Bhutan, not only in his superb B&W photographs but also in his well written text. The text only could be a book by itself. A very interesting contribution to books on Bhutan and the region. Bart Jordans - living in Hanoi - from Holland

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