

The Last Paradise

‘An expedition through the remote
hidden kingdom of Bhutan’

By
Christopher D G Brown.



Children gazing into cloud forest, Paro valley.

Day 1

I left my hotel in Kathmandu early in the morning, got into a taxi and headed to the airport. Finally all those months of planning and anticipation were over, my expedition was about to become a reality. After passing through customs and waiting at the gate, a small twin propeller driven plane pulled in. I boarded along with the twelve other passengers present and took a seat. The air hostess went through the usual air safety rigmarole and then the captain's voice came through the speakers 'Mount Everest will not be visible today due to thick cloud cover'. Everest was a sight I had been longing to see, so luckily for me the captain was wrong. After forty five minutes in the air, there it was, Everest, protruding through a dense layer of clouds, it truly was a magical sight to behold and one that will stick with me forever.



A View of Mount Everest (left) and Kanchenjunga (right) from the aeroplane.

As the aeroplane descended down through the clouds in preparation to land, Bhutan began to reveal itself. Dzongs and terraced rice paddies adorned the forest covered Himalaya and the view of the mountains just seemed to go on forever. I was there, finally. I had made it to the Shangri la, the land of the thunder dragon, the last paradise. The sheer beauty of what lay before me brought a tear to my eye; it was like landing in the Garden of Eden.

Usually one would travel straight to their hotel from the airport before exploring, but not in Bhutan. After passing through customs I proceeded to meet my guide, Kesang Tenzin, together we drove straight to the Paro Dzong (a traditional fortress that has been converted into a Buddhist monastery). The ancient traditional architecture is massive in style and spectacular in form, with towering exterior walls surrounding a complex of courtyards, temples, administrative offices, and monk's accommodation. The Dzong was decorated with hand painted murals of Buddhist depictions and spectacular scenes of nature alongside many different mythical beasts.

After some time exploring the Dzong and admiring the architecture Kesang and I began a short two hour walk along the forested sides of the Paro valley. It was my first

chance to experience the forests of Bhutan and I was not disappointed. The hills were densely dressed, *Pinus wallichiana* and *Cupressus himalaica* as the main canopy providers. The canopy trees were accentuated by an understory of many different spectacular shrubs and herbaceous plants, including; *Rosa*, *Berberis*, *Bergenia*, *Mahonia*, *Juniperus*, *Cannabis*, *Zingiber* and *arisaema*, along with a huge array of mosses, lichens and epiphytic ferns.

Once the short walk was completed, Kesang and I made our way down to the local green, here we sat and watched the men in their traditional dress competing at a game of archery. Out of nowhere a group of Bhutanese girls dressed in beautiful hand woven silk outfits began to sing. The sound of their combined voices was incredible and truly humbling. Kesang and I then headed to a local restaurant for lunch and then onto the hotel. It was an amazing and inspiring first day in such a unique place.



Women singing in their silk outfits.



Man taking aim with his bow.

Day 2

I awoke at 6:30am, packed my camera, waterproof clothing and a bottle of water. I put on my hiking boots and set off with Kesang. Today was a day I had been looking forward to for a very long time, the trek to the Tigers Nest monastery. Hidden amongst the cloud forest, perched on the side of a huge vertical cliff lies the Tigers Nest. This monastery is one of the most iconic images of Bhutan and a sacred pilgrimage destination for Buddhists. Nothing can prepare you for the sheer magnificence and

beauty of this place. The surrounding mountains are covered in dense forest from which clouds are continuously formed and then drift across the landscape.

The trek up to the monastery was long, steep and arduous. It took four hours to reach the top but what a trek it was. The starting altitude was around 2000m, whilst the monastery lies at around 3000m. The distance up is 4km, this makes for a very steep climb. We started in Pine forest, predominantly *Pinus wallichiana* but as we headed uphill the vegetation began to change. We passed through glades of *Rhododendron sp.*, *Pieris japonica*, *Cornus capitata*, several *Arisaema sp.*, *Leycesteria formosa*, many *Quercus sp.*, *Berberis* and many many more. In amongst the understory were boulders that looked like miniature gardens of lichens and mosses, these were the perfect breeding ground for many different species of ferns which were sprouting out of them. A mountain goat perched high up on a cliff edge and a Grey Langur jumping through the canopy were both spotted high above us.

As the monastery grew ever closer, occasionally revealing itself through the dense forest, it became more and more astounding. We reached the final push, turned a corner and there before us was a huge waterfall cascading down the cliff face. The drift from the waterfall had kept part of the cliff face permanently moist which had created the perfect conditions for an incredible vertical garden of ferns and mosses. Kesang and I passed the waterfall, the power from its flow being harnessed to turn a prayer wheel stuffed with thousands of hand written prayers; every time the wheel turned it rang a bell, adding to the atmosphere. The final ascent lay before us.

Eventually we reached the monastery; we put on our long sleeved shirts and removed our boots. We then left our valuables including phones and cameras at the entrance (sadly no photos from inside). We headed up some very steep paved stairs and into a tiny dark room, here we made offerings and were blessed with holy water infused with saffron. We continued to make our way up more steep steps until we entered another dark room, the air was thick with potent incense smoke. The room was full of monks sitting all over the floor, shaved heads and dressed in red robes. They began to chant their mantras loudly and play their long silver horns. The room was adorned with spectacular statues alongside clay carvings and painted from floor to ceiling in incredible scenes of nature and beauty. Colourful textiles were draped everywhere. It was an image that words cannot do justice and to understand you must experience first hand, an image I will never forget.



Leycesteria formosa.



Epiphytic ferns colonising *Quercus*.



Young children play under prayer flags during ascent to the Tigers Nest.



A vertical moss and fern garden created and sustained by the drift from the nearby waterfall.



The Tigers Nest Monastery.



Grey Langur sat on a branch of *Quercus*, eating epiphytic fern fronds.

Day 3

I did not get a good night of sleep due to the anticipation of the days trek. What would it be like? Would I be able to complete it? Am I fit enough? Will I be able to cope with the altitude?

Nine days hard trekking in unknown terrain is a daunting challenge. I woke up early, prepared my things and headed down to the hotel reception to meet Kesang and the driver. We loaded up the 4x4 and headed out through the Paro valley. Just when you think the scenery cannot get any better it does, around every corner, Bhutan never ceases to take your breath away. Suddenly the car ground to a halt at a gate and some soldiers appeared from a small hut surrounded by barbed wire. It was here we would collect the permission papers to enter into the Jigme Dorji national park. My passport was thoroughly inspected and the permit paperwork received.



Soldier guarding the Army checkpoint.

We headed further up the valley following the banks of the Paro River to a place called Sharna Zampa, until we finally were met by our horseman, horses and cook. The horseman and cook were loading up the horses whilst Kesang and I set off ahead, they were to catch up and overtake us later in the day.

The trek had begun. The path was not easy and consisted of a combination of protruding boulders and deep mud. We hopped from boulder to boulder to avoid getting our boots wet so early on. After roughly three hours of walking, Kesang and I stopped for lunch in a beautiful spot, on top of a huge boulder surrounded by dense forest and overlooking the raging Paro River. Little did I know of the long and gruelling trek that lay ahead that day? The rain began to fall, lightly at first, but gradually getting heavier and heavier. The path became more and more difficult to traverse, until eventually it had actually transformed from a path into a fully flowing stream.

The rain got progressively worse until I was literally drenched from head to toe. My waterproofs had failed me miserably on the first day; this was not a good sign as more rain was expected and this was the beginning of the monsoon season. Wet clothes and

trekking are not an ideal combination, especially when you are camping, it is impossible to dry anything. Luckily my boots held out and my feet were dry, if a little worn out.

Despite the hardship of the rain and the difficulty of the trail, the mountain scenery and forest I was enveloped in were inspirational. The plant diversity was endless and it quickly became apparent that it would take a lifetime to identify all of the plants. Luckily and completely randomly, around twenty minutes later I stumbled across one of Bhutan's most senior botanists Raling Ngawang, he has collected and pressed almost every single specimen held in the Bhutanese national Herbarium and was actually collecting when I stumbled across him in the forest, it was such a pleasure to meet such a well respected botanist in his natural environment, we chatted for 10 minutes, discussing the surrounding plants, Bhutan and the locations I would pass through along my trek route.



Raling and I after meeting randomly in the forest.

After meeting Raling I managed to see through the physical challenge I had set myself and began to observe the sheer beauty and diversity that the wilds of Bhutan have to offer. Around me were so many beautiful plants, *Primula sikkimensis*, *Rosa webbiana*, *Primula geraniifolia* and *Rhododendron lepidotum* amongst many others. Kesang and I walked for a total of nine hours through extreme rain and terrain, covering a total distance of 28km and climbing in altitude 760m, from 2870m up to 3630m. We trekked through many different forest types, including broad leaf temperate filled with oaks such as *Quercus semecarpifolia* and coniferous consisting of a mix of *Pinus wallichiana*, *Picea smithiana*, *Abies spectabilis*, *Cupressus torulosa* and endless *Rhododendron sp.*

Eventually we arrived at our arranged camp for the night. Camp consisted of a stone shack with a wooden roof. Any false hopes I had of a comfy bed where quickly shattered, a rug on the floor was what I received. Due to the climb in altitude, sickness quickly set in, headaches, dizziness and a loss of appetite, all of which could not stop

me from sleeping for eleven hours on an uncomfortable rug. I was extremely worn out and it was only the first day.



Kesang headed into wilderness of the Jigme Dorji national park.



The path transformation after torrential rain.



Rhododendron lepidotum.



Primula geraniifolia.



Traditional hand woven bamboo backpack.



Primula sikkimensis.



Clouds clinging to the dense forested peaks of the Jigme Dorji national park.

Day 4

I woke up early and after breakfast prepared my things, the ritual of taking down the camp and loading the horses began. Once the horses were loaded, Kesang and I again left the horseman and the cook behind and continued our slow ascent. It was a steady gradual uphill trek with some ups and downs along the way. We passed through another army checkpoint, where again my papers were rigorously inspected. The vegetation gradually began to transition from the dense forest from the day before into open grassland being grazed by Yaks, surrounded by steep sided valleys coated in conifers, including cypress and junipers. Along the rivers edge were fantastic meadows of *Primula sikkimensis*, *Irises* and several other alpine meadow species.

We passed through a small settlement called Soe. When we arrived in the settlement we were met by a young Yak herder in traditional dress who was preparing to feed salt to his Yaks. We waited in anticipation to observe this difficult and dangerous task, whereby the Yak is tripped over, its horns pushed in to the soil and salt poured into its mouth. A process the Yak's do not enjoy and put up some fight to avoid. We watched the process in awe.

Kesang and I then left the young man and continued our way uphill through the steep sided valley. Eventually after around seven hours walking and a climb in altitude of 460m from 3630m up to 4090m we had covered roughly 19km. We arrived at our camp; now well above the forested area below and with very few coniferous trees remaining. Again the camp was a small shack, this time surrounded by grazing Yaks. The clouds began to clear and a spectacular view of Bhutan's second tallest mountain was revealed, Mt Jomolhari.

Altitude sickness began to set in, this time worse than previously and I was unable to stomach dinner. Kesang grew ever more concerned with my condition as I was by now clearly showing signs of acute altitude sickness. That evening we discussed the implications of continuing the trek as helicopter extraction would be the only means of escape, should my condition worsen. I genuinely contemplated turning back and asked myself whether I was physically capable of coping with ascents in altitude totalling nearly another additional one thousand metres. I convinced Kesang that we should see how I felt in the morning and make a decision on continuing then. A sleepless night followed, could I complete this epic adventure I had spent so much time planning and travelled so far to undertake? Had I over estimated what I could physically achieve?



Large male Yak being prepared for salt feeding.



Spectacular view of Mt Jomolhari 7314m.



Species rich alpine meadow.

Day 5

I woke up not feeling great, but better than the night before, no headache and some appetite. I drank lots of water and forced myself to eat as much rice as possible. I had decided that there was no way I would not at least attempt to complete this expedition. It had been my dream for many years to reach the high Himalaya in Bhutan and now it lay literally before my very eyes and I was actually contemplating giving up. I decided I would have to be rescued by helicopter before I gave up my dreams of seeing what natural spectacles this mysterious and remote region had to offer me. With some convincing of my symptoms receding, Kesang, the Horseman and the cook reluctantly agreed to continue.

The daily ritual of packing up the camp and loading up the horses was completed. Kesang and I again set off ahead. The ascent had begun and it was tough. Steep, slippery and wet, we climbed ever higher and higher, headed into the clouds. The air was thin and getting thinner with every metre higher we climbed. It began to rain heavily; alpine plants slowly began to reveal themselves from within the dense wet mist. Eventually we reached the summit of our first mountain pass at 4890m. I was eager to descend quickly in altitude as the symptoms of altitude sickness are often delayed; spending any significant amount of time at these altitudes was not a wise idea. We pushed on down the steep mountainside passing huge swathes of *Primula sikkimensis*, *Rhododendron sp* and a through a dense forest of *Betula utilis*. The Betula forest was so distinctive and unlike any I have ever laid eyes upon. All of the trees growing at an angle towards the sun, this was obviously the shadier side of the mountain.

The understory of the forest was uniform and consisted of only a few plant species, or at least it did at this time of year. As we descended down and out through the forest more spectacular views of the steep sided mountain valleys were revealed. So was our campsite, way down in the flattened valley bottom next to a river. The river being fed by the melting glacial waters flowing down from Mt Jomolhari.



Brightly coloured bird perched on a branch with dense birch forest in the background.



Iris goniocarpa amongst a meadow in a deep sided valley.



Tent pitch surrounded by meadow and a spectacular view

Day 6

We headed off early; it was to be a long day. Kesang and I climbed along the valley side and eventually came across a small community of around six households. Located here was a medical dispensary but not the sort we are used to back home. It consisted of a small shack that contained sacks full of wild plants which had been harvested for traditional plant based medicines used by the people of this region. Western medicine is not accepted in these far and remote areas of Bhutan.

We continued our way along, up, and eventually over the steep sided valley. Climbing ever higher, the path became quite hazardous, fresh but small landslides were present and there were some extreme drops we had to navigate past. Eventually we dropped down into the beautiful remote settlement of Chebisia. The valley that Chebisia sat within was extremely beautiful; the view of the village (roughly ten houses) from a distance was that of an untouched idyllic lifestyle high in the clouds. Eagles circled above whilst Yaks grazed around us. At the far end of the valley was a dramatic mountain from which flowed a waterfall that had carved its way through and off of the sheer mountainside. The waterfall fed into a shallow but wide river that meandered along the flat valley bottom, passing by the houses of the valleys occupants and providing a fresh glacial water supply to its inhabitants.

In the distance I could see children playing and laughing. I dreamt what it would be like to grow up in such a remote and secluded setting, no understanding of the rest of the world and its problems. Left alone to fend for yourself and to grow old with such a connection and reliance upon the valley in which you live and the nature by which you are surrounded.

After passing through Chebisia the relentless uphill climb began, we were headed for today's high mountain pass. The ascent was the steepest of all and extremely hard going. Once again the air became thinner and thinner until eventually we reached the top, our heads within the clouds. Keen to get down we pushed on, heading down the mountain side, eventually heading into a dark and dense coniferous forest. The path was twisting and turning below the dense canopy and the forest gave me a slight feeling of unrest, it was like no other I had seen so far on the trip and reminded me of the remote areas where tigers had been filmed for the BBC documentary 'Lost Land of the Tiger'. Tigers are known to frequent these high and remote forests because they receive very little, if any, disturbance from human beings.



Clouds descending into the dark coniferous valley.



A view of the dense coniferous forest we had trekked through.

Day 7

I was awoken by the sound of chopping wood and the smell of smoke in the air. Fresh green branches of *Tsuga dumosa* were being burnt to release their strong coniferous scent and dense white smoke. The horse man was doing this to appease the mountain deities of the region and to ensure us a safe passage through the most remote parts of the trek that lay ahead. So much smoke was produced that the whole valley became filled with a smoky haze.

After the smoke had cleared and the horses were loaded, we noticed two other visitors to the wild valley, Himalayan Black Bears. We stood and watched in awe as the two bears migrated along the high valley side, they knew we were there, intruders in their remote and beautiful home. One bear retreated into a cave hidden under a stand of conifers, the other sat outside staring down at us. These bears are predominantly solitary except during mating season, during this season the bears become more territorial and propose a higher risk of attack to humans.

As a group we discussed how we would approach them as our only route out of the valley headed straight past where they rest. We decided that Kesang and I would head up the valley side first, making lots of noise as we approached and giving them as wide a berth as possible. We grew ever closer and my adrenaline began to flow, there was no alternative route to take, this was our only option. We were within 100m of the bear sat outside guarding its cave, when it suddenly stood up. It began to charge down the hill towards us, I could clearly hear the thuds of its feet hitting the ground. Kesang and I had agreed that if the bear did charge us we would stand our ground together as usually this is the safest option. I turned to Kesang and he had already begun to run, I turned and ran too. We ran into some dense Rhododendron scrub and found ourselves scrambling up a very steep and loose slope of rocks. We could no longer see the bear due to the dense vegetation blocking our view, but we could still hear it. I was half expecting the bear to appear out of nowhere and attack, luckily for us the Bear retreated and so did we.

Whilst clambering out of our sticky predicament I spotted some orchids which I took pictures of to attempt to identify later. We headed up and out of the valley below, the paths were steep and treacherous. The ascent gradually levelled out and we met our first of a few nomadic Tibetan Yak herders. Their tents perched at well over 4000m in altitude. We approached a tent that was guarded by a Tibetan mastiff; the lady present did not want to interact with us. We continued on our way until we came across another tent and a woman and child appeared at the entrance. The woman had weathered skin but kind eyes; she welcomed us into her home with open arms. We entered and took a seat; she showed us the traditional technique used by these nomadic people to churn Yaks milk into butter. She used a hollowed out trunk of *Pinus wallichiana* as a bucket with a kind of plunger inserted into it. I took some pictures of her and her daughter and we headed on our way.

As we neared the mountain pass I spotted two men below us butchering a Yak in a stream, this technique is used as it keeps the flies off of the meat and helps to keep it clean by readily washing the blood away. This is a rare sight to see as these nomadic communities will only slaughter one Yak per year. The meat will then be dry cured and smoked over a fire, providing a lasting supply. The hide will be used for bedding and clothing etc, no part of the animal is wasted. Above us we could see the majestic *Rheum nobile* but it was way out of our reach. On reaching the peak of the mountain pass, Kesang, the horseman and the cook all hung some prayer flags and chanted their mantras. We then descended down the valley towards our camp for the night. The day ended with a precarious river crossing and yet another beautiful camp spot.



The view down the valley from campsite



Himalayan Black Bear



Nomadic mother and daughter outside their home.



Nomadic mother and daughter



Yak butter churn



Fern fronds used for insulation

Day 8

The day began with a steep ascent and a long hard climb; once again the air began to thin along with the vegetation. As we reached into the high alpine region we spotted many fantastic alpine plants including *Lilium nanum*, *Saussurea gossypiphora*, *Anaphalis nepalensis* var. *monocephala* and *Eriophyton wallichii* along with many others. Kesang and I also spotted a small *Rheum nobile* high on the valley side not too far out of reach; we decided we could make it. To reach it we needed to cross a fast flowing glacial river. We took off our boots and bags and waded across, from there we scrambled up a steep boulder field until we finally reached it. This was a plant that I had set out to find and had spent many days searching for as well as asking locals if they had seen it. We had achieved it, it was a great feeling.

I noticed a yak hair tent in the distance and then by the riverside a nomadic lady collecting water. We headed down towards her tent to say hello. She was a lovely person and invited us into her home, inside it was blackened with smoke and filled with curiosities, in the tent we sat together and drank yak butter tea. I took a photo of us using my phone and she said it was the first photo ever taken of her and the first time she had ever seen a camera. I was humbled by her presence; she had such a lovely character. We showed her a photo of the *Rheum nobile* and asked if she had seen any better specimens, she said yes, if we were to head further up the valley we would find them, I couldn't wait, we headed ever higher in search of this magnificent plant.

We pushed higher and higher until we turned a corner into a remote alpine plateau with steep rocky mountain sides, it was filled with *Rheum nobile*'s of all shapes and sizes, it was spectacular. Kesang and I scanned the mountain sides for a good specimen to photograph. About 500m above us we spotted a fantastic specimen. Tall and stout and in full bloom it was a sight to behold, the flower spike hidden within the semitransparent bladder like bracts. Surrounding the *Rheum* was *Meconopsis grandis* also in flower. The two plants complimented each other in an otherwise almost barren landscape. We took photographs and then headed ever higher until we crossed the highest mountain pass of all at 5005m. The ascent was hard but the descent was even harder. Water flowed through the slippery and dangerous boulder field for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually the path eased up as we headed down to the base of Tiger Mountain. On the way down we spotted a musk deer, a fitting place to see the favoured prey of the Royal Bengal Tiger. Eventually we made it down to a meadow where we set up camp for the night.



The first photo ever taken of this nomadic yak herder.





Anaphalis nepalensis var. *monocephala*



Lilium nanum



Saussurea gossypiphora



Eriophyton wallichii



The majestic *Rheum nobile*.

Day 9

We woke up early and admired the meadow that we had camped in; it was the last I would see. The camp was packed down and the horses were loaded with all the gear. We were headed back down into the dense forested valleys that came with the lower altitudes. We passed through coniferous forests, temperate forests and mixed of the two. Again we spotted many species of *Rhododendrons*, *Arisaema*'s, countless *Berberis* species, *Daphne*'s and many other wonderful flowering plants. The walk was long and tiresome, eventually the forest cleared and we could see our destination miles ahead in the distance. We were headed to the remote mountain community of Laya. This community's people are unique in appearance because of their traditional dress. They have been living a traditional lifestyle unspoiled for centuries. The village sits at well over 3000m in altitude and is the highest permanent community found within Bhutan. The community itself are of Tibetan origin, they migrated over the high mountain passes into Bhutan after they were banished from Tibet when they were blamed for livestock plagues and crop failures. It is said that when they set eyes on the beautiful valley they now inhabit, they chanted 'Laya' which subsequently became the permanent name of their village.

Eventually we made it to the village, there was a real sense of community, the houses were of a traditional Bhutanese style but the people were dressed very differently. The women had conical woven bamboo hats and jumpers made from black Yaks wool, they wore beaded necklaces and other jewellery. There were cows, horses and Yaks roaming freely throughout the village whilst the men and women worked the fields. The rain was pouring and the ground so wet there was nowhere for us to set up camp. We set about knocking on people's doors to see if they would let us stay the night. Eventually a very kind lady welcomed us into her home and offered us a room for the night and a warm meal. Ironically after all of the searching we had done on the mountainsides to find the *Rheum nobile* she had one in a vase on her windowsill.

This community spend a lot of time harvesting and collecting Chinese medicines such as the strange and intriguing *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* which consists of a parasitic fungus and its host the ghost moth larva. This particular ancient medicine has been used for over 2000 years by the Chinese and Bhutanese to treat heart, lung and liver diseases.



The village of Laya



The lady who let us stay



The Rheum on her windowsill



Layap women in traditional dress

Day 10

Once again we started the day by loading the horses with all of the gear. We said our goodbyes to the people of this beautiful village, as we left I took a few black and white pictures of some of the villagers, one of whom gave me one of the traditional bamboo hats as a parting gift, I cherish it dearly as my favourite possession.

We descended back down into the dense forests but it was not long before we were stopped in our tracks. A huge landslide had been caused by the heavy rain and the path along with the forest around it had vanished. We navigated across the steaming soil precariously. It wasn't long before we came across another, and another. We must have traversed five or six before we were confronted with the biggest of all. To cross this one we had to jump into a raging glacial river and wade up to our waists in the freezing water. The horses refused to cross so we had to turn back and then use machetes to cut down trees in order to fashion a path across the crumbling earth. It was a great piece of team work and worked successfully. It wasn't long before again the rain began to pour heavily. The path was becoming harder and harder to walk on and large cracks were revealing themselves running parallel to the path we were walking on. Sure signs that the earth was loose and could potentially give way at any moment. It was still too wet for us to set up camp anywhere but the horseman said he knew of a solitary household hidden in one of the forested valleys we were headed into. Eventually we found it; we were welcomed in by the lovely family who inhabited the premises. They were very hospitable and again we were offered a bed for the night and a warm meal.



Layap mother and daughter in their vegetable plot.



Portrait of a young girl from Laya.



Layap mother and daughter.



One of the many landslides we crossed.



Forested valley filled with *Abies densa*.



Children of the family that welcomed us into their home.

Day 11

We woke up early, said our thanks to the family and headed off for the days walk that lay ahead. The end of the adventure was upon us and what an adventure it was. Whilst we walked on headed for civilisation, I thought back through the fantastic and terrifying moments that we as a team had shared along the way. The horseman, the cook, the guide and I had become a close knit team.

Eventually, in the distance, we could see civilisation, we had done it! We completed over 156 kilometres along the Bhutan Tibet border, through some of the roughest terrain I had ever experienced, the most magnificent scenery I had ever seen and the home of a huge and diverse flora.

We had seen so much and met so many fantastic people. We had spotted so many wonderful and fantastic plants, including the one I had set out to find, the *Rheum nobile*. We had climbed up to extreme altitudes, seen glaciers, suffered altitude sickness, waded through freezing glacial rivers and even had a close encounter with a bear.

To date this adventure is the greatest achievement of my life. It genuinely was a life changing experience and one I will never forget. It makes me want to explore the whole of Bhutan, the whole himalaya. Remember, this adventure was only within one national park. Bhutan is an incredible place and one that I would recommend to anyone.

