

PHOTO ESSAY

A photographer's wander in Bhutan

Awestruck by the landscapes of Bhutan, photographer Solana Cain learned to put down the camera and immerse herself in the moment

WRITING AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOLANA CAIN
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An iron chain suspension bridge takes visitors to Tachag Chakhang.

Halfway up the steep 915-metre hike to Taktsang, or the Tiger's Nest Monastery, one of the places where Buddhism was introduced in Bhutan, my guide asked me again if I'd like him to carry my pack. Struggling to catch my breath, I declined, yet again. The weight felt heavier with every step, but as any photographer knows, some suffering is necessary to get the right shot.

My trigger finger had been putting in overtime since arriving in the tiny Himalayan kingdom tucked between India and Tibet. The country draws many types of tourists – the spiritually inclined, wellness enthusiasts, trekkers, birders and photographers to list a few.

[REVIEW: Sleep in sweet tented suites at Bhutan's Punakha River Lodge](#)

Everywhere you look, there's a photo to be captured. Bhutanese culture is vibrant, the architecture is breathtaking and the country is teeming with ecological diversity. I brought as much photography gear as I could because I knew that the range of what and who to photograph would be great, but what I did not understand was that the altitude – which ranges from 2,400 m to 3,350 m – would make my camera bag feel like I was carrying a boulder.



Perched high above the Upper Paro Valley in Bhutan, Taksang (or Tiger's Nest) monastery is one of the country's most sacred Buddhist sites.



In Punakha, Guide Kuenzang Gelay Yonten points out plants used as medicine.



Prayer flags adorn one of the country's longest suspension bridges as it stretches more than 160 metres over the Pho Chhu river.

Within an hour of landing at Bhutan's Paro airport, I found myself on the side of the highway at Tachog Lhakhang, a temple resting at the base of a mountain. We couldn't go inside because it was closed for renovations but there was still so much to see.

[FIRST PERSON: The Tiger's Nest Monastery is in my backyard. I try not to take that for granted](#)

To reach the temple, there's an iron chain suspension bridge built over Paro River and secured by traditionally built gatehouses with whitewashed walls and windows framed with interlocking, elaborately carved and painted wood that makes the structure stand out against rolling hills and a valley that descended as far as I could see. The bridge swayed slightly as we crossed, the river below my feet gently babbled and the morning haze still lingered in the sky, shielding some mountains while exposing others, adding to the mystique of this remote country. Awestruck, I wondered how I could possibly fit all I was seeing into one frame. But I tried anyway.



Towering over Thimphu, the capital city, is the Buddha Dordenma made out of bronze and gilded in gold. At 51.5 metres, Buddha Dordenma is one of the tallest sitting Buddha statues in the world. The statue fulfills an ancient prophecy dating back to the eighth century that was revealed by a Bhutanese saint. It is said to bring peace and happiness to the entire world.



Dochula Pass is a popular stop on the highway between Thimphu and Punakha. Here, stupas made from stone, bronze and gilded gold commemorate the Bhutanese soldiers killed in a 2003 offensive against Indian insurgents. At 3,100 metres elevation, visitors often have views of the snowcapped eastern Himalayas on a clear day.



A young monk looks over the courtyard inside of Punakha Dzong, the country's most impressive temple fortress. Constructed in 1637, this was the second dzong in the country.



The Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten in Punakha was built as a spiritual protector of the country and its king. Bhutan's royal family regularly hikes up to it.

As a photographer travelling through Bhutan, I felt a pull I've never experienced before: I was torn between raising my camera to compose a photo or allowing myself to be immersed in the moment. Prayer flags fluttered on every hillside and were somehow strung across wide gorges, making a pleasing sound as they snapped back and forth in the wind. Buddhist prayer wheels were equally as prevalent around the country and a bell rang to let you know someone nearby was spinning it – always clockwise.

[Hiking in Bhutan brought me a whole lot closer to Shangri-la](#)

In many of Bhutan's most sacred structures, cameras, phones and sometimes bags must be given up and locked away before entering. Watching my guide hand over my camera was painful but it allowed me to find new ways to remember. I have no photos of the intricately painted murals retelling the country's history that covered every inch of walls and sometimes the ceilings inside the Lhakhangs we toured, but I remember those legends that are so important in Bhutanese culture because my eyes studied every inch of those paintings.



Visitors often come across locals chanting and turning one of the many prayer wheels throughout Bhutan. Spinning a prayer wheel clockwise is said to purify the soul and bring merit. Devotees concentrate, reciting mantras and prayers while it spins.

One morning while visiting the Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup nunnery, our guide, who always went ahead of us, hurriedly returned from the building to exclaim that the Queen Mother was inside. To honour her surprise visit, the nuns were reciting a special chant. We were welcomed to sit in the back row and included in an offering of sweet rice. As I ate, I was deeply moved by the soft, melodic voices of about 50 young women that filled the space.

When the chanting came to an end and the Queen Mother rose to depart, I realized the nuns, draped in rich scarlet fabric, were going to exit the temple, too. All I could do was watch from the back row as they swiftly got up, smiling, talking, embracing, and then they were gone. I could only imagine the photo that I could have shot as they stepped into the sun, but the sound of their voices would've escaped the frame.

The diversity of experiences during my short time in Bhutan is reflected in these photos – I came home with nearly 2,000 images – but so much of my journey lingers in my memories, long after the shutter had closed.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/article-a-photographers-wander-through-bhutan/>

Solana Cain

PHOTO EDITOR, PHOTOJOURNALIST.

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Solana Cain is a news photo editor at The Globe and Mail, Canada's national newspaper. She is passionate about ensuring diversity and inclusion behind the lens in news coverage. Solana has worked as a photo editor for Getty Images, HELLO! Canada and Maclean's. Solana is a mentor in the newly launched BIPOC photojournalism mentorship program, Room Up Front, and sits on the Board of Directors at Gallery TPW in Toronto.

Solana is committed to her own photojournalism practice where she prioritizes documenting authentic and empowering images of Black women and girls. Solana was selected as one of the first artists in residence at Nia Centre for the Arts in Toronto. She is a graduate of Toronto Metropolitan University's (formerly Ryerson University) School of Journalism and the photojournalism program at Loyalist College. Recently, Solana completed The Kalish photo editing workshop.



Photo by Alyssa Pointer

<http://www.solanacain.com/about-1>