

flavorless Zeppa uses American English spellings.

Saskatchewan A province in Canada known for its harsh winters.

British Columbia A Canadian province on the west coast, containing the city of Vancouver.

impish Mischievous; the term comes from the name of a mythological creature, 'imp', believed to cause trouble.

WUSC World University Service of Canada, a non-profit organisation that works with local bodies to strengthen educational systems and economic opportunities.

Willie Nelson A well-known American musician of country music whose career was at its height in the 1970s.

Rambo The American main character from the Rambo films.

dzong A type of fortress found in the present and former Tibetan Buddhist kingdoms of the Himalayas, particularly Bhutan and south Tibet.

emissary A diplomat or representative for a country.

George Bogle A Scottish traveller and diplomat who was the first to establish diplomatic relations with Tibet.

Druk Sherig hotel, I watch mountains rise to meet the moon. I used to wonder what was on the other side of mountains, how the landscape resolved itself beyond the immediate wall in front of you. Flying in from the baked-brown plains of India this morning, I found out: on the other side of mountains are mountains, more mountains and mountains again. The entire earth below us was a convulsion of crests and gorges and wind sharpened pinnacles. Just past Everest, I caught a glimpse of the Tibetan plateau, the edge of a frozen desert 4,500 meters above sea level. Thimphu's altitude is about half of that but even here, the winter air is thin and dry and very cold.

The next morning, I share breakfast of instant coffee, powdered milk, plasticky white bread and **flavorless** red jam in the hotel with two other Canadians who have signed on to teach in Bhutan for two years. Lorna has golden brown hair, freckles and a no nonsense, home-on-the-farm demeanour that is frequently shattered by her ringing laughter and stories of wild characters that populate her life in **Saskatchewan**. Sasha from **British Columbia** is slight and dark, with an **impish** smile. After breakfast, we have a brief meeting with Gordon, the field director of the **WUSC** program in Bhutan, and then walk along the main road of Thimphu. Both Lorna and Sasha have traveled extensively; Lorna trekked all over Europe and northern Africa and Sasha worked for a year in an orphanage in Bombay. They are both ecstatic about Bhutan so far, and I stay close to them, hoping to pick up some of their enthusiasm.

Although Thimphu's official population is 20,000, it seems even smaller. It doesn't even have traffic lights. Blue-suited policemen stationed at two intersections along the main street direct the occasional truck or land cruiser using incomprehensible but graceful hand gestures. The buildings all have the same pitched roof, trefoil windows and heavy beams painted with lotus flowers, jewels and clouds. One-storied shops with wooden-shuttered windows open onto the street. They seem to be selling the same things: onions, rice, milk powder, dried fish, plastic buckets and metal plates, quilts and packages of stale, soft cookies from India – Bourbon Biscuits, Coconut Crunchies and the hideously colored Orange Cream Biscuits. There are more signs of the outside world than I had expected: teenagers in acid washed jeans, **Willie Nelson**'s greatest hits after the news in English on the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, a **Rambo** poster in a bar. Overall, these signs of cultural infiltration are few, but they are startling against the Bhutanese-ness of everything else.

The town itself looks very old, with cracked sidewalks and faded paintwork but Gordon told us that it didn't exist thirty-odd years ago. Before the sixties, when the third king decided to make it the capital, it was nothing but rice paddies, a few farm houses, and a **dzong** – one of the fortresses that are scattered throughout the country. Thimphu is actually new. "Thimphu will look like New York to you when you come back after a year in the east," he said.

At the end of the main road is Tashichho Dzong, the seat of the Royal Government of Bhutan, a grand, whitewashed, red-roofed, golden-tipped fortress, built in the traditional way, without blueprints or nails. Beyond, hamlets are connected by footpaths, and terraced fields, barren now, climb steadily from the river and merge into forest. Thimphu will never look like New York to me, I think.

The Bhutanese are a very handsome people, 'the best built race of men I ever saw,' wrote **emissary** **George Bogle** on his way to Tibet in 1774, and I find I