

Squiz the World goes to... Bhutan

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country that has a dragon on the flag, TV only arrived in 1999, and success is measured in happiness, not money.

Can you guess? Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at the mountain Kingdom of Bhutan - the Land of the Thunder Dragon!

JUST THE FACTS

Bhutan's official name is The Kingdom of Bhutan, but it's also known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon. Fierce storms that roll down from the Himalayas make the name fit perfectly, plus the dragon symbolises power and protection. There's even a dragon on the country's flag!

Bhutan is tucked high in the southern slopes of the Himalayas, sandwiched between India and China, and close to Nepal. It's about half the size of Victoria, but with mountains stacked on mountains, the average elevation is more than two kilometres above sea level.

The capital of Bhutan is Thimphu, and the whole country has a population of just under 800,000 people. Most still live in rural villages, although more are moving into towns and cities.

The terrain is dramatic: snow-capped peaks, deep valleys, and fast-flowing rivers. The climate varies from icy cold in the north to subtropical warmth in the south. Bhutan is home to some amazing animals too — the takin (its national animal, a goat-antelope), snow leopards, red pandas, and even legends of the yeti.

Politically, Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy... it has both a king and an elected parliament. And unlike most countries, Bhutan doesn't just measure its success in money. It uses something called the Gross National Happiness Index, which focuses on wellbeing and balance. Imagine if your report card included not just maths and reading, but also how kind, balanced, and happy you are. That's Bhutan.

And speaking of culture and values... let's check them out in

LET'S GET CULTURAL

Bhutan is one of those places where it feels like you've stepped into the past. Temples, monasteries, and traditional homes look like they've been frozen in time for hundreds of years.

The majority of Bhutanese people practise Buddhism, which teaches compassion and balance. That's where the Gross National Happiness idea comes from — the belief that wellbeing and kindness matter more than just money in the bank.

This focus on people and community shows up in surprising ways. For example, Bhutan's capital city has no traffic lights. The government tried installing some once, but people hated them. They preferred the personal touch of a human traffic controller, who can smile, wave, and keep traffic moving.

The King even issued a Culture Law, saying citizens need to protect their traditions, including the way they dress. That's why men wear a gho and women wear a kira every day. And until 1999, there were no TVs in Bhutan. No Pokémon, no Bluey, no Netflix. The internet only arrived in the early 2000s. Talk about a time warp!

But cultural protection has had its harsh side too — many Bhutanese of Nepalese origin, called Lhotshampa, were forced to leave because they didn't fit the government's strict idea of "traditional" Bhutanese identity.

So, in Bhutan you'll find colourful festivals, ancient temples, and a society deeply proud of its culture. But you'll also see how the effort to preserve tradition can create tension.

And speaking of traditions... one of the most important parts of Bhutanese life these days is school, where kids are taught not just reading and maths, but also these cultural values. Which means it's

TIME FOR SCHOOL

In Bhutan, school uniforms are anything but boring. Forget polos and skorts — boys wear a knee-length robe called a gho, and girls wear a long dress called a kira. Imagine showing up to class looking like you'd stepped straight out of a history book.

Classes are taught in English, with Dzongkha — the national language — as a subject. Mornings often start with prayers or meditation, and some schools have gardens where kids grow veggies that get cooked into lunch.

Education is free up to Year 12. But with schools hidden away in valleys and on mountain slopes, some kids hike for hours just to get there. In remote areas, boarding school is common.

Bhutanese schools also follow the Gross National Happiness philosophy — teaching isn't just about test scores, but also about kindness and respect for nature. The problem is, education scored lowest in Bhutan's recent happiness survey. Teachers are waiting for a new National Education Policy to help balance modern skills with Bhutanese traditions.

STEM is starting to get more attention, but many rural schools don't even have reliable internet, which makes online learning tricky. Still, Bhutan is determined to give kids the tools to succeed — while keeping their culture front and centre.

After all that studying, let's switch gears to...

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

Believe it or not, Bhutan is the only country in the world that's carbon-negative, meaning it sucks more carbon dioxide out of the air than it puts in.

Bhutan runs almost entirely on renewable hydroelectric power from its rivers. In fact, it produces so much clean energy that it sells the extra to India — making hydropower its biggest export. To cut down on waste, Bhutan was also one of the very first countries to ban plastic bags completely.

Even tourism is carefully managed. Visitors have to pay a daily Sustainable Development Fee — about A\$150 for adults and A\$80 for kids — with the money going straight into protecting forests, keeping the air and water clean, supporting education, and preserving Bhutan's culture.

And then there's the mysterious side of Bhutan. It's one of the few places that has set aside land especially for the Yeti... (you know, like big foot or the abominable snowman). Known locally as the migoi, or "wild man." Legends say the migoi is a giant, hairy creature that can walk backwards to confuse trackers — and even turn invisible. The Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Bhutan was partly created to protect its habitat. Can you imagine a whole national park in Australia just for Drop Bears and Bunyips?

After all that eco-adventure and yeti spotting, I reckon it's time to sit down and eat. Which means it's...

DINNER TIME

Dinner in Bhutan is not for the faint of tongue. Chillies aren't a garnish... they're the main dish. The national meal, ema datshi, is basically chilli-and-cheese stew. And the cheese? Often made from yak's milk (picture a huge cow wearing a woolly mammoth jumper). Mmmm... yak mac and cheese!

Instead of the white rice you're used to, Bhutanese families usually eat red rice, grown in the mountain valleys. It's nutty and fluffy, and perfect with spicy stew. In rural areas, people often eat with their hands, and it's polite to always accept food and drink when offered.

Speaking of drinks... you won't find Milo or hot chocolate here. In Bhutan, the traditional drink is butter tea — a salty, frothy mix of tea leaves, water, and yak butter, whisked until thick. Think a cup of tea, crossed with a cuppa soup. Perfect for cold mountain days.

So, whether it's red rice, yak cheese, or chilli peppers galore, food in Bhutan is all about comfort, sharing, and warmth.

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

Question 1 : Bhutan is known as The Land of the... what? (Thunder Dragon)

Question 2 Like Scotland has The Loch Ness Monster, Bhutan also has a famous cryptid (that's an animal that is claimed to exist but hasn't been proven...) what is this animal called? (Yeti or Migoi)

Question 3 What type of milk is used in Bhutanese Butter Tea? Yak Milk

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Bhutan.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.