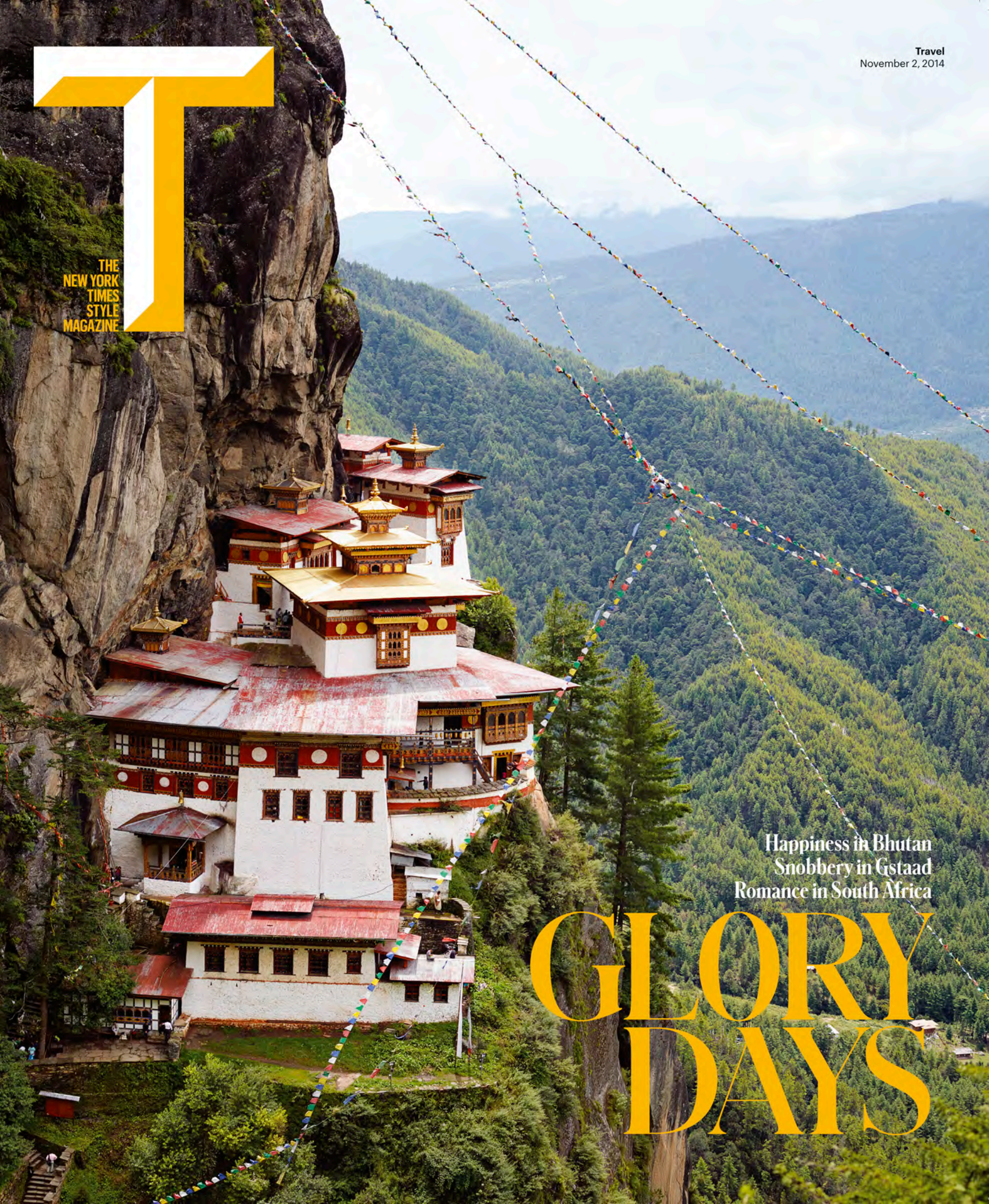
T
THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE



Happiness in Bhutan
Snobbery in Gstaad
Romance in South Africa

GLORY DAYS

HIGHER STATE OF BEING

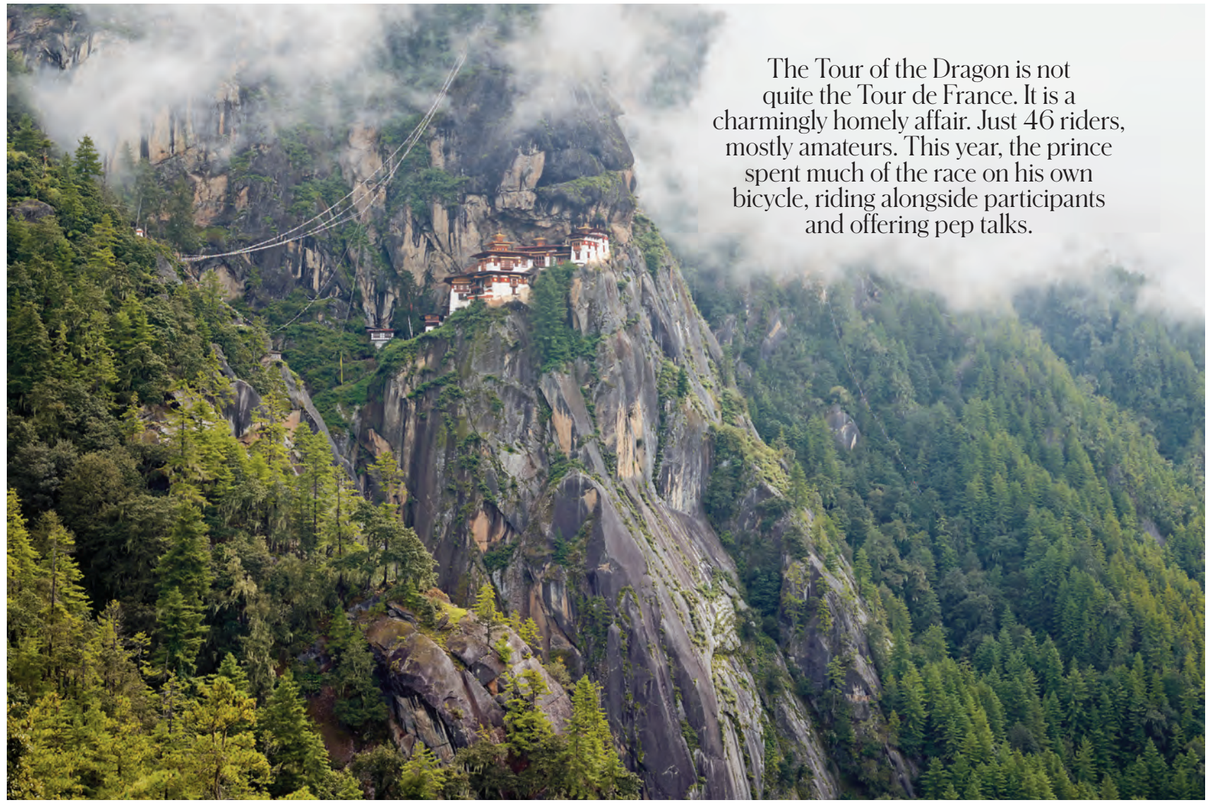
In the vertiginous mountains of Bhutan, where happiness is akin to holiness, bicycling has become much more than a national pastime. It's a spiritual journey.

BY JODY ROSEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON ROBERTS

SOUL CYCLE
A rider in the Tour of the Dragon, a 166.5-mile, one-day bike race through the mountains of Bhutan, alongside the Druk Wangyal Lhakhang temple on the crest of the Dochula pass, which offers 360-degree views of the surrounding Himalayas.

IN BHUTAN, THERE IS A KING who rides a bicycle up and down the mountains. Like many stories you will hear in this tiny Himalayan nation, it sounds like a fairy tale. In fact, it's hard news. Jigme Singye Wangchuck, Bhutan's fourth Druk Gyalpo, or Dragon King, is an avid cyclist who can often be found pedaling the steep foothills that ring the capital city, Thimphu. All Bhutanese know about the king's passion for cycling, to which he has increasingly devoted his spare time since December 2006, when he relinquished the crown to his eldest son. In Thimphu, many tell tales of close encounters, or near-misses — the time they pulled over their car to chat with the bicycling monarch, the time they spotted him, or someone who looked quite like him, on an early-morning ride. If you spend any time in Thimphu, you may soon find yourself scanning its mist-mantled slopes. That guy on the mountain bike, darting out of the fog bank on the road up near the giant Buddha statue: Is that His Majesty?

The fourth king is the most beloved figure in modern Bhutanese history, with a biography that has the flavor of myth. He became Bhutan's head of state in 1972 when he was just 16 years old, following the death of his father, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. (He formally ascended to the throne two years later, at age 18.) It was a heady historical moment. Bhutan had opened to the outside world just two decades earlier, in



The Tour of the Dragon is not quite the Tour de France. It is a charmingly homely affair. Just 46 riders, mostly amateurs. This year, the prince spent much of the race on his own bicycle, riding alongside participants and offering pep talks.

1952, abolishing slavery and undertaking the arduous task of reconciling its medieval infrastructure, politics and culture to late-20th-century life. For millennia, Bhutan had been isolated: a land of devout Buddhism and pristine natural beauty, cradled by the Himalayas, which served as a bulwark against both military aggressors and modernity. Now, the burden of modernization fell on the shoulders of the teenage king.

Under his leadership, electricity and modern medical care reached Bhutan's remotest areas; the country established a hydropower industry and navigated the perilous geopolitics that come with its geography — a landlocked plot, home today to about 753,000 citizens, that is wedged between India and China, the most populous nations on earth. In 2006, the king shocked his subjects by unilaterally ending Bhutan's absolute monarchy, leading an effort to draft a constitution and institute free elections, a process that culminated, in 2008, with the country's first general election. But the king's most celebrated contribution is in the realm of what might be called political philosophy. It was he who formulated Bhutan's signature quality of life indicator, Gross National Happiness, an ethos of environmental sustainability, cultural preservation and ''holistic'' civic contentment that has made Bhutan a fashionable name to drop in international development circles and among New Age enlightenment seekers.

Somewhere along the way, the king took up bike riding. Bhutan may have been the last place on earth that the bicycle reached. (The country's first paved road wasn't built until 1962.) Today, though, bicycling culture is taking root in this unlikeliest of settings: a place of forbidding 10-percent grade climbs and rugged mud-and-rock-mottled roadways that challenge the sturdiest tires and suspension systems. Bhutan's discovery of the bicycle is, on the one hand, on-trend: We are in the midst of a new bicycle

CLIFFHANGER Schoolchildren cheering a rider approaching the town of Wangdue Phodrang. Above: Taktsang Palphug Monastery, also known as ''Tiger's Nest,'' above the Paro Valley.

NATIONAL PRIDE A rider on the treacherous highland trails, with the not-yet-completed 139-foot Buddha Dordenma statue in the background. Below: a scout group waits to cheer on riders in the village of Longtay.

boom, which is putting millions of new cyclists on the road and bringing cycling-promotion initiatives to the agendas of governments across the globe. But the bicycling movement in Bhutan is unique: a craze for the ultimate populist transportation machine that has been handed down from the palace to the grass roots. ''There is a reason we in Bhutan like to cycle,'' said Tshering Tobgay, the prime minister. ''His Majesty the fourth king has been a cyclist, and after his abdication, he cycles a lot more. People love to see him cycle. And because he cycles, everybody in Bhutan wants to cycle, too.''

EVERY YEAR for the past five, Bhutan has held what amounts to a national bicycle holiday — a celebration of the peculiar pleasures, and rigors, of bicycle riding in the country. The Tour of the Dragon is a 166.5-mile road race that stretches from Bumthang, in central Bhutan, to Thimphu, about 65 miles from the country's western border. It is a spectacular journey, following a route through unspoiled forests and fields, over rolling river valleys and past mountainside farms, touching just a few tiny villages along the way. The ride is almost comically strenuous. Cyclists must tackle four mountain passes that range in height from just under 4,000 to nearly 11,000 feet; in places the road grade reaches 5 percent and the straight uphill climbs stretch on for nearly 24 miles. Tour organizers boast that it is the most difficult one-day bicycle race on earth.

This year, the Tour of the Dragon fell on a Saturday in early September. It was an overcast but dry day at the tail end of Bhutan's three-month-long monsoon season. That morning in Thimphu's Clock Tower Square, the central gathering place in the city's downtown, builders briskly assembled a stage for the presentation of medals. Nearby, at the race's finish line, workers for the Bhutan Olympic Committee, which oversees the race, milled around wearing bright orange uniforms with matching baseball caps; on their chests, several workers had pinback buttons with a photo of a dashing young couple: Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the 34-year-old current Bhutanese sovereign, and his queen, Jetsun Pema, 24.

A sign to the right of the stage read: ''Excellence Through Sports for All.'' At the rear of the stage there was another, larger, sign: a silhouetted image of a cyclist, hunched over handlebars, pedaling in the slipstream of a fiery red dragon. Dragon iconography is everywhere in Bhutan. The Bhutanese name for the nation is Druk yul — ''druk'' means thunder dragon, ''yul'' means land.

The sun broke through the scattered cloud cover around noon and a little while later, the first rider showed up in Thimphu: a short, slight man, perched on a mountain bike that was spattered with mud. His bright-hued Lycra shirt and shorts were emblazoned with the word ''Nepal.'' It was Ajay Pandit Chhetri, the five-time Nepalese national racing champion, who was riding in the Tour of the Dragon for the first time. He broke the finish-line tape 10 hours, 42 minutes and 49 seconds after the race's 2 a.m. start time, besting by 17 minutes the previous record, set in 2012 by a Bhutanese cyclist, Sonam. This year, Sonam struggled to the finish in third place, behind Chhetri and another Nepalese racer, Rajkumar Shrestha.

The Tour of the Dragon is not quite the Tour de France. It is a charmingly homely affair. Just 46 riders, mostly amateurs, took part in this year's event; only 22 made it to the end, most of them straggling in hours after the winner. One of the most vigorous riders was an unofficial participant, a man often referred to in Bhutan by the nickname ''H.R.H.'': His Royal Highness Prince Jigyel Ugyen Wangchuck, age 30, the crown prince and heir presumptive to the Bhutanese throne. Like his older brother, the current king, the prince has taken after his father when it comes to bicycles. The prince is the president of the Bhutan Olympic Committee, and the Tour of the Dragon is his brainchild. This year, the prince spent much of the race churning up and down the slopes to

The majority of the Bhutanese live off the land, practicing subsistence agriculture. Schoolchildren, even in the deepest countryside, are taught English. Bhutan only got television in 1999. And yet nearly all its roads and buildings are constructed by migrant laborers from India and Nepal. Homosexuality is illegal and gender equality is a work in progress.

ride alongside participants, offering pep talks, tracing and retracing his path along the torturous mountain passes. Eventually, he jumped off his bike and got in a chauffeured car, speeding ahead of the pack so he could greet the winner in Thimphu.

That evening, the race-finishers assembled in a tent facing the big stage in Clock Tower Square before a crowd of a few thousand that gathered to watch the awards. Eventually, the Tour of the Dragon riders made their way to the dais, where they were congratulated by the crown prince and by Tobgay, the prime minister, a cyclist himself who has raced in three Tours of the Dragon. When the ceremony was over, I caught up with Chhetri, the race winner, and asked him if he planned to ride again next year. His answer was impressively when-in-Rome. ''I'm not sure,'' he said. ''I'm just so happy that I was able to come to Bhutan this year.''

TO ASK A BHUTANESE about happiness is akin to asking a Frenchman about wine or a Brazilian about soccer: It is the expected question, the question he is perhaps a bit weary of answering — yet he will gamely respond, unfolding not just a rote reply, but an admirably subtle disquisition. Gross National Happiness, or G.N.H., is the big talking point when it comes to Bhutan. It is also a source of intense debate, a fluid concept which, many Bhutanese contend, is often misunderstood, especially by the outside world.

''Here is the key point to understand about G.N.H.,'' said Kinley Dorji, the head of Bhutan's Ministry of Information and Communication. ''Happiness itself is an individual pursuit. Gross National Happiness then becomes a responsibility of the state, to create an environment where citizens can pursue happiness. It's not a guarantee of happiness by the government. It's not a promise of happiness. But there is a responsibility to, you know, create the conditions for happiness.''

Dorji said: ''When we say 'happiness,' we have to be very clear that it's not fun, pleasure, thrill, excitement, all the temporary fleeting senses. It is permanent contentment — with life, with what you have. That lies within the self. Because the bigger house, the faster car, the nicer clothes, they don't give you that contentment. G.N.H. means good governance. G.N.H. means preservation of traditional culture. And it means sustainable socio-economic development. Remember, here, that G.N.H. is a pun on G.D.P., Gross Domestic Product. We are making a distinction.''

For foreigners of progressive leanings, the values espoused in G.N.H. ignite the utopian imagination. And for Western travelers of all political persuasions, a visit to Bhutan can leave one sputtering Orientalist clichés. Bhutan presents itself as a startlingly different place. It is a land of astounding beauty, of soaring peaks and verdant valleys, of centuries-old rope bridges that stretch across white-water rapids. There are ancient monasteries nestled on craggy cliff-tops — and the terminal at the international airport resembles an ancient monastery. The law mandates that all buildings be built according to traditional Bhutanese designs, employing no nails or iron bars in their construction. Government workers and schoolchildren are required to wear traditional dress, kimonolike garments called gho (for men and boys) and kira (for women and girls). The majority of Bhutanese still live off the land, practicing subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. Bhutan is the only country in the world whose state religion is Mahayana Buddhism. Its official language, Dzongkha, is spoken in few other places on earth — but all Bhutanese schoolchildren, even in the deepest countryside, are taught English. Bhutan only got television in 1999. There are no plastic bags allowed in Bhutan, and 72 percent of the country is under forest cover. In 2013, the government announced its intention to become the world's first 100-percent organic-farming nation.

All of this has earned Bhutan a reputation in certain quarters as a dreamland, an unsullied Shangri-La. Government officials pooh-pooh this idea — yet they trade on it. Once, Bhutan admitted only 2,500 tourists each year; today that number has swollen to 100,000, with luxury resorts springing up in remote regions to lure wealthy adventure- and eco-travelers. Bhutan's official tourist slogan makes a bald appeal to the ''Eat, Pray, Love'' crowd: ''Happiness is a place.''

The realities of Bhutan, of course, are more complicated. On the streets of Thimphu, you will find drug rehabilitation clinics and pizza joints, and when children get out of school they discard their traditional Bhutanese dress for hoodies and skinny jeans. Nearly all of Bhutan's roads and buildings are constructed by migrant laborers from India and Nepal, whose standard of living is far lower than anyone else's in the country. In the late 1980s and early '90s, Bhutan expelled nearly 100,000 of its citizens, almost all of them Hindus of Nepalese origin, forcing them into refugee camps in eastern Nepal; refugees have alleged that the government purge involved torture and sexual violence. Homosexuality is illegal. Gender equality is a work in progress; fewer than 9 percent of the country's nationally elected officials are women. Happiness, in Bhutan as elsewhere, is a goal, an ideal. A place, though — that's a stretch.

INTO THE MYSTIC Steep hills, like those along the Bumthang-Ura Highway outside the village of Rukubji, earn the Tour its billing as the most challenging one-day bike race in the world.

THERE IS ANOTHER line of thinking about happiness that is gaining currency these days: that happiness is a thing — specifically, a bicycle. A favorite mantra of cycling-boosters goes like this: ''You can't buy happiness — but you can buy a bike, and that's pretty close.'' In 1896, Arthur Conan Doyle voiced the same sentiment, in less bumper-sticker-friendly fashion. ''When the spirits are low,'' Conan Doyle wrote, ''when the day appears dark, when work becomes monotonous, when hope hardly seems worth having, just mount a bicycle and go out for a spin down the road, without the thought of anything but the ride you are taking.''

Sonam Tshering, 27, is a native of Thimphu who has thought a great deal about the connection between the bicycle and happiness. He is the sixth of eight children in a devoutly Buddhist family; his father, now in his 80s and retired, worked for the government as a tax collector. At a young age, Tshering decided that he wanted to be a monk. (A family friend, an astrologer, explained to Tshering why he was so drawn to the monastic life: He'd already been a monk, in an earlier life.) But Tshering had another passion, too. ''When I think back to

HAPPY FEET Clockwise from near right: monks-in-training during downtime at a monastery in Punakha; Sonam Tshering, who won the race in 2011 and now coaches a local youth cycling club; a nighttime view of Trongsa Dzong, the largest dzong fortress in Bhutan.

my childhood age,'' he told me, ''I was always very much attracted to wheels.''

In 2010, when Tshering was 23, a friend told him that the Bhutan Olympic Committee was sponsoring a daylong bike race from central Bhutan to Thimphu: The inaugural Tour of the Dragon. The B.O.C. had provided five bicycles to be used by young Bhutanese interested in cycling; one bike was still up for grabs. Tshering agreed to take part. He knew how to ride a bike, but had never owned one; he'd never ridden a bicycle with gears or tried to cycle up a mountain. On that first Tour of the Dragon, Tshering gave out after 112 miles — but he was hooked. The Olympic Committee allowed the riders to keep their donated bikes, and Tshering spent the following year training and self-educating, learning about seat positioning, gearing strategies and other technical aspects of mountain biking, while building up his speed and stamina. In 2011, Tshering again entered Tour of the Dragon. This time, he won.

Today, Tshering is a semiprofessional rider. He has participated in several races internationally, including the 24 Hours of Moab, a major mountain-biking event held each autumn in the Utah desert. I met Tshering one early evening in September, a couple of days after the Tour of the Dragon, at a spot well known to Thimphu's cyclists — a high mountain road dotted with fluttering Buddhist prayer flags on the city's southern side. Tshering had recently hurt his back, an injury that had kept him out of the 2014 Tour. But he had his bicycle in tow: a Commencal Meta SX, a high-end French mountain bike, with 26-inch wheels and a hot pink aluminum frame, which he'd been given by a local sponsor. Tshering was wearing a black T-shirt and florescent yellow shorts. On his lower left leg, there was a tattoo: a grinning skeleton on a bicycle.

Tshering is one of the Bhutan cycling scene's favorite sons. He has cycled with Tobgay. After Tshering's 2011 Tour of the Dragon victory, he was invited to ride with the prince, H.R.H. (''The moment I entered the palace gate, I prayed from inside and said, 'Let not this be my last time here.' '') That winter, Tshering spent two weeks with the royal family at their vacation compound in Manas, in southern Bhutan. There, he went on frequent bike rides with Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king, who encouraged him to pursue his cycling dreams. Tshering told me that the rumors were true: The 58-year-old former king always rides wearing his traditional gho, and is an exceptionally hardnosed cyclist. ''He is like one of the toughest riders in Bhutan I've ever met,'' Tshering said. ''He's not a very technical rider, and downhill isn't his specialty. But climbing uphill — I don't think anyone can top him.''

Tshering doesn't imagine that he can be a top international mountain racer. His goals are more modest, or at least more community-minded. He coaches a local cycling club whose 24 riders range in age from 10 to 19. He envisions a time when the club will have a state-of-the art training facility and can compete at the international level. As for his own cycling: He finds the kind of fulfillment on a bike that you might expect of an erstwhile aspiring monk. You could say that Tshering has not so much abandoned his religious

LEADER BOARD Outside Paro Airport, a portrait of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, a zealous cyclist, and his wife, Queen Jetsun Pema.

To ask a Bhutanese about happiness is akin to asking a Frenchman about wine or a Brazilian about soccer: It is the expected question, the question he is perhaps a bit weary of answering — yet he will gamely respond with an admirably subtle disquisition.

practice as transferred it — exchanged the Buddhist prayer wheel for the spoked and metal-rimmed kind. Tshering said: ''The feeling that you get when you're riding on the trail, alone in nature, surrounded by all those nature sounds, it is one of the greatest feelings you can ever have. My happiness — my own personal G.N.H. — is the mountain bike and the forest.''

Tshering is not alone in linking cycling to Gross National Happiness. In 2010, then-prime minister Jigme Thinley told a reporter that he hoped ''to make Bhutan a bicycle culture.'' The current prime minster, Tobgay, concurs. ''Gross National Happiness is about wholesome development. And cycling, like any worthy sport activity, is also about wholesome development. It is good for the soul, good for the body and good for happiness. You cannot love cycling and not be an environmentalist. It is one of the reasons we must encourage more cycling in Bhutan.''

We are used to hearing such talk from bicycle activists in the metropolises of the West, who champion the bike as the redemptive green machine — the Little Victorian Relic that Can Save the World, with a carbon footprint of nearly zero and a rack in the back to hold your kale. It is odd to find the same ideas circulating in a country like Bhutan, arguably the most pastoral, environmentally progressive place on the planet. But if you gaze down on Thimphu from the mountain road where I met Tshering, you take in a familiar tableau: a landscape steadily being mutated by car culture and urban sprawl. Thimphu's population has more than doubled in a generation. (The figure today is about 100,000, and growing rapidly.) Everywhere you look, there are automobiles chugging up newly constructed roads and buildings rising behind bamboo scaffolding on land which, just a few years ago, was one vast rice paddy, stalked only by peasant farmers and their livestock.

The notion that mountainous Bhutan can be transformed into ''a bicycle culture,'' a Holland of the Himalayas, seems, to say the least, far-fetched. (There is a reason that the bicycle has thrived in northern Europe: The countries there are, as the saying goes, low.) To the extent that a bike culture is taking hold in Bhutan, it is a fun-house mirror version of the one advocated by most cycling activists. The thrust of today's global cycling movement is to normalize cycling: to establish the bicycle as transport not sport, to promote bikes as everyday commuter vehicles and clear more room for them on the roads. But except for a few places in Bhutan — the flat plains near the Indian border in the country's south — bicycles are not used to just get around. When Bhutanese ride bikes, they do it like Tshering and the fourth king: They hop on a sporty bicycle with lots of gears and go bombing up and down the mountains.

For his part, Tobgay doesn't see Bhutan's landscape as an impediment to cycling. ''In fact, our terrain in Bhutan is bicycle-friendly,'' Tobgay told me. Westerners have a mawkish habit of discerning Buddhist parables in even the blandest Bhutanese policy pronouncements. Yet it is tempting to find a larger metaphor — for happiness, both personal and gross national — in the prime minister's assessment of Bhutan's cycling topography. ''If it's all flat, it's no fun,'' Tobgay said. ''Here in Bhutan, there are ups and there are downs. Wherever there's an up, there's a down. Both parts are fun. In that sense, I think Bhutan is perfect for bicycling.''