

Pro Bhutan e.V.

philanthropischer Verein zur aktiven Entwicklungshilfe
im Himalaja Königreich Bhutan



The Punakha Dzong and Dzongs in General



is the most important Dzong of Bhutan, built 1637-38 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of Bhutan as one nation. In a secret temple, embalmed, he lies in state and has been venerated as a living god until today.

He was born 1594 at Ralung, Tibet, descendant from the forefather of the Monastic Drukpa Lineage of Mahayana Buddhism. He was the legitimate abbot at Ralung Monastery, the traditional seat of the Drukpa Kagyu School. Ousted by a rival and facing arrest, 1616 he left Tibet for Bhutan. He followed a vision that Mahakala did send him to Bhutan to strengthen Buddhism there. Being a striking personality, he overcame the division of the warring rulers and soon was the supreme worldly and religious leader of Bhutan. To solidify the new power structure of Bhutan, he created a chain of 16 large Dzongs (monastery-castles) in the main valleys of Western Bhutan as the centres of religious and civil authority.

The Punakha Dzong is the second oldest and most majestic Dzong in Bhutan. It measures 180 metres (590 ft) in length with a width of 72 metres (236 ft) and has three docheys (courtyards) and three utzes (temple towers).

Why did the Shabdrung choose this place for the Punakha Dzong where he lived and ruled until his death in 1651? It is attributed to a prophesy by Guru Padmasambhava: at a place resembling the head of an elephant, the Shabdrung should build his stronghold. The mountain above the confluence of the two rivers Mo Chhu (mother river) and Po Chhu (father river) can be seen as the head, the narrow flat area between the two rivers as the trunk of the elephant on which the Dzong was built.

During winter, this Dzong is the Residence of His Holiness, the Je Khenpo, the Supreme Abbot of the Kingdom, with more than 500 monks.

All the Kings of Bhutan have been coronated here. The present King, H.M. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck on November 1, 2008.

Until 1955, the Punakha Dzong was the seat of the Government of Bhutan when it moved to Thimphu.

Dzongs in general:

Until today, reflecting the “duality power”, the worldly and the religious functions have been living in the Dzongs of Bhutan side by side under one roof: on one side, formerly the regional Prince or Penlop, nowadays the Dzongda or District Governor; in a separate part, the monastery with its many temples under a high ranking Abbot with his monks.

By tradition, Dzongs are constructed without the use of architectural plans. Instead construction proceeds under the direction of a high Lama who defines each dimension by means of spiritual inspiration.

The sites for Dzongs were chosen in regard to their function as defensive fortresses. Above some Dzongs, directly uphill, a ta-dzong or watchtower was built: its purpose was to keep the slope above clear of attackers who might otherwise shoot fire arrows onto the wooden shingle roofs and destroy the Dzong. Trongsa Dzong and Paro Dzong are examples. Some of the defensive features of Dzongs are the steep wooden draw stairways and heavy wooden doors, closed at night or against attack.

The heavy masonry curtain walls usually surround one or more courtyards. In the center of a courtyard usually stands an utze, a tower with temples on various levels which can be used as an inner defensible citadel. utzes and other religious buildings, like all other structures, are whitewashed inside and out, but distinguished by a broad red ochre band at the outside top. The larger internal spaces of temples and halls have massive timber columns and beams, elaborately carved and painted. Some columns are covered by gilded copper sheets. The beams and columns create sometimes multistoried, galleries around an open central area.

The materials used in building a Dzong consist of compacted earth, stones and timber in floors, ceilings, doors and windows. The roofs are massively constructed in hardwood and bamboo, highly decorated at the eaves. Traditionally they are constructed without the use of nails. They are open at the eaves to provide a ventilated storage area. The roofs were traditionally finished with timber shingles weighted down with stones; but in almost all cases they have by now been replaced with corrugated iron. The courtyards are usually stone-flagged. All doors have high thresholds to discourage the entrance of spirits.