



I am happy to declare that I've now reached a point in my career where I am blessed with opportunities to connect with those I may have previously only met whilst travelling. In the past year I've had the good fortune to connect with travellers, dreamers, chefs and wanderers who've made it against the odds. One recent memorable encounter was with Choki Dorji, owner of Blue Poppy Tours & Treks, who specialises in bespoke tours of Bhutan. How does a boy born in the hillsides of Tashi Yangtse, speaking a dialect that is only spoken not written, come to own one of the top 20 tour companies in the country? Welcome to my three-part series of Bhutan, possibly, the most captivating place on earth. Read my interview with Choki Dorji for a personal story which proves that the greatest adventure you'll ever have is life itself.

EARLY FAMILY LIFE

Choki was the first born in a family of four. The small town of Trashie Yangtse had been his ancestral home for generations. Choki's first language is Dzalakha, a dialect spoken only in the east of Bhutan. Village life centered around the temple Chorten Kora which was built in 18th century by Lama Ngawang Lodrö, to quell a demon.

Choki's father took care of the temple daily and was a learned Buddhist scholar despite the lack of a formal education. His mother coming from a farming family never learnt to read or write. Choki says of his parents:

When I was young, I did not have any dream of doing anything and I am sure my family was worried as I am the oldest son and their expectations would be very high. I always wanted my parents to be proud of me and I wanted to be able to give back to them as well. In the end, they don't actually have much idea of what I do and where I live and go as they can't really imagine the world I inhabit now from the remote village life that they still lead, but I am sure they are very proud of me.

BUDDHISM IN BHUTAN

Like the majority of Bhutanese, the Dzalakha observe Tibetan Buddhism which has been strengthened over thousands of years. Visits from Tibetan, Nepalese and Indian Lamas over centuries have strengthened the community's ties to its teachings. The Dzalakha identity is enmeshed in the history of Buddhism and traditions are deeply steeped in Buddhist heritage. As such, Choki started school at the age of seven whilst his brother trained to be a monk.

EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Leaving school, aged just 14 years, Choki was driven to seek out opportunities that would enhance his life and those around him. At first, he became a messenger in the district court. Then, following in his mother's footsteps trained to become a farmer. Whilst farming, an opportunity arose with the Bhutanese government; Bhutan was expected to receive electricity between 1997 – 1998. Choki trained to become an electrician.

Despite a myriad of occupations Choki was not satisfied that he had found his life purpose. He knew for sure that he loved his country and the company of others. So he made the bold move to work in a local hotel and learned Japanese to communicate with tourists. Following on from this Choki progressed on to become a trained guide and worked for one of the largest travel agencies in Bhutan. His speciality? Trekking and cultural tours.

MOVE TO THE UK

It was on one such tour that he was destined to meet his future wife who was visiting Bhutan on holiday. They fell in love and were soon married. In 2001 Choki crossed the oceans and moved to live in the UK where next stage of his life started to take shape.

A young Choki learned English at SELS College, Covent Garden and trained as a cinematographer at Kings College, London. During this time, identifying a gap in the market for a traditional Bhutanese tour operator with a base in the UK, he set up Blue Poppy Tours and Treks in 2005. True to his nature he chose the blue poppy as a name after the national flower of Bhutan.

Today, Blue Poppy is incorporated as Blue Poppy Pvt Ltd and expanding into the hotel industry. There will soon be a four-star hotel in the west of Bhutan and a three-star boutique hotel in Tashi Yangtse. As life would have it, things have come full circle and brought the boy from the hills back home; this will be the first hotel to open in Choki's home town.

Despite his journey so far, the young man from Tashi Yangtse remains humble and says of his achievements:
I feel like I still have a long way to go to achieve everything that I want to in life, however at the same time I am also proud of what I have been able to do so far to help my family, friends and the local community.

Look out for my next post on culture and festivals of Bhutan and why this enigmatic land will continue to enchant travellers for centuries to come.

For more information on bespoke tours in Bhutan visit <http://www.bluepoppybhutan.com>