

# Bhutan



## What is a developing country?

Bhutan has a maximum speed limit of 60kmph, most of the time you are lucky to be able to do 30kmph. The roads are narrow, steep, windy, shared with pedestrians, horses, cows, dogs, yaks, monkeys and occasionally the toddler children of road workers who seem to know to stay exactly where they have been placed between the edge of the road and the sheer drop of the Himalayas. The road sign says it all, no hurry no worry.

In many ways Bhutan is ahead of the rest of the world. It is carbon neutral yet sells power to India, produced through solar and hydro. Seventy two percent of their land area remains forest with development capped in the 2008 Constitution at no more than 40%. Their healthy diet has a low carbon footprint thanks to local stalls and back yard veggie plots. Mobile coverage is brilliant, I was never without a signal, many times a full 5 bars. Construction is booming with workers needing to be imported from India. This country of just 800,000 people is punching well above its weight not just in development but in protecting and caring for its people and environment.

Education, health care and dental care are completely free. Some housing is substandard but I saw no evidence of homelessness. The King's grant (Kidu) provides for the homeless. There are government programs to help the unemployed.

Education is in English though the native language, Dzongkha remains. Foreigners cannot own land in Bhutan, they can invest through Foreign Direct Investment arrangements. Ideally leasing land to build motels, tourism being a strong pillar of the economy. All tourists must be accompanied by a guide and driver to ensure there is no

burden on the environment. The Bhutan Travel Club guides made it much easier to see all the sites. There is a daily fee to the government for each tourist. That was another cultural change for me, gladly paying taxes because the money is so well spent!

Bhutan's life expectancy is 75 years with a massive 82% of the population being of working age. Australia has a life expectancy of 83 which would contribute to the fact that only 72% of our population are of working age.

Unfortunately, a lot of young Bhutanese don't realise how lucky they are. Bhutan is losing its youth to more developed countries. The King has a grand plan to encourage them to stay, his Gelephu Mindfulness City project. A new city near the border with India boasting an international airport and rail link to India. Gelephu will retain the Bhutanese culture while providing better economic and educational opportunities. It will have a university, Buddhist temples, habitual bridges, robots, cosmopolitan living, a huge dam to provide hydro-electricity and still plenty of rice fields.

Bhutan's hydro-electric infrastructure is amazing, even the temples way up in the Himalayas have electricity. To fund such massive improvements Bhutan received a very large donation from India and a loan. Our developed world could do with a more helpful attitude to its neighbours and their people. We need to ask what and who are we developing for? Enough chasing unnecessary wealth and power at the expense of human lives.

The population are regularly surveyed on their level of happiness, based on psychological wellbeing, health, time use and ecological resilience. A sufficiency of 66% or more is considered happy. And they are happy despite long working hours. Family appears to be central to this with multiple generations supporting each other in a culture that goes back beyond 600 AD. Another key factor, in my opinion, is the faith they have in their King. They trust in his wisdom and know he has their best interests at heart. The Bhutanese are very kind, generous and respectful. I wonder which came first the happiness or the kindness, generosity and respect.