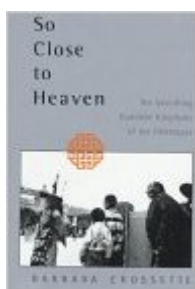


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So Close To Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms Of The Himalayas



Synopsis

Tantric Buddhism, with its complex and fascinating rites, rose to its highest levels on the trans-Himalayan Tibetan plateau, where it had flowered since the eighth century. But now the small kingdoms -- Sikkim and Ladakh among them -- where the teachings and miracles of the great lamas were revered have been gobbled up by bigger powers. The story of that loss is a prelude to Barbara Crossette's richly evocative journey into the historical past and courageous present of Bhutan, where the Buddhist world can still be seen intact, peaceful, harmonious -- and threatened. We enter a landscape of frozen peaks, high windy flatlands, and deep verdant valleys where, until the 1960s, the Bhutanese lived a medieval existence -- where temples and monasteries, monks and lamas, provided not only spiritual but legal and even medical sustenance. We move through farmlands, villages, and towns whose clusters of painted ornamental buildings and wooden half-timberings might be illustrations for old fairy tales, where thanks to Bhutan's devoted rulers change has thus far been gradual; where the tolerance, good humor, generosity -- and gorgeous ritual -- of Himalayan Buddhism continues to shine through. Into this setting creep the tensions, deep and destructive, that threaten to wound Bhutan despite its best efforts to ward off the outside world. We see how open borders and recent air links have led to high-stakes smuggling of temple treasures and gold, as well as the ravages of AIDS; how tourism is importing dollars, distance from village roots, and a new urban phenomenon -- burglary. Westerners tend to take from the Buddhist world only what seems at the moment relevant to them: today it is meditation and elements of oriental medicine. The Buddhist way of life that this book reveals is much more -- a rich amalgam of theology spiced by legend, superstition, astrological interpretation, and the worship of natural phenomena; a religion that binds each man and woman to the cosmos and to the gods while it prescribes the earthly rituals that ease the human passage from birth to death. A splendid culture is under siege. In this book we have a rare and memorable portrait of a corner of the world where it can still be experienced.

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Customer Reviews

Journalist Crossette visits the last remaining strongholds of Tantric Buddhism, examining the ways this culture has preserved its uniqueness amidst the homogenizing influences of contemporary geopolitics. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

The past and present of the kingdoms of the Himalayas is examined in a history of both Buddhist thought in the region and a culture under siege. Enjoy a first-person journey which brings an immediacy to the atmosphere of the region and exposes newcomers to the cultures and lives of the peoples. -- Midwest Book Review

The most informative book I've read about Bhutan, and enjoyable to read, too

Fortunately I read the reviews and duly noted that the book focused on Bhutan, which was my main interest. Ideally the book should be read before and after one's trip to Bhutan. I can now understand better why our seemingly competent Bhutanese guide offered such contradictory, confusing, and incredible explanations for the role of Buddhism in his wonderful country. At times, Crossette's book seemed a little disorganized and served more as a memoir than an analysis of vanishing Buddhist kingdoms.

This is a current review of Bhutan and its modern challenges. I like that it presents impressions in an unbiased, matter-of-fact way and includes the "human" side of their society along with the Gross Domestic Happiness hearts and flowers stuff you see in most superficial treatments of the country. It makes the people more real, and more admirable for the compassionate traits they exhibit. There are also good sections on history and cosmology.

As many others have mentioned, Crossette's biases are evident, but this book nevertheless contains some fascinating insights and is entertaining at times. I'd really give it 3.5 stars.

Interesting history of Bhutan, a bit long and wordy. It did help me prepare for a trip to Bhutan

This is a great book for those with a special in asian religion and history. The author brings to life the sights and sounds of Bhutan, Ladakh and Sikkim.

This book is necessary reading to help explain an area of world few westerners know anything about. Definitely a must is traveling to Himalayas. needs some updating regarding bhutan. A good read.

This book provides a very comprehensive view of the history of Bhutan and neighboring states. The book ends in the mid to late nineties, thus its characterization of 'modern' Bhutan is no longer accurate.

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