

When **Linda Leaming** decided to add Bhutan to her trip to India and Europe, it was the start of a very different kind of adventure INTERVIEW **LORNA V** PHOTOGRAPHY **CAROLINE IRBY**

# «Nobody in the US knows where Bhutan is, so it's amazing that I went there

in the first place. I was a business writer in Tennessee, and doing very nicely. While in New York on business, a friend introduced me to some Bhutanese people who were working at the United Nations and we just hit it off. Anytime I was in New York for work, I went to see them.

I was 39, a symbolic age. I'd had boyfriends, some serious, but had been single for nearly three years. A couple of times early in my twenties I'd planned to marry, but something always stopped me. I always knew I didn't want a traditional relationship. When I was growing up in Nashville, there was a woman around my mother's age who went to Paris and married a Frenchman. Every summer they'd come with their boys to visit her family. I remember thinking, how clever and interesting to make a new life in a foreign country.

When I inherited some money from my grandmother I decided to go on a long trip to India and Europe. My Bhutanese friends said I should visit Bhutan, too, so I took the opportunity to do so. On that first trip I fell and injured my ankle while on a long walk by myself. I was grateful to the motorcyclist who found me and took me back to the hotel. I was hurt and thinking about myself, so I wasn't paying attention to the face under the visor.

Afterwards, travelling in Europe with friends, it hit me that I'd fallen in love with Bhutan. My friends didn't take it seriously, but I was possessed. I knew I had to go back. Before I had left for the trip, I had bought a property at home knowing the sale would complete shortly after I returned. When I got back to the US, I pulled out. Everyone thought I was crazy. For the next three years I kept going back to Bhutan as a tourist, each time staying longer and longer, meeting people and trying to find work. Eventually, I got a job as a teacher.

I was happy in Bhutan from the moment I arrived. Every day felt magical. Because I was happy I was absolutely open

to meeting someone. But I knew that the Bhutanese marry young and it would be hard for me to find someone older. So it's phenomenal that I found Namgay. He and I taught at the same school. I saw him and thought he was cute, but so shy.

**We went through a few months of nodding to each other. I'd see him walk by and I knew he wanted to catch sight of me.** We said very little because he was so shy. My Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, was like a child's, and he didn't speak English. I had a crush on him, but couldn't see a relationship developing, as we were from such different backgrounds. When a friend at the UN said she and her husband didn't speak each other's languages when they married, I thought maybe something could happen after all.

The other teachers at the school teased me. They kept saying I was old and unmarried with no children; he was old and unmarried with no children. Friends in Bhutan pointed out I wasn't getting any younger, and in a remote place a woman needs a man for practical things. But I decided I wouldn't push it or do anything.

Eventually, Namgay said he wanted me to teach him English, and I said, 'Good, we can learn Dzongkha and English together'. So he would come to see me in the afternoons for tea. It was all very Victorian, with me trussed up, as always, in traditional Bhutanese clothing. At the end of the year I blurted out that I liked him and when he repeated the words back, I thought he was correcting my Dzongkha.

We were further along than I realised, though, because during the winter break he pointed to 'marriage certificate' in the dictionary and said that we needed that. I said, 'OK'. Two weeks passed. One week he didn't come round. It seemed important to let him lead, even though it was seriously frustrating. In the US, I'd have been analysing and pushing things. Then he asked me to his house. I met his family, who wel-



HAIR AND MAKEUP: JO MCKENNA

comed me. A few days later he said firmly, 'I'm coming to your house'. We had only held hands, and hadn't even kissed, but I knew he'd be staying the night. And boy, it was worth waiting for. We had sex for days. We began to cohabit, which means marriage there, and then we had a lot of ceremonies.

I thought maybe Namgay was joking when he told me he'd been waiting for me. His father was an astrologer and had told

him that his wife would come from really far away. Two years after we got married, I found out that the motorcyclist who helped me on my first trip to Bhutan was Namgay. He said he thought I always knew.»

*'Married To Bhutan: How One Woman Got Lost, Said "I Do" And Found Bliss' by Linda Leaming (Hay House) is out now*