
Above and Below
the Snow-line

ERNST SONDHEIMER

A Plant Addict in the Eastern Himalaya

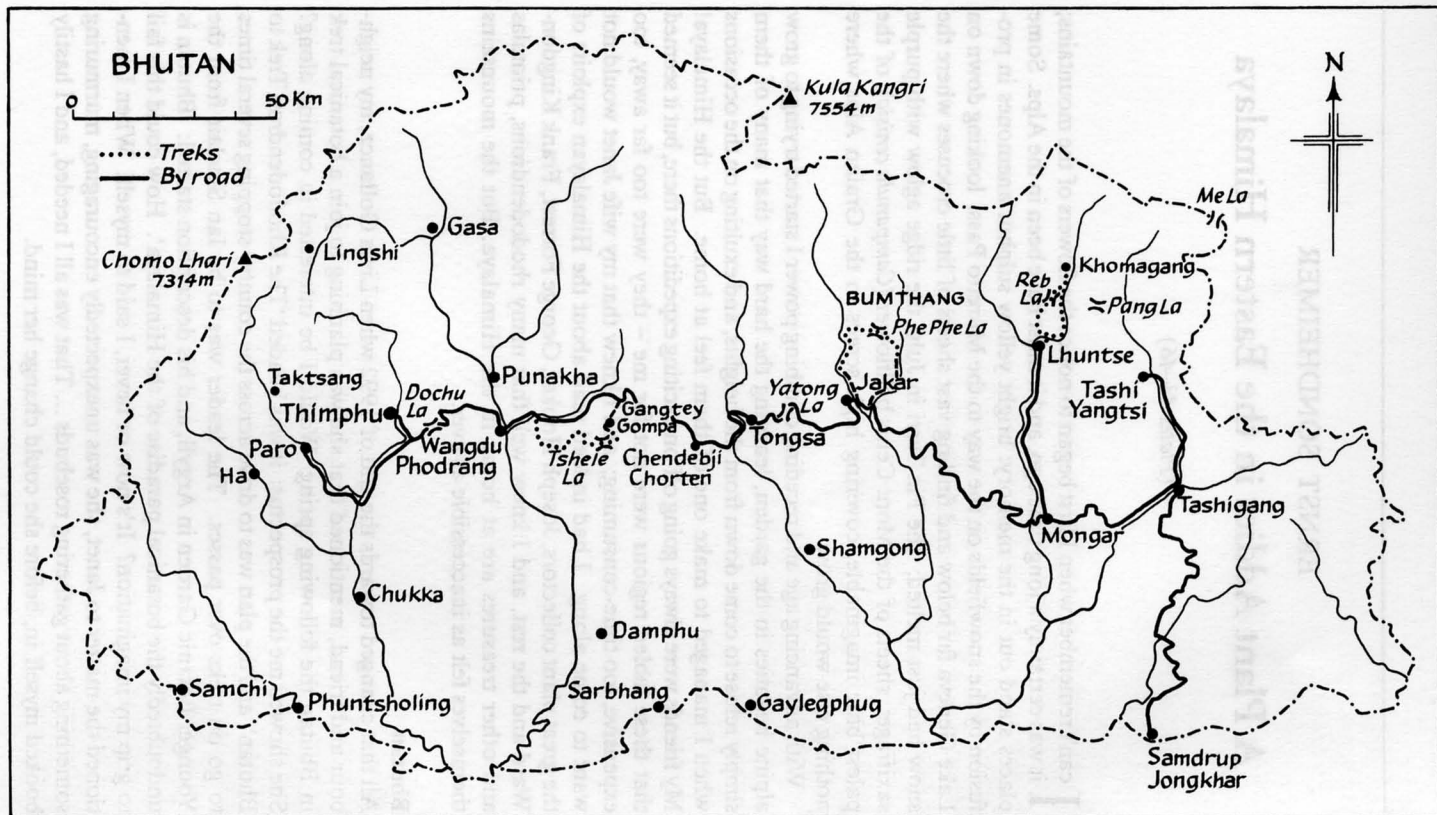
(Plates 43–46)

I can't remember when I first began to notice the flowers of the mountains; it was certainly a long time ago, and it must have been in the Alps. Some places stand out in the memory: bright yellow sulphur anemones in profusion by the snowfields on the way to the Muretto Pass; looking down on Lake Geneva far below and finding vast sheets of little crocuses where the snow had just melted; the Piz Terri in July, the ridge aglow with purple saxifrage; sheets of the Mont Cenis bellflower (*Campanula cenisia*), of the palest blue imaginable, covering high screes in the Graian Alps where nothing else would grow.

With advancing age and receding climbing power I started trying to grow alpine beauties in the garden, learning the hard way that many of them simply refuse to come down from the heights, and exulting on the occasions when I managed to make one of them feel at home. But the Himalaya! My friends were always going off on exciting expeditions there, but it seemed that these fabled regions were not for me – they were too far away, too expensive, too time-consuming; and I knew that my wife Janet would not want to come along. I had indeed read about the Himalayan exploits of the great plant collectors, Joseph Hooker, George Forrest, Frank Kingdon-Ward and the rest, and I knew well that many rhododendrons, primulas and other treasures are at home in the Himalaya. But the mountains themselves felt as inaccessible as ever.

Bhutan

All that changed towards the end of 1992 when Livia Gollancz, my neighbour and friend, mentioned that she was planning to join a botanical trek in Bhutan the following spring. Would I be interested in coming along? She showed me the prospectus: it was headed 'The Rhododendron Trek to Bhutan', and the plan was to drive across the country stopping several times to go on treks over passes. The leader was to be Ian Sinclair from the Younger Botanic Garden in Argyll, and his description started: 'Bhutan is undoubtedly the botanical paradise of the Himalaya'. How could this fail to grip my imagination? It's now or never, I said to myself. When I mentioned the matter to Janet, she was unexpectedly encouraging, murmuring something about gathering rosebuds ... That was all I needed, and I hastily booked myself in, before she could change her mind.



From the accounts I had read in the *Alpine Journal*,¹ I knew that the mysterious Kingdom of Bhutan was still remote from the world, unspoilt, with very few tourists. Furthermore, this trip was to be neither a climbing expedition, suitable for hard men only, nor a brief 'cultural visit' such as was normally on offer, but was evidently a very special opportunity, under the auspices of Himalayan Kingdoms, to see and study those wonderful plants. I also realised uneasily that I would undoubtedly be among experts, and my deplorable ignorance in matters botanical would be all too obvious; but I hoped to learn a lot. I did find out, before we left, that not many plant-collectors had been to Bhutan. The earliest was W Griffith, way back in 1838; later ones included Frank Kingdon-Ward in the 1920s; but the most important were Frank Ludlow and George Sherriff, who visited Bhutan seven times in the 1930s and 1940s.² They introduced many of the popular plants growing in our gardens.³ More recently, A J C Grierson and D G Long of the Edinburgh Botanic Garden have been there and are producing a *Flora of Bhutan*, part of which has been published.⁴

Our trip turned out to be in every way delightful. We were a harmonious party of ten, efficiently looked after by the staff of the Bhutan Tourism Corporation. We drove by mini-bus along the single rough mountain road, only completed in the 1980s, which traverses the country from west to east. It crosses numerous passes linking the valleys which run from north to south. This is the 'Middle Kingdom' where most of the population live, between the main Himalayan chain to the north and the subtropical jungle merging into the Indian plain to the south. Here the altitude ranged from 1500m to 3600m, and most of the time we were in forest, almost entirely untouched. Amongst the trees the chir pine (*Pinus roxburghii*), the blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), spruce, hemlock (*Tsuga dumosa*) and the Himalayan birch (*Betula utilis*) with its beautiful bark were much in evidence. Our skilful, patient driver was willing to stop every few hundred yards so that we could pile out to admire some rarity or other. On the treks our luggage was carried by ponies, and there were riding ponies for those who were ill, tired, or just too slow or lazy.

On 22 April 1993 we flew into Paro and were taken to the idyllic Olathang Hotel. The next day, before driving to the diminutive capital Thimphu, we went on the obligatory uphill walk towards Taktsang monastery, the famous 'Tiger's Nest', high on its sheer cliff. Here we first saw the tree-rhododendron *Rh. arboreum*, with blood-red flowers (Plate 43). Later on we would see it again, growing up to thirty metres high. We also admired *Rh. virgatum*, with delicate pale pink flowers; in contrast to most of the other plants seen, this likes dry conditions. (Bhutan has a moist climate, much wetter than Nepal, for example.) A pretty blue gentian might have been *G. pedicellata* – the Himalayan spring gentians are hard to identify.

From Thimphu we drove to Gangtey Gompa, a monastery set on a hilltop, where our first trek was to start. This drive took us over the Dochu La, in gentle rain, where masses of *Daphne bholua* filled the air with scent.

The forest floor was covered with myriads of wild strawberries. Beautiful yellow *Rh. falconeri* (Plate 44) could be seen everywhere, and the occasional *Magnolia campbellii* gleamed white in the gloomy mist. *Rh. griffithianum* had large white, fragrant, bell-shaped flowers. There was much excitement when *Primula whitei* (Plate 46), the lovely blue primula which wins many prizes at our flower shows, was seen, growing happily like our own primroses, on the banks flanking the road; and again when we spotted *Bryocarpum himalaicum*, a charming plant looking like a yellow soldanella.

The two-day Gangtey Gompa trek took us over the Tshele La (3300m) and finished with an exciting ride in an open box-car down 1200 metres into the valley. At the start of the trek we crossed meadows studded with a little purple primula, *P. erythrocarpa*, a Bhutanese relation of *P. denticulata*, and hedges of the yellow-flowered laburnum-like shrub *Piptanthus nepalensis*. Later we saw *Rh. kesangiae*, a very beautiful newly described species, named after Bhutan's Queen Mother, which has deep rose trusses; and, growing in a bog, there was yellow *Primula smithiana*.

Over the next two days we drove via the ancient capital Tongsa to Jakar in the centre of the country. On the first day we stopped for lunch at Chendebji Chorten, a big white religious monument, where *Rh. lindleyi* was growing epiphytically on the hemlock trees. It has huge white blossoms, and a sweet scent. Next day *Arisaema nepenthoides* with its mottled greenish-brown spathe, with white stripes on the back, was an exciting find. Later on we stopped, in rain and mist, on the Yatong La. Some of our members disappeared into the undergrowth and came back clutching purple trusses; this was *Rh. hodgsonii* aff., never before described. Climbing Everest could hardly have felt more of a triumph, and the plant was thoroughly studied and measured (though not by me!) for most of the following night.

Our second trek was the popular Bumthang trek which crosses the Phe Phe La (3450m). Here we saw the Himalayan giant lily *Cardiocrinum giganteum*, not yet in flower; anemones in the forest (*A. obtusiloba*, white and blue); and, by the Sacred Lake of Mabartsho, yellow tree paeonies, a variety of *Paeonia lutea*. Then came a long day's drive from Jakar to Mongar, over several passes, with frequent stops for photography. The day provided a feast of rhododendrons, among them yellow *Rh. cinnabarinum* ssp. *xanthocodon* (one of Joseph Hooker's introductions), cream and pink *Rh. flinkii* and scarlet *Rh. argipeplum*. The rare *Rh. pendulum* was photographed by one dare-devil leaning over the edge of a cliff, with another belaying him by sitting on his legs. We also saw *Arisaema griffithii*, a fearsome-looking plant resembling a cobra about to strike.

The original intention had been to finish with a week's trek over the Pang La, a remote high pass in the east of the country, in the footsteps of Ludlow and Sherriff, but at the last moment permission was withdrawn, either because conditions were too difficult or because the Bhutanese just didn't want us to go there – probably both. So our third trek was a more modest one over the Reb La, on the way to the Pang La, which as far as we knew

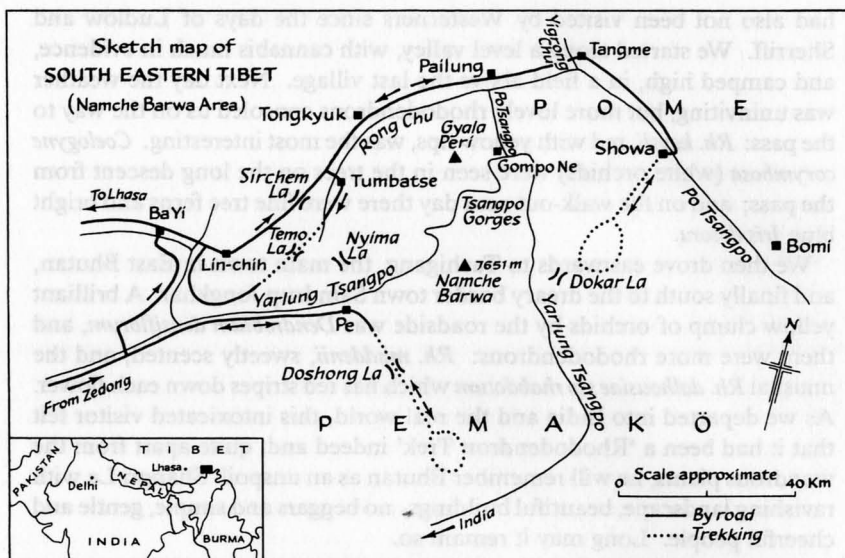
had also not been visited by Westerners since the days of Ludlow and Sherriff. We started along a level valley, with cannabis much in evidence, and camped high, in a field above the last village. Next day the weather was uninviting, but more lovely rhododendrons consoled us on the way to the pass: *Rh. keysii*, red with yellow tips, was the most interesting. *Coelogyne corymbosa* (white orchids) were seen in the trees on the long descent from the pass; and on the walk-out next day there were fine tree ferns and bright blue *Iris decora*.

We then drove eastwards to Tashigang, the main town in East Bhutan, and finally south to the dreary border town Samdrup Jongkhar. A brilliant yellow clump of orchids by the roadside was *Dendrobium densiflorum*, and there were more rhododendrons: *Rh. maddenii*, sweetly scented, and the unusual *Rh. dalhousiae* ssp *rhabdotum* which has red stripes down each flower. As we departed into India and the real world, this intoxicated visitor felt that it had been a 'Rhododendron Trek' indeed and, quite apart from the wondrous plants, he will remember Bhutan as an unspoilt Shangri La with ravishing landscape, beautiful buildings, no beggars and simple, gentle and cheerful people. Long may it remain so.

Tibet

After such a feast, the Himalaya had surely nothing comparable to offer to the plant enthusiast. Or had it? Anne Chambers, our expert on alpenes in Bhutan, had mentioned Kingdon-Ward's book *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*.⁵ This tells about the great Tsangpo river which, coming from the high plateau of Tibet, forces its way through the Eastern Himalaya in a big loop around the mysterious high mountain Namche Barwa (7756m), unclimbed until 1992, to become the Brahmaputra in the plains of India: the 'riddle' being the legend that there must be a huge waterfall somewhere in the deep impenetrable gorge. But it was chapter headings such as 'The Paradise of Primulas' and 'In the Rhododendron Fairyland' which stimulated more dreams ... and the Doshong La, where the weather was always evil, was the place where these marvels were to be found. Kingdon-Ward was there in 1924, and Ludlow and Sherriff had also explored the region. In recent years botanists had been hoping to make a return, but it was not until 1995, after at least one false start, that a party from the UK was at last able to go. This was under the auspices of Exodus Travels, and Anne was a member of the party. I tried hard not to feel jealous! When I heard that a similar trip was planned for 1996 I succumbed, with (admittedly) some trepidation. I would be three years older than in Bhutan, and the trek would be tougher: the 1995 party had found the Doshong La under many metres of snow and only half of them had managed the crossing. For 1996 ice axes and crampons were recommended.

On 28 May 1996 our party of fourteen, accompanied by a group of Sherpas from Nepal, arrived at Gonggar airport, 120km south of Lhasa, and were met by our Tibetan staff, with four land-cruisers and a lorry for



the tents and luggage. Our botanical leader was Kenneth Cox, a leading expert on rhododendrons, who had brought his equally expert father Peter; and David Burlinson of Exodus, whose enthusiasm for Tibet had made the trip possible, also came along. This time we started at a height of 3500m (and felt it!) and reached nearly 5000m on the trip; thus the plants to be seen were mostly different from those encountered in Bhutan. The next three weeks amply fulfilled our expectations: Kenneth Cox's list of plants seen comprises over 250 species, including 64 different rhododendrons, and I can only mention a few of the most exciting discoveries.

For two days we drove east along rough roads, following the Tsangpo river; gradually the arid landscape turned green, and trees and cultivated fields appeared. Eventually we camped in an idyllic forest clearing to the north of the Doshong La: masses of orange-yellow *Primula chungensis* grew in boggy ground nearby, and aptly-named bright yellow *Rhododendron wardii* filled the forest. A reconnaissance towards the pass confirmed that the snow was deep and soft, but we were declared fit for the crossing which was successfully accomplished the following day. A young Tibetan guide was assigned to me as minder, and his physical and moral support proved crucial as I plodded along, hours behind everyone else. The season was late, and flowering plants were sparse in the clearings, but creeping scarlet *Rhododendron forrestii* remains in the memory. The campsite down on the other side, where we stayed for three nights, was dank and the rain was incessant; nevertheless, when we explored the valley below we found many treasures, among them Kingdon-Ward's pale yellow 'daffodil primula' *P. falcifolia*, so-called after its scythe-shaped leaves, which is endemic to the

Doshong La. All that rain meant lots of new snow on the pass, and our return threatened to become an epic. As we had no permission from the Chinese authorities to travel into Pemakö, south from the pass, I still wonder what would have happened if any of us had failed to get back across. Fortunately I will never know.

Now the weather cleared, and remained good for the rest of the trip. Another two days of driving took us across the Tsangpo, through the green and beautiful Rong Chu Valley and eastwards into the district of Pome. On the way we admired *Clematis montana*, with huge white blooms some with pink-striped edges, drifts of yellow *Rhododendron wardii* and lovely purple *Primula tanneri ssp tsariensis*. We camped at Showa, by the Po Tsangpo river which is a tributary of the main Yarlung Tsangpo. Local porters were recruited with difficulty – there is no trekking tradition in this remote part of Tibet – but a gang consisting mainly of women and young boys was eventually assembled; fortunately their load-carrying capacity was astounding. Two days' uphill trek through superb untouched forest – elsewhere in Tibet excessive logging was all too sadly evident – took us to a camp, still in forest, below the Dokar La: this pass, which leads to the Tsangpo Gorge, was crowned with huge cornices and was evidently quite out of bounds. At the camp, as we watched the clouds disperse, a glittering icy peak, Jhulong, slowly began to dominate the view. Plants seen on this trek included blood-red *Rhododendron sanguineum*, the yellow poppy *Meconopsis pseudo-integrifolia*, the remarkable striped *Daiswa violacea* and the woodland orchid *Calanthe tricarinata*. Special thrills were *Omphalogramma tibeticum*, a primula-related rarity with deep violet trumpets, and the brilliant red *Lilium paradoxum*, discovered by an intrepid member on a daring solo scramble up steep scree. We may have been the first Westerners ever to have approached so close to the Dokar La.

We returned to the Rong Chu Valley where we stayed for three nights, botanising and recuperating. Whilst there we visited Tumbatse, the village which had been Kingdon-Ward's base; it had largely preserved its Tibetan character. Here a gracious old lady invited us into her house and offered us the inevitable butter tea, which is not nearly so disagreeable as popular opinion would have it. Then we were ready for another long day's walk, which turned out to be a most enjoyable finale. It took us over the Temo La on a good track; there was no snow, the sun was shining and I could stroll along at my own pace. From the pass Namche Barwa revealed itself as a fearsome-looking pyramid (Plate 45). On the long descent there were more lovely plants, including the dark red, striped ladies' slipper orchid *Cypripedium tibeticum*, a clump of blue poppies by a stream (*Meconopsis betonicifolia*, the emblem of the Himalaya), and beautiful *Primula cawdoriana*, with downward-pointing mauve tubular flowers, named after the Earl of Cawdor who accompanied Kingdon-Ward on his 1924 expedition.

Finally, on the long drive back to Lhasa, further excitements awaited us when we stopped on the last high pass, the Manshung La (4800m):

among them a curious member of the crucifer family called *Solms-Laubachia*, with pale blue flowers, and, much more striking, soft hairy cushions carrying forget-me-not-like sessile flowers of intensest blue, *Chionocharis hookeri*.

Kingdon-Ward spoke the truth. This remote corner of the Himalaya, with its wealth of rare and beautiful plants, its imposing mountains and its gentle people who are trying to preserve their customs and religion under difficult circumstances, left deep and enduring impressions. I hope to return one day, even if it means waiting for my next incarnation.

REFERENCES

1. *AJ91*, 94-100, 1986; *AJ94*, 38-51, 1989/90.
2. Michael Ward, 'Exploration of the Bhutan Himalaya' in *AJ 102*, 222-223, 1997.
3. H R Fletcher, *A Quest of Flowers. The plant explorations of Frank Ludlow and George Sherriff*. Edinburgh University Press, 1975.
4. Review of *Flora of Bhutan, Vol I* by A J C Grierson & D G Long. (Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh) in *AJ94*, 288-289, 1989/90.
5. F Kingdon-Ward, *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges*. Arnold, 1926.



43. Taksang monastery, Bhutan, with *Rhododendron arboreum* and prayer flags. (Ernst Sondheimer) (p149)



44. *Rhododendron falconeri* ssp. *eximium*. (Ernst Sondheimer) (p149)



45. The pyramid of Namche Barwa, 7756m, glimpsed from the Temo La. (*Ernst Sondheimer*) (p149)



46. *Primula whitei*. (*Ernst Sondheimer*) (p149)