



Radio Shangri-la: What I Learned in Bhutan, the Happiest Kingdom on Earth

Lisa Napoli

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Lisa Napoli was in the grip of a crisis, dissatisfied with her life and her work as a radio journalist. When a chance encounter with a handsome stranger presented her with an opportunity to move halfway around the world, Lisa left behind cosmopolitan Los Angeles for a new adventure in the ancient Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan—said to be one of the happiest places on earth.

Long isolated from industrialization and just beginning to open its doors to the modern world, Bhutan is a deeply spiritual place, devoted to environmental conservation and committed to the happiness of its people—in fact, Bhutan measures its success in Gross National Happiness rather than in GNP. In a country without a single traffic light, its citizens are believed to be among the most content in the world. To Lisa, it seemed to be a place that offered the opposite of her fast-paced life in the United States, where the noisy din of sound-bite news and cell phones dominate our days, and meaningful conversation is a rare commodity; where everyone is plugged in digitally, yet rarely connects with the people around them.

Thousands of miles away from everything and everyone she knows, Lisa creates a new community for herself. As she helps to start Bhutan's first youth-oriented radio station, Kuzoo FM, she must come to terms with her conflicting feelings about the impact of the medium on a country that had been shielded from its effects. Immersing herself in Bhutan's rapidly changing culture, Lisa realizes that her own perspective on life is changing as well—and that she is discovering the sense of purpose and joy that she has been yearning for.

In this smart, heartfelt, and beautifully written book, sure to please fans of transporting travel narratives and personal memoirs alike, Lisa Napoli discovers that the world is a beautiful and complicated place—and comes to appreciate her life for the adventure it is.

Radio Shangri-la: What I Learned in Bhutan, the Happiest Kingdom on Earth Details

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From Reader Review Radio Shangri-la: What I Learned in Bhutan, the Happiest Kingdom on Earth for online ebook

Lisa Napoli says

I'm biased--I wrote it!

Kevin says

What a great book, I feel like I'd really like to visit a country where the measure of the country is how happy the people are instead of how much money or product they produce. Well written and plenty of interesting people. Written in 2011, I'd like to see the writer do a follow up as it seems the country was in transition when this book was written.

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

Bhutan, with its Gross National Happiness emphasis, its gorgeous and isolated setting, wonderful people, and sudden ascent into the 21st century, has intrigued me, so I couldn't wait to read this memoir by a woman who volunteered at a fledgling radio station in the country. And I loved learning more about this unique country.

Unfortunately, the writing didn't quite live up to my expectations; it just didn't grab me as much as I had anticipated. To start, the author writes about Harris and Matt, Benjamin and Sebastian. Are Harris and Matt the same person? What about Benjamin and Sebastian? I hate flipping back to try to figure out who is who. To be expected with Bhutanese names, but could have easily been avoided with the American ones.

The author is having a midlife crisis. She has chosen a career in modern media but seems to dislike almost everything about her chosen field. Something terrible happened to her when she was young, and it has understandably affected her later decisions, but too much of the book just seems like whining and I couldn't connect to her feelings. She hated the food in Bhutan and the stray dogs annoyed her, as though it were the dogs' fault they were strays, and couldn't seem to let either of those things go.

I did love reading about some of the Bhutanese people, the irrepressible Ngawang and her impressions of the United States, the Rinpoche who turned out to be not so nice. The author had advantages and accomplishments greater than the people she was helping, but it sometimes came across as her being a bit smug although I'm sure it wasn't meant that way. I liked this book and am glad I read it but didn't love it – the writing just didn't pull me in.

I was given a copy of this book by the publisher, for which I am grateful.

Donna says

No matter how happy Bhutan is, I would not fare well there. It may be beautiful, but the fiery hot peppers they favor would leave me in tears and starving.

Lisa Napoli, author of “Radio Shangri-La: What I Learned in Bhutan, the Happiest Kingdom on Earth,” worked for public radio in California and was dissatisfied with her life.

Through a chance meeting at a party, she winds up on the other side of the world, spending six weeks helping radio station Kuzoo FM operate, well, more like a professional radio station.

The pace of life, of course, is very different in Bhutan, as is the standard of living. Oh, and the cuisine. Bhutanese eat a lot of rice and insanely hot chili peppers. Unable to tolerate the latter, Napoli survives largely on the former.

Napoli arrives at a time when Bhutan is undergoing political changes. The king steps down, turning over power to his son, and national elections take place. As the footprint of the capital city of Thimphu continues to grow, the country maintains a \$250-per-day tax on tourists so it won’t become like (shudder) Nepal.

Napoli ends up sponsoring one of the women who worked at the radio station on a kind of internship in the United States. Ngawang is overwhelmed by our country and disappears for months after her visa runs out.

She does end up back in Bhutan, though I don’t want to give anything away.

Napoli continues to return to the country that captured her heart and changed her life. Her account of her adventure educated me about a country I had heard of but didn’t really know anything about and made me think about the good and the bad of modernization.

Early in the book, she talks about attending an experimental workshop in positive psychology. One of the teacher’s suggestions is to write down, at the end of every day, three good things that happened. I’m going to start doing that, and I think that exercise in gratitude is the most important thing I got out her road to Shangri-La.

Four out of five stars.

bookczuk says

Bhutan captured my imagination back in my son's freshman year at Stanford because of a connection with one of his Stanford faculty and the Royal family. He almost spent part of that summer there, but time and finances worked against him heading to the Happiest Kingdom on Earth. Had he gone, he would have been in Bhutan the same time Lisa Napoli first went there, to help with the fledgling youth radio station Kuzoo FM.

There was a lot I liked about this book, but it had little to do with the author's story and more with the country itself. I was fascinated by the story that was behind University of Texas El Paso's architecture being based on Bhutanese architecture. Who knew? I had to look it up to see the Texan interpretation of Himalayan style [<http://universitycommunications.utep....>] And I, who absolutely love all kinds of graffiti and wall art, or native art that decorates homes in other country got a huge kick out of learning many homes in Bhutan has phalluses painted on them to ward off evil. Of course, that got a google search. Amazing. The unfolding of democracy, and the way auspicious dates were calculated intrigued me. Then there was the general beauty of the country. I spent hours looking at photographs.

As to Napoli's story itself, I had less infatuation. But she had a tale to tell, and told it well. (Many of my frustrations in reading were because this was an uncorrected proof, and there were some mixups with names of characters - real vs fictional. I hope those were straightened out before the book went to press.) Napoli's needs and life are very different from mine, but I still can appreciate her journey -- especially since she gave

me a lift, via armchair travelling, to the beautiful kingdom of Bhutan.

Many thanks to readitforward.com for this book. I shall be passing it along via www.bookcrossing.com (<http://www.bookcrossing.com/journal/9...>).

John says

Really 2.5 - 3 stars, but rounded down for the author's overly-perky narration, which grew irritating.

I found the story ultimately lacking, disappointing, underwhelming. We get a general description of Thimpu, though not much the country as a whole. Instead, the Bhutan-set chapters focus more on the personalities of the people she meets there, and impressions of the society; however, I didn't get an idea of what she actually *did* there as a volunteer. To be blunt, she came off as needy, and the Bhutanese came off as willing to take advantage of that, driven home when a Bhutanese colleague from the station comes to America for a visit.

She returns a few times, seemingly having enough money to do so after losing her job and such. She remarks that her L. A. costs "half my take home pay", so I found her financial situation a bit ... confusing, shall we say.

Others may get more out of this book than I did, but I can't really recommend it with any enthusiasm.

David says

I received this book as part of the Goodreads First Reads program.

After a chance meeting at a party, Lisa Napoli stumbles across the adventure of a lifetime. *Radio Shangri-La* covers two main narrative threads: a memoir of Napoli's sort of mid-life crisis and the history of Bhutan as well as its increasingly rapid democratization and commercialization. As a geography/culture junkie, I found the latter topic more compelling. Indeed, at times Napoli's personal developments seem a bit superfluous to my main interests in the book.

This is a great read for those who wish to find out more about the tiny little-known kingdom landlocked between India and China. I found myself often comparing and contrasting Bhutan with the nearby and similar, but long converted into a spiritual tourist mecca, Nepal. While Nepal caters to backpackers seeking spiritual enlightenment, Bhutan targets an elite brand of tourist, even charging a daily rate to visit the country.

It was also interesting to see the cultural impact of Kuzoo FM upon the Bhutanese people. In a country where a large percentage of the population is under the age of 30, it is no surprise the programming, especially the station's musical content, caters to a younger crowd.

Napoli's account of Bhutan's movement from monarchy into democracy and the bumps along the way also provide food for thought. The people are still very much enamored of their king and royalty, and while the first election is taken very seriously, Napoli provides insight from citizens who are cautious about the changes.

A fascinating insight into a quickly Westernizing nation, *Radio Shangri-La* is an informative, insightful read.

Read It Forward says

I'm so excited to tell all my friends who loved *Eat, Pray, Love* about *Radio Shangri-la*! It's fabulous. So smart and insightful, and what an education I got reading it. Lisa has a journalist's precision and a novelist's way with character. She grabs her life during a moment of crisis and shakes it out like a rug - she's such an inspiration to all of us who have wondered what we would do if given the opportunity to let go of the familiar, travel to a far-off place, and change our life.

Rebekah O'Dell says

Imagine *Eat, Pray, Love*. Subtract the self-indulgent whining. Add work. Voila! An approximation of Lisa Napoli's *Radio Shangri-la*.

I don't mean that in a reductive way, though. This is a very thoughtful, interesting travel memoir about a successful journalist in a mid-life crisis. After a chance meeting at a party, Lisa agrees to travel to Bhutan, a tiny country touted as the "happiest kingdom on Earth." A radio vet, her skills are needed to help professionalize a Bhutan's first radio station. So, she hops on a plane and joins the Kuzoo FM team as a consultant.

Though there are plenty of moments of self reflection, this memoir is not nearly as introspective as other travel memoirs. In the midst of her own self-discovery, Napoli really reports on Bhutan — the people, the culture, the religion, the industry, the economy, the politics. In many ways, *Radio Shangri-la* reads very much like an extended NPR article.

The most interesting twist in the tale, however, occurs when Napoli returns to the States and sponsors a visit from a young Bhutanese friend, Nangwang. Having never been outside of Bhutan, Nangwang's view of America is fascinating, as are the manipulative interpersonal tactics she employs to try to stay in the country. Napoli thus shows the reader Bhutan from both sides — as a foreigner in Bhutan and as a foreigner from Bhutan.

At moments I felt the narrative lagged, particularly when Napoli went into details of Bhutan's political elections. Overall, though, this was a very interesting book about a little-known part of the world and an inspiring story about the ways one person can make a difference in the world through their current vocation. Not everyone can open an orphanage or build a school. Napoli shows that impact — both personal and professional — can come in many forms. Avid NPR-listeners and lovers of the travel memoir alike will love this book.

Karen Germain says

I have a soft spot for travel memoirs, especially ones that involve quirky, fish-out-of-water scenarios. Lisa

Napoli's *Radio Shangri-La* documents the author's many trips to the country of Bhutan, the self-proclaimed "Happiest Kingdom on Earth."

Bhutan is a country that is not accessible to the average tourist. It's difficult to obtain a visa and if you are allowed in, there is a heavy daily tax levied on visitors. Napoli managed to gain entry by way of her career in radio and arrived to help the nation's first station geared towards Bhutanese youth, radio Kuzoo. Radio Kuzoo became a phenomenon in Bhutan, as it allowed the citizens in a very closed culture, access to the outside world. When Napoli was visiting in 2008, the country was beginning to let in the modern world and changes were happening rapidly.

The book is as much about Bhutan's changes, as the changes in Napoli's own life. It is very reflective, especially with regards to Napoli's younger Bhutanese friends. Napoli is in her forties and reflecting on the decisions made in her youth and focused on how to spend the second half of her life. This is especially profound in the last half of the book, when Napoli befriends Ngawang, a young adult, who is trying to carve out her own future and in the process makes life-altering decisions.

The contemplative tone of the memoir, also has a lot to say on the idea of happiness and what it means of different people. Bhutan claims to be the "Happiest Kingdom on Earth" and when Napoli first arrives, she goes in with a rather, western, hippy notion that it's because the people are unplugged from modern distractions. Bhutan does eschew many of the trappings of modern society, but it's more deeply rooted cultural priorities of family and belonging that give the citizens a sense of happiness. If Napoli write another book, ten or twenty years from now, it may give us a very different view of Bhutan, as the outside world becomes a bigger part of daily life. However, at this junction, it doesn't seem that any negative affects have invaded.

The afterword could have easily been a jumping point for a new book. It was actually quite surprising. Napoli met with a family of Bhutan refugees in Tuscon, Arizona, who told their story about being forced out of the country twenty years ago. Bhutan made it very uncomfortable for their ethnic Nepalese citizens to live in the country, forcing them to flee Bhutan and find safe havens in other countries. This happened to approximately 1/6th of the population of Bhutan, many of whom, wish that they could return home despite being unwelcome in their home country. Reading about this, made the whole "Happiest Kingdom.." bit sound like even more P.R. nonsense than it did initially.

This being said, the idea of whether or not it is the Happiest Kingdom is irrelevant. Napoli's book is about herself and the individuals that she encounters. It is a micro, not a macro view of her experience of the culture of Bhutan. In the end, the concept of Happiness is vast and impossible to define. It is an individual feeling and absurd to apply to an entire country.

Sandi says

I entered two giveaways for this book, one through FirstReads and one from the publisher's website. I won the FirstReads one and am hoping I don't end up with two. Isn't this title terrific?

After reading the 20 page introduction and the first 3 chapters, I decided that this just isn't my kind of book. I got suckered in by a terrific title and great cover. The blurb sounded pretty good too. However, I'm just not that into memoirs about middle-aged women (of which I am one) who feel a need to zip off to some Third World country in search of self-realization. When the 40-something woman sounds like she's 18, I find it

pretty annoying. I really didn't have the patience for the text messages with the handsome stranger or the exclamation points when she describes arriving in Bhutan. When she started talking about how she was burned out on media, even though she was in Bhutan to help with their new radio station, I just gave up. I have too many books to read to spend my time on something that just isn't my taste.

Shomeret says

Although I did learn about Bhutan from this book, I thought that Lisa Napoli's memoir was not the best vehicle for doing so. It occurred to me that Napoli isn't very visual. One incident that stood out for me was when she was guessing the nationality of another visitor to Bhutan by his accent rather than his appearance. Another one was when she purchased a ring as a keepsake from Bhutan and didn't describe it at all. Her descriptions are general rather than specific. A travel writer should be more detailed.

I also was disappointed in what she actually accomplished on her first trip. She was asked to help establish a radio station for the youth of Bhutan, but for the most part it didn't seem like she was needed. I also thought that she could have done more for the orphanage in Bhutan.

On the other hand, I was impressed with Bhutan's limits on how much Western influence they were willing to accept.

I also liked the workshop that Napoli took in Los Angeles in which you record three good things that happen to you. Being happy really is subjective. The re-framing technique that is used in that workshop is effective. If you remember the positive events in your life, you will feel more optimistic.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Athira (Reading on a Rainy Day) says

When I was first offered to review this book, I spent a while thinking about Bhutan, the country which is the focus of this travelogue memoir. The first sad thing I realized was that even in spite of having stayed for eight years in India, and having grown up on a steady diet of news regarding the southern Asian peninsula, Bhutan very rarely featured in any flash news from that region. Although I knew plenty about Bhutan, there was still a lot I didn't. That, as well as the real reason why news about Bhutan rarely invaded my living room couch, was revealed to me in this book.

Radio Shangri-La is about Lisa Napoli's rediscovery of self through this remotely tucked away country in Asia. The book started out typically - a mid-life crisis bringing about a yearning for travel - especially to a little known country shrouded in mysticism and full of a promise of spiritual awakening. Warning flags immediately started popping up in my antenna - I haven't still forgotten the debacle that was Eat, Pray, Love. Luckily though, Lisa Napoli is very practical, and doesn't start off with dumping all her issues on us. In fact, it is many pages later that we really know what her troubles are. If not for the candid admission in the Preface that this is a story of her midlife crisis, I might have taken her for any one of us.

By the end of the book, I've learned enough about Bhutan to wonder which planet this country was in. Bhutan's monarchy made a conscious decision not to be "corrupted" by outside influences. It's unbelievably hard to get into this country - \$200 per head per day! (Even if that hefty pay serves to keep most potential tourists out of the country, and thus not turn Bhutan into yet another country that serves as the world's spiritual ground, it's not a policy I approve of.) Lisa vividly describes the many customs of the country and its geographic characteristics that I could picture the place so well in my mind's eye. Too often, I find travelogues focus on only some particular aspect of a country. Not Lisa's, though. She doesn't stick to exploring only one facet of her favorite place in the world - instead she easily delves into other political and commercial news, and shares them with us.

I liked the second half of the book better than the first. The first half was way too descriptive for me, while the pacing of the second half a lot faster. The first half is really the exploration / rediscovery / change part of the author's life, and consistent with that, she shares a lot of what she learns during that phase with us. It has whole chapters that show what makes Bhutan the way it is -- resilient, incorruptible, paradisaical. I appreciated how well she made a case for it. But the second half, which is the acceptance / moving on part shows the reverse culture clash -- of her returning back to the states, completely transformed; and of one of her favorite people from Bhutan, who comes to visit her in LA.

Moreover, the first half of the book focuses on the "good" side of Bhutan. I may not have visited Bhutan, but there's a lot (esp the customs) that sounds similar to me because of the way of life in India. The author's initial perspective about the good virtues of Bhutan left me asking - where's all the bad stuff and the bad people? Even in a country so isolated, where radio broadcasting is received with the same gusto as Apple's iPads are in the tech world, and where everyone absolutely loves the king, there should still be the odd person indulging in bad politics or something about this mystic place that feels too ancient. I was rewarded in the second half with all those answers. The author presents a well-written case of why some things had better not be done in Bhutan, and what some changes can mean to the country and the rest of the world.

While I didn't agree with the author on everything, I loved that this was a very honestly written account of what she benefited from Bhutan. She didn't believe in superstitions or prayer rituals to make her life better but if that option was provided to her, she didn't denounce it or jump into it outright - instead she had a very practical response. That practical approach, her candidness and matter-of-fact tone in making any decisions are what make this memoir work very well.

Stephanie says

I was wary of this one, but I'm not about to turn down a new book about Bhutan!

Travel memoirs are tricky. The author must strike a balance between blandly listing what they experience in the country and making the journey all! about! them! Radio Shangri-La is hit or miss in this regard. Unlike other travel memoirs I've read, there is a wealth of information about the Bhutan of the past four years. Napoli's pretty straightforward about how little she knew about Bhutan before arriving, and how much of the material is filtered through her foreign mindset. Since I worked in college radio, I was fascinated about the comparisons between American and Bhutanese media. Less riveting were the sections on how this experience made the author feel about romance. I'm not really interested in books about people who see *~exotic locales*~ as backdrops for their own personal revelations. Epiphanies can happen while traveling, but pro-tip: always try to keep in mind that the country doesn't exist solely for your own personal enlightenment. Likewise, I could have done without the discussions of how Bhutan's modernization makes

foreign visitors sad that "real" Bhutan is diminishing. The book does include perspectives on how the Bhutanese feel about this phenomenon, and that's a point in it's favor. Finally, this book could have used some judicious editing. Many repetitions of "spicy hot food" (yay redundancy?), of "tiny Himalayan kingdom no one had heard of," and of how Nepal and India are clogged with tourists. Also use of the word "civilized" in comparison with the United States. Criiiiinge. Cringe.

Now after that complaining I will say this book is in my "recommend!" pile, partially due to novelty. And despite the things that aggravated me, Napoli's love for Bhutan is genuine, and quite fun to read about. The culture shock comes across, but so does her enthusiasm.
