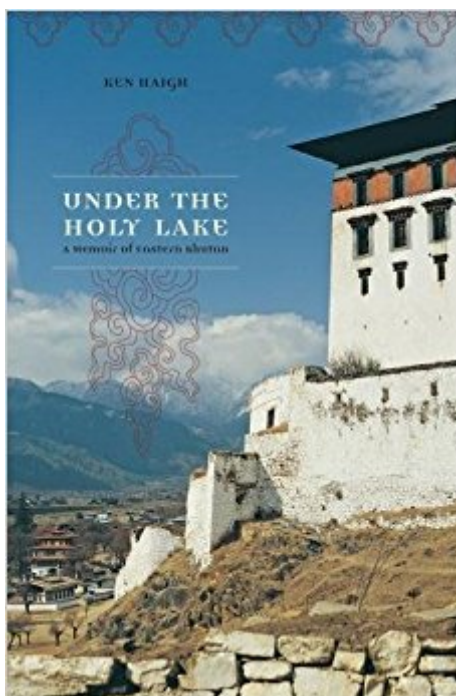


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# Under The Holy Lake: A Memoir Of Eastern Bhutan (Wayfarer)



## Synopsis

A child's face, a forgotten scent, or a distinctive flavour engages memory and inspires longing. Ken Haigh brings us tantalizingly close to his own vision of longing for a place, a people, a time, as he revisits those all-too-fleeting years as a young school teacher in the remote Himalayan village of Khaling, Bhutan. These experiences in an exotic country will leave you yearning for ancient Buddhist temples, winding mountain trails, and a simpler way of life. This memoir will captivate the vicarious traveller in each of us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"As a young teacher in the late 1980s, Ontarian Ken Haigh taught for two years in a remote Himalayan village in eastern Bhutan. This is an evocative memoir of that time and that place, redolent of the region's Buddhist legacy, its mountain trails and its timeless way of life." *The Globe and Mail*, August 9, 2008 "His adventures of teaching for two years in Bhutan have been my bed time reading for the past while. An amazing story, beautifully written."

<http://heathersexcellentadventure.blogspot.com/>"In 1987, with a degree in English Literature under his belt, Ken went, under the auspices of WUSC (World University of Canada), to teach in a remote Bhutanese valley, at a school that had originally been established by Canadian Jesuits. Ill-prepared and initially ill-at-ease, he arrived in a corner of the earth that was virtually untouched by the modern world. It was a landscape of lush valleys overshadowed by the oldest and highest mountains on earth, in a country rich in legend, magic and superstition, with a vibrant traditional culture in which

every aspect of daily life was permeated by Buddhism; a country of mountain villages and friendly people, with gorgeous temples that were living places of worship, not tourist attractions. With eloquence, wit, and self-effacing humour, Ken traces the stages of his culture shock: the honeymoon period, in which everything was new and fascinating: the period of conflict in which a longing for Tim Hortons set in; the critical period, in which everything that was apparently wrong with the place grated on his nerves. Finally came a time of acceptance and transition into recovery and cultural adaptation. He relates how he learned to deal with lack of telephones, the constant haggling, the rats, the wild dogs, the leeches, the hundred-mile treks, the near death experiences on terrifying mountain roads, the frustration of language barriers, the monotonous diet, the sickness. Yet, despite the great discomforts, Haigh's book is a love story, the story of how a young Canadian teacher became captivated by the magic and the mystique of a strange land and its people....Ken Haigh's book is a 'must read' for any young person contemplating volunteer service overseas, and it's a first-class read for the armchair traveller. You can feel the mountains, hear the sounds, taste the food, see the colours and breathe the air of Bhutan, the only country on the planet where 'Gross National Happiness' is officially deemed more important than 'Gross National Product'." Patricia Grant, *The Blue Mountains Courier-Herald*, September 17, 2008"Haigh's sensitive and penetrating account of two years' teaching in Bhutan shatters many Himalayan Shangri-la myths in projecting the many-faceted and tougher realities. Haigh's dedicated work there will evoke admiration." Peter Skinner, *Outstanding University Press Books*, *Foreword Magazine*, January/February 2009"Under the Holy lake: A Memoir of Eastern Bhutan, writer Ken Haigh revisits his time spent as a young school teacher in the remote Himalayan village of Kahling, Bhutan, and draws the reader into a place where the hurried pace of Western life gives way to simpler, gentler modes of living." *Edmonton Journal*, Christmas Gift Guide, November 19, 2008"I put it aside for a few weeks, asking, 'Do we really need another memoir of a North American's brief stay in Bhutan?' Sorry about that, but we do. ... In 1987 and '89, he taught in the Khaling Valley in Eastern Bhutan. And now, 20 years later, Haigh has written a winner about his experience." Andrew Armitage, *Owen Sound Sun Times*, January 16, 2009"This is a beautifully written love letter to a country, simple and untouched, where Haigh spent two formative and hugely informative years. Haigh's experiences are those of every traveller eager to experience a new society and culture. He has to learn the mysteries of the local body language, the subtleties of everyday commerce, the wonders of the local customs (did you know archery is the national sport in Bhutan?), the importance of clans and families and myriad other minutiae. Haigh's ability to recall and describe this detail makes the book so fascinating. ... An example of these wonderful tales is Haigh's attempt to wear the local costume, a

single piece of cloth known as a gho. He doesn't put it on right so the students strip it off and show him how, when worn correctly, it can make him look 'very handsome and very dangerous.'" Bruce Elder, Sydney Morning Herald, March 14-15, 2009"Ken Haigh's memoir of teaching high school in Bhutan has been published by University of Alberta Press. Ken spent two years teaching in Bhutan and his book, *Under the Holy Lake*, is an engaging and informative tale of his adventures during a unique time in the country's history. After teaching in Bhutan, China and the Canadian Arctic, Ken earned his Masters of Library & Information Science at the University of Western Ontario. Shortly thereafter he moved to The Blue Mountains and worked as CEO until 2002 when he resigned to become a full time father and writer. Ken has since returned to work part-time at the Blue Mountains Public Library and he continues to write and actively parent his three school-aged children. Ken's book has been enthusiastically received by the Georgian Bay Communities." Hoopla, Spring 2009"[Haigh's] book is knowledgeable, thoughtful, humane and stylish." Diplomat and International Canada, Spring 2009"Ken Haigh's memoir of teaching high school in Bhutan has been published by University of Alberta Press. Ken spent two years teaching in Bhutan and his book, *Under the Holy Lake*, is an engaging and informative tale of his adventures during a unique time in the country's history. Ken's book has been enthusiastically received by the Georgian Bay Communities." Hoopla, Spring 2009"At times, it's difficult to believe that Haigh's Bhutan, with its gentle (though often intoxicated) people, lack of ethnic tension, dozens of languages, mountainside villages and monasteries, authoritarian but benevolent king, combination of a devout and traditional Buddhism with a system of government-funded English-speaking boarding schools run by Catholic priests and nuns, actually exists. And it doesn't anymore. ... Haigh was lucky to have been there when the country was open to foreigners yet relatively uninfluenced by them, and his sensitive, elegant reminiscences of mountain hikes and churned-butter tea, of Buddhist festivals and attentive, thoughtful teenage students, will make anyone nostalgic for that brief golden moment." Alex Rettie, Alberta Views, May 2009."Excellent, well written book of early experiences of Bhutan as it was opening its boundaries to welcome visitors from the West. Recommended reading for those interested in Buddhist countries and the insights that await for those with an interest in mindfulness and awareness of living for the moment." Lovethebook.com"Despite of culture shock, Haigh persevered, turning into a remarkable teacher, complete with banjo, grit and imagination. And he is also a writer with sensitivity and an exquisite eye for detail. If you are planning on a career in overseas teaching, know someone who is now there, or simply want the best in Canadian non-fiction, you need not go much further than *Under the Holy Lake*." Andrew Armitage, Owen Sound Sun-Times, January 16, 2009"Ken Haigh spent two years in the remote

Himalayan village of Khaling, teaching in the local school. In *Under the Holy Lake*, he shares his experiences, his knowledge of the country and its culture, and the personal insights he achieved. The first three chapters recount his quasi-accidental journey to his teaching appointment in Bhutan, capturing the scene, the people, and a taste of the school life. In Chapter 4, "An Accidental Area," Haigh succinctly explains the history and current political situation in this heretofore overlooked "country of mountains." This historical rendering could easily have become dry, but the author maintains an engaging educational style throughout. But *Under the Holy Lake* is not only the socio-political description of a teacher, it is also the very humorous account of a young man experiencing a culture vastly different than his own. In Chapter 5, Haigh recounts his comical search for the ruins of the legendary King Dewa, complete with a growing entourage and an impromptu picnic. Chapter 8 becomes a bit more serious, as he describes the very real culture shock he underwent during his two-year sojourn in Bhutan. Throughout this engaging memoir, Haigh's personality is a calm foil against which the people and places he experiences are clearly depicted. While some of his students in the beginning may have thought he was "dangerous" because of his beard, he finds his place among them for a time, and leaves the reader with a lasting impression of a fascinating country, its people, and its place in the world." - Lori A. Dunn "If you like to think about escaping from the hectic lifestyle of Western culture and settling down for a good long soak in a world that's really, really different, this memoir by Ken Haigh could go a long way to fleshing out your fantasies." Summer Reading 2010, Dilettante's Diary [Full review at <http://dilettantesdiary.com/id155.html>] There were times when he got tired of having to deal with the lack of telephones, and the presence of leeches, rats and wild dogs. He also hated the frustrating language barriers, the exhausting hundred-mile treks, his terrifying near-death experiences on steep mountain roads, the monotonous diet, and times he fell sick. But he learned to deal with these and other problems and shortcomings. He slowly began to accept them and adapted to the traditions and ways of living which initially had given him culture shock." Deekay Daulat, Bizindia, April 17, 2013 [Full article at <http://www.bizindia.net/?p=3124>]

I told myself: remember this moment, this perfect moment. The time may come when you will have need of it. I gazed around at the surrounding hills and drank it all in. •Ken Haigh A child's face, a forgotten scent, or a distinctive flavour stirs memory and inspires longing for those transformative experiences in one's life. Ken Haigh brings us tantalizingly close to his own vision of longing for a time, a place, and a people when he revisits his two-year sojourn as a young schoolteacher in the remote Himalayan village of Khaling, Bhutan. Ken's memoir

will leave you yearning for ancient Buddhist temples, winding mountain trails, and a simpler way of life; it will enchant the vicarious traveller in each of us. Ken Haigh is a graduate of Queen's University and the University of Western Ontario, where he studied English literature, education, and library science. In 1987-1989, he taught for two years in Khaling Valley in Eastern Bhutan. Ken has also taught in China and in the Canadian Arctic. Ken lives in Clarksburg, Ontario.

The sad part about this book is that it ended. Beautiful writing and a compelling story of the author's two years teaching in eastern Bhutan written/published after twenty years. I loved every page of the book. The author is a brilliant writer with a wonderful heart. Perfectly beautiful with thoughtful metaphors and similes which make a book special. Pure quality. Wishing there were more books by this author.

This is an excellent book about a country that I hope to visit. Does a great job describing the culture the people and the beautiful scenery. Gives you a feel for what a peaceful country this is

Excellent, well written book of early experiences of Bhutan as it was opening its boundaries to welcome visitors from the West. Recommended reading for those interested in Buddhist countries & the insights that await for those with an interest in mindfulness & awareness of living for the moment.

The author spent two years teaching English composition at a mission school in eastern Bhutan in the 1980s. Bhutan is a primitive place now; it was even less developed back then. The school was dilapidated, the bureaucracy cumbersome, the principal a tyrant, and the standards of instruction antiquated, mostly rote memorization. Haigh's residence was besieged by rats and other vermin, he came down with dysentery, and he was nearly killed in a bus accident on the mountain roads. But he fell in love with Bhutan and its people nonetheless. Haigh does not romanticize Bhutan and he notes the poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, disease and other problems he observed there. But his great affection for the country is evident in his delightful descriptions of the polite, kind, generous people he encountered everywhere and the beautiful landscape and the "villages strung along the river like pearls on a thread of silver." Illustrated with black-and-white photographs, this book is sure to please anyone interested in Bhutan or travel narratives in general.

While another Canadian teacher of English in the late 80s in this Himalayan kingdom's eastern

remote reaches has gained nearly a hundred reviews on US for her well-written narrative, "Beyond the Sky and the Earth," appearing in 1999, this Ontario native, who parallels in his decision to leave grad school and no job prospects for a (nearly parallel in time) immersion instructing youth in grammatical niceties should be equally known. I liked Jamie Zeppa's account (see my own review in May 2012). But I did not know of Ken Haigh's 2008 story until I looked for more well-crafted, no-nonsense encounters in print from this often-romanticized realm. After Easter Sunday Mass in Khaling (despite the Buddhist state religion, teachers often come from India and Catholic regions), Haigh looks back over the scene. "There were bright green highlights on the pasture, almost yellow, and deeper green in the pastures of the ravines. A lone white cow ambled down the hillside and onto the road where it was struck by a passing truck." (70) What Haigh shares with Zeppa is a determination to avoid the soft-focus, combined with an acknowledgement of the love-hate feelings that may come once the initial confusion or infatuation wears off and the reality of separation from Canadian comfort sinks in. He relates his training, his hesitation, and his acceptance. He inserts a few excerpts from his diary to share his frustrations during the first summer's monsoons. Then, he adjusts with winter's better weather. He braves the bus to the capital, Thimphu, and he begins to get the hang of local habits. Curricula debates, rodents, fatalism, preparing students as critical thinkers despite the rote parroting expected for the antiquated exams occupy his time. He even gets elected chairman of the Community Development Association, despite himself. The titular lake, diplomatic dinners, always more bureaucracy, the "tsechu" festival, a haunting glimpse of a blue-eyed stranger in a forlorn canteen: these typify the range of his chapters. He heads down to the Indian border, and up for his second Christmas among the Brokpa herders in truly remote Sakteng. Unlike his counterpart's initial teaching situation, he's not in a hamlet accessible only by a day's journey from the "ghally lam," the east-west lateral paved highway. He's at the high school on the main road, not far from where Zeppa will later teach at the nation's first junior college--whose original site is now Haigh's assigned post. Still, at least in 1988, this is not a frequently visited spot, and taking into account the changes that such a road accelerates since Haigh's two-year stint, you get a sense of vast differences amid the relative (dogs aside) silence. He writes straightforwardly, free of affectation. Simple black-and-white photos convey the sense of the places and faces. A small map suffices but it's not detailed; a glossary, reading list, and a few footnotes document his search for a rebel king's holdout near Khaling, for instance. He covers the essentials of the area's politics and history quickly in the "Accidental Area" chapter, and he keeps a keen eye out for the culture shock that's inevitable for any long-term foreigner. He realizes the temptations to play up the eccentricities and oddities, but he balances this with a frank representation of the interwoven familial and class

connections that entangle the Bhutanese in a system that Haigh shows us in as honest and direct a fashion as he can, given his reliance on the English-language medium chosen by the monarchy to teach its citizens, across a land easy to praise but more difficult to analyze from a Westerner's perspective.

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