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Bert Hewitt and Sandi Fischer travelled to India and Bhutan when Hewitt fell ill with the coronavirus. PHOTO: SANDI FISCHER

# American's life-saving rescue from Bhutan

ELDERLY PHYSICIST SURVIVES WITH THE HELP OF A KING, A VENTILATOR, A 13,000-KM JOURNEY

JOANNA SLATER  
*in New Delhi*

The 76-year old American tourist arrived at the hospital in Thimphu, the sleepy capital of Bhutan, on a cool day in early March. His symptoms were perplexing. He complained of stomach trouble and breathlessness, but his vital signs were normal. There was one exception: The level of oxygen in his blood was so low that doctors thought the monitor was malfunctioning. On a hunch, they decided to test him for the novel coronavirus.

Bert Hewitt, a retiree with a passion for hiking, would become the first confirmed coronavirus case in Bhutan, a country of 780,000 people nestled in the world's highest mountains and famous for its pursuit of "gross national happiness."

Hewitt's prognosis was not good. He had high blood pressure, and he was a cancer survivor whose spleen had been removed, compromising his immune system. His condition deteriorated rapidly.

In other ways, however, Hewitt would turn out to be exceptionally lucky. His case received personal attention from Bhutan's beloved king. He was evacuated back to the United States in a Gulfstream jet outfitted with a biocontainment unit. The 13,000-kilometre journey was so complex that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later singled it out for praise — especially because the patient was "frankly expected to die."

Hewitt's survival is also a source of pride in Bhutan, a young democracy where the monarchy remains revered. The command "from his majesty was to really take care of him," said Dechen Wangmo, the country's health minister. "The whole nation was, I think, praying for Bert."

Hewitt's odyssey began in mid-February. He and his partner, Sandi Fischer, a 59-year-old psychologist from Los Angeles, planned to travel around India and Bhutan. They took a weeklong cruise down the Brahmaputra River in northeastern India, stopping in small villages.

On the last night of the cruise,

the staff prepared a sumptuous banquet, but Hewitt's appetite had vanished. He could not eat a bite.

To reach Bhutan, Hewitt and Fischer flew north toward an unbroken line of Himalayan peaks, then descended into the valley that is home to the country's only international airport.

Hewitt's gastrointestinal problems worsened, he said, and he felt breathless. After an outing to the town of Punakha, where the pair mingled with locals at an annual festival, Hewitt could barely walk from the car to a café for a cup of tea.

At first, doctors in Thimphu believed Hewitt had a stomach bug. On March 4, he returned to the hospital. Within 24 hours, there was an answer: coronavirus.

For the Bhutanese authorities, it meant the threat they feared had arrived. Health officials rushed to trace Hewitt's contacts.

The nearest aircraft with a biocontainment unit was in Nairobi. It flew to Bhutan with a crew that included a nurse and a paramedic, a Phoenix executive told a Georgia newspaper. Fischer watched from a hospital window as Hewitt, still on a ventilator, was wheeled into a waiting ambulance. She thought she would never see him again.

The jet stopped in Kolkata, India; Dubai; the Greek island of Crete; Paris; and Newfoundland to refuel and take on fresh crew members. None of them were allowed to leave the aircraft during the journey because they were transporting a contagious patient, the Phoenix executive said.

Early on March 14, more than 30 hours after the jet departed Bhutan, it landed in Maryland. Hewitt was transferred to the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore, where his eldest daughter is the director of care management.

Hewitt was on a ventilator for 10 days. His first memory is waking up with someone pressing on his head and calling his name. Hewitt said that a doctor there told him that "whatever they tried in Bhutan probably saved your life."

Hewitt believes he came within a few days of dying. He is at a loss to explain his recovery. "I still think it's a miracle I survived," he said.

The Washington Post

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