

Bhutan –Happiness is a Place !



Bhutan often revered as the "Land of the Thunder Dragon" or 'Druk Yul', is still regarded as one of the last "Shangri-La's" in the Himalayan region because of its remoteness, its spectacular mountain terrain, varied flora and fauna and its unique ancient Buddhist monasteries.

This country of rolling hills and towering crags certainly exudes charm. The mountains are magnificent, the forest are dense, the people are delightful, the air is pure, the architecture inspiring, the religion exciting and the art superb. Like timeless images from the past, the traveller encounters the full glory of this ancient land through its strategic fortresses known as Dzongs, numerous ancient temples, monasteries and stupas which dot the countryside, prayer flags which flutter along the high ridges, wild animals which abound in dense forests, foamy white waterfalls which are the ethereal showers, and the warm smile of its friendly people.

The tiny kingdom of Bhutan shares with Nepal the world's greatest concentration of mountains and living heritage of Buddhism. With its beautiful and largely unspoiled Himalayan setting, its rich flora and fauna and its vibrant Buddhist culture, Bhutan has become an increasingly popular destination for travelers. In addition to generating hard-currency revenue, tourism is also providing impetus for the development of services sector and hence balanced and holistic development of entire region.

In an effort to safeguard its rich natural and cultural environment, the country has consciously adopted a controlled tourism and development policy, in favor of the new norm, social distancing.

Thimphu, Punakha, Gangtey & Paro

Day 01: Arrive Paro by Druk Air & transfer to Thimphu (approx. 1.1/2-hour drive)

The flight to Paro is one of the most spectacular in entire Himalayas. Whether flying along the Himalayan range from Kathmandu or over the foothills from Kolkatta, the journey offers fascinating views and an exciting descent into the Kingdom. Bhutan's first gift as you disembark from the aircraft will be cool, clean fresh mountain air. After immigration formalities and baggage collection, you will be met by our representative, and afterwards drive to Thimphu, the capital town of Bhutan with en-route stop at Chuzom, the confluence of Thimphu and Paro rivers. Three different style of stupas; Tibetan, Nepalese and Bhutanese adorn this confluence.

On arrival, in Thimphu check-into the hotel. The capital town of Bhutan and the center of government, religion and commerce, Thimphu is a unique city with unusual mixture of modern development alongside ancient traditions. With the population of about 90,000 it is perhaps still the world's only capital city without a traffic light.

On arrival, drive to hotel check in and short rest.

Post lunch, drive to **Buddha Point** (Kuensel Phodrang). Located at a short drive from Thimphu city centre, visitors can get a good overview of the Thimphu valley from the Buddha point (Kuensel Phodrang). You can pay your obeisance and offer prayers to the Buddha, the largest statue in the country and then walk around and take a glimpse of the valley.

Evening an exploratory walk around Thimphu Main Street and market area and Kaja Throm.

Overnight at the hotel in Thimphu (Altitude 2,320m)

Day 02: Thimphu

After breakfast, drive to take a short hike to **Tango Goemba**. The Tango Goemba monastery was initially built in the 12th century and expanded many times. The golden roof is a 19th century addition, but perfected by the fourth Temporal Ruler in 1688 CE. Tango literally translates to 'horse head' in honour of the main idol, Hayagriva, consecrated in the monastery. The temple is a short 30-minute drive from Thimphu, followed by an hour long walk through a beautiful violet and crimson rhododendron cloaked woodland. Today, the monastery serves as a Buddhist University with nearly 300 monk scholars in residence.

Return to hotel for lunch.

Post lunch, drive to visit **Takin Preserve**. The crown jewel of Thimphu, Motithang Takin Preserve is a protected area where the national animal of Bhutan, Takin, is preserved. A half an hour walk here would unveil many exotic birds and animals to you, who wander around the area freely and in the most natural of habitat. Overflowing with serenity, the wildlife here is exquisite and should be seen once.

Located in the Motithang district in Thimphu, the Royal Takin Preserve was originally a mini-zoo but later turned into a wildlife preserve. The king found it unfair to bind its national animals within definite boundaries and hence declared the area as a wildlife preserve, where the animals can roam around freely.

Later drive past the **Trashichhoe Dzong**, "fortress of the glorious religion". This is the center of government and religion, site of monarch's throne room and seat of Je Khenpo or Chief Abbot. Built in 1641 by the political and religious unifier of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, it was reconstructed in 1960s in traditional Bhutanese manner, without nails or architectural plans.

Overnight at the hotel in Thimphu (Altitude 2,320m).

Day 03: Thimphu – Punakha (approx. 3 hours' drive)

After breakfast, drive to Punakha across Dochu La. Located at a height of 3,088m/ 10,130 ft, Dochula is a scenic location with chorten, mani wall, and prayer flags which decorate this highest point on the road. If skies are clear, it may be possible to see the following peaks from this pass in the order left to right: Masagang (7,158m), Tsendagang (6,960m), Terigang (7,060m), Jejegangphugang (7,158 m), Kangphugang (7,170 m), Zongphugang (7,060 m), a table mountain that dominates the isolated region of Lunana - finally Gangkar puensum, the highest peak in Bhutan at 7,497m. You can make a pit stop here to gaze at the mountains and capture the perfect photo of the 108 mini chortens surrounding the spot.

Well before reaching Punakha, stop en route and hike to **Chimi Lhakhang**. Perched on a hillock in the centre of the valley, is also known as the temple of fertility. It is widely believed that couples who do not have children and wanting one, if they pray at this temple, they are usually blessed with a child very soon. A walk through the village near the temple will give you rare glimpses into the daily life and lifestyle of the villagers.

Then drive to hotel check in and spend rest of the evening at leisure.

Overnight at the hotel in Punakha. (Altitude 1,300m).

Day 04: Punakha

After breakfast, a beautiful hike (total about 2 hours' round trip walk) takes you to the regal **Khamsum Yuelley Namgel Chorten**, which was built by the Queen Mother of Bhutan to remove negative forces and promote peace, stability and harmony in the changing world. The Chorten dominates the upper Punakha Valley with commanding views across the Mo Chhu river and up towards the mountainous peaks of Gasa and beyond. Also it features one of the longest suspension bridge in Bhutan.

Return to hotel for short rest.

Afternoon visit to **Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Lhakhang (nunnery)**. Perched on a ridge amid pine trees and overlooking valleys of Punakha and Wangduephodrang, gleams the magnificent structures of Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Lhakhang (Temple). The temple houses a 14-foot main bronze statue of Avalokiteshvara (Chenrizigchagtongchentong). The Avalokiteshvara statue, one of the biggest in the country, was the handiwork of entirely local Bhutanese artisans.

On your way back, visit **Punakha Dzong** or (Palace of Great Happiness), built in 1637 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, at the junction of the Phochu and Mochu rivers. This majestic dzong served as both the religious and the administrative center of Bhutan in the past. It measures some 600 by 240 feet and has a six-story, gold-domed tower. Inside are courtyards and religious statuary that hint at the depth of history and spiritual tradition embodied here. Your guide will illuminate your understanding of this intricate culture that is exotic to us, though long established here.

Later drive back to hotel for restful evening.

Overnight at the hotel in Punakha. (Altitude 1,300m).

Day 05: Punakha – Gangtey (approx. 3 hours' drive)

After breakfast, drive to Gangtey.

The Phobjikha valley is a U-shaped glacial valley. It serves as a winter home to a group of globally endangered black-necked cranes that migrate every winter from the Tibetan plateau. This crucible of beauty is on the western slopes of the Black Mountains, bordering the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park. Some people refer to the entire region as Gangtey, which is well known for its magnificent nature trails. Gangtey also has its own monastery, perched at the head of the valley.

On reaching Phobjikha, check in to the hotel. Soak in the beautiful views of the Gangtey valley and relax over lunch.

After lunch visit **Gangtey Goemba**, is the venue to celebrate the coming of Black Neck Cranes to its winter roosting at Phobjikha valley, a monastery perched on a small hill rising from the valley floor. The monastery is in fact the only Nyingmapa monastery on the western side of the Black Mountains and the village that surrounds it is mainly inhabited by the families of the 140 gomchens (priests) who look after it. Celebrated in the courtyard of the Gangtey Goemba in the Phobjikha valley, the annual Black-Necked Crane festival celebrates the return of the endangered and migratory birds to the region of Gangtey. The festival is organized to create awareness and understanding of conservation in Bhutan and is celebrated with cultural programs, masked dances and folk songs.

Then you will walk along the **Gangtey Nature Trail**, a popular excursion for those who enjoy hiking. Leaving the Goemba and crossing streams, past the Sumchubara village, you enter mixed forests, much of it covered in Spanish moss. Emerging from the trees, the path opens up to a fabulous view of the valley and the marshy conservation area below.

Overnight at the hotel in Gangtey (Altitude 3,000m).

Day 06: Gangtey

After breakfast, you will go on the **Longteng hike**. The morning begins with a 30-minute drive from Gangtey to your hike's starting point near Longteng village on the east-west highway. Start by walking downwards following the path to the right of the road. The path leads through bush bamboo towards a small cluster of village houses. There are vibrant rhododendron forests on both sides of the trail, and in the winter months, yaks graze in the area. The last part of the trail through the forest is steeper until you reach the pass at 3,586 metres (11,766 ft) with impressive views of the Gangtey Goemba, the Shedra, and the valley below. After the pass you continue downward towards the idyllic Kumbu village. It is possible to get collected from here, or you may continue down to the Shedra. The full hike will take about four hours and you will be back at your hotel by lunch time.

Later visit **Black Necked Crane Center** Situated on the edge of the forest and wetland along the main road of Phobjikha valley, the Centre has an observation room equipped with a high power telescope and spotting scopes for catching the best view of the cranes. The centre also displays information that outline the natural and cultural history of the area. There is a small gift shop that sells handicrafts produced by the local people.

Overnight at the hotel in Gangtey (Altitude 3,000 m).

Day 07: Gangtey– Paro (approx. 6 hours' drive)

Enjoy a hearty breakfast & drive back to Paro descending back down from Dochu La, follow the way back up the dramatic Wang Chhu and Paro Chhu river valleys, before crossing through Paro town towards the north end of the valley.

Drive to hotel check in and lunch.

Later in the day after checking into hotel, proceed to visit **Ta Dzong**, originally built as Watchtower, which now houses National Museum. The extensive collection includes antique thangka paintings, textiles, weapons & armour, household objects and a rich assortment of natural and historic artifacts.

Then drive to visit **Rinpung Dzong**, meaning ("fortress of the heap of jewels"), which has a long and fascinating history. Along the wooden galleries lining the inner courtyard are fine wall paintings illustrating Buddhist lore such as four friends, the old man of long life, the wheel of life, scenes from the life of Milarepa, Mount. Sumeru and other cosmic Mandala.

Overnight at the hotel in Paro (Altitude 2,280m)

Day 08: Paro – Bumdra

Today's adventure begins with an early morning drive to Sang Choekhor, to meet our ponies. While they are loaded up, we should have time to pay our respects at the Buddhist College, with outstanding views of the valley below. Striding out on foot from here, we make the one to two-hour ascent of the ridge, which is steep at times but in cool shade. This brings us to a clearing with prayer flags and views down into the Paro and Do Chhu Valleys. Above us, the Chhoe Tse Lhakhang temple nestles in the mountainside – a further two-hour walk, where we will stop for lunch. Afternoon the trail undulates for a while before the steep pull up.

From here, you can soak up the dramatic views south over Paro and north to the snow-capped Himalayas. After a final climb back into the ancient forest, coming out on a high wide meadow dotted with sacred chorten and white flags. Our wild camp for the night is tucked under Bumdra monastery (Cliff of a Hundred Thousand Prayers) with incredible views of the Himalayan range. Later, we can visit the monastery and also climb the peak to the sky burial site (about 4,000m) for even better views, returning in time for a hearty dinner.

Overnight at the Bumdra CAMP in Luxury Tent.

Day 09: Paro

After a filling breakfast, we linger a while to soak up the view and perhaps hang some prayer flags of our own. Eventually we drop back into the ancient pine and rhododendron forest on the zig-zag trail. During our descent, we catch glimpses of Tiger's Nest temples below. The path snakes across the mountainside between the temples, before reaching the Zangtopelri, from where we can see straight down onto the ornate rooftops of **Taktsang Monastery**, perched against the cliff-face far below. An hour later and we are at the gates of Taktsang, looking across the gorge; a steep descent to a waterfall then up some steps to pass into Tiger's Nest itself. Retracing our steps we begin the final descent to reach our vehicle and drive back to hotel in Paro – not forgetting to stop on the other side of the valley and look back at all that we have achieved.

Drive to hotel and check in.

Overnight at the hotel in Paro (Altitude 2,280m).

Day 10: Paro

This morning, drive to Paro Dzong to **witness Paro Tshechu**. The Paro Tshechu is a Buddhist Festival and one of the major annual events of Bhutan. The Tshechu holds religious significance and is held to commemorate the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava, the patron saint of Bhutan who introduced Tantric Buddhism in Bhutan. Festivals are held mostly in the huge courtyards of the magnificent Dzongs/Fortresses and comprise of colorful masked dance and traditional folk songs and dances attended by even more colorfully dressed Bhutanese people.

Post lunch, visit the 7th century **Kyichu Lhakhang**, one of the 108 temples built in the Himalayas by Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo. The building of this temple marks the introduction of Buddhism in Bhutan.

Evening an exploratory walk around Main Street and Paro Kaja Throm.

Overnight at the hotel in Paro (Altitude 2,280m).

Day 11: Depart Paro

After early breakfast at the hotel, drive to the airport for flight to your onward destination. Our representative will help you with exit formalities and then bid you farewell.