

Bhutan opened for tourism in 1974 and is one of the world's most exclusive tourist destinations.

Bhutan lies in the eastern Himalaya, wedged between Tibet, Sikkim and the Indian states of Assam, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh. The mountainous kingdom is sparsely populated. Its population of just over half a million inhabitants is mostly hill farmers living in small villages. Hospitality and a warm welcome to strangers are second nature in a land where ancient traditions are revered and kept alive.

The history of Bhutan begins in the 8th century, with the legendary flight of Guru Padmasambhava, who fled Tibet on the back of a tigress. The Guru, who is considered as a second Buddha, settled in Taksang in the valley of Paro, where he set up the Tantric strain of Mahayana Buddhism. In the 17th century, a series of impressive fortresses, known as *Dzongs*, were built to repel invasions from Tibet and preserve national unity. Many now house religious and administrative centres and are a fascinating side to the nation's heritage. The present monarchy dates from the early 20th century, when Ugyen Wangchuck united the nation and was crowned King of Bhutan in 1907.

Buddhist teachings and way of life are an important influence in the lives of the people and Bhutan's festivals are legendary. Dancers in brilliant silk costumes re-enact ancient tales, to the booming of drums and clashing of cymbals. The crowds that attend the festivals are no less colourfully dressed, sporting the intricately woven traditional costumes that nearly all Bhutanese wear. Most of the festivals take part in spring and autumn, happily coinciding with the time that visitors arrive and we have tried, wherever possible, to ensure that our trips give the opportunity to attend a festival. Even if you are not in the country during a festival, the air of spirituality about the place is evident, both in towns and in the more remote rural areas. The Buddhist temples, known as *Lhakhangs* are not so much monuments, as a part of the way of life of the people.

OUTLINE ITINERARY

**** The dates for this trip are dependent on the Druk Air flight schedule for flights in and out of Paro. At present, only tentative dates have been released for flights from April – Oct 2010. Flights from Kathmandu to Paro are currently likely to be on Thursdays, and returning on Sundays. However, this may change when the definite schedule is released by Druk Air, and therefore NO international flights should be booked prior to checking with the Community Action Treks office, as it may be necessary to reschedule the dates**

Walking and journey times are approximate

Day 1 Fly to Paro

We take a flight from Kathmandu to Paro in Bhutan. After completion of airport formalities you will drive through the fascinating Paro valley to your hotel.

In the evening you can take a stroll through the town's main street. Dinner and overnight at the hotel.

Day 2 Paro to Tiger's Nest 2 hours walking and drive to Drkgyel Dzong and Thimpu

After an early morning breakfast you trek for approximately two hours to reach the spectacular and much photographed Taksang Monastery or Tiger's Nest, where the history of Bhutan begins in the 8th century with the legendary flight of Guru Padmasambhava, who fled Tibet on the back of a tigress. The Guru, who is considered as a second Buddha, settled in Taksang in the valley of Paro, where he set up the Tantric strain of Mahayana Buddhism which is now practised in Bhutan.

If time allows following the trek to Tiger's Nest we drive to Drukgyel Dzong, this is a ruined fortress where Bhutanese warriors fought Tibetan invaders centuries ago. The snowy peak of the sacred and highest mountain in Bhutan Chomolhari (mountain of goddess) looms directly over the dzong. Along the way we will see the 7th century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the 108 temples built in the Himalayas by the Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo. This temple reflects the introduction of Buddhism in Bhutan.

OR

Visit Ta Szong, originally built as a watch tower, it now houses the National Museum of the Kingdom. It boasts antique thangka, textiles, weapons and armour, household objects and a rich assortment of natural and historic artifacts. Wandering down the trail we visit Rinpung Dzong (meaning 'fortress of the heap of jewels') which has a long and fascinating history. Along the wooden galleries lining the courtyard of the Rinpung Dzong 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.

We return to our transport and travel the one and a half hours drive to Thimphu, the capital town of Bhutan. The road leads through the Paro valley to the confluences of Paro and Thimphu rivers at chuzom (confluence). Three different style of chortens adorn the confluence. Just beyond here is Tschogang Lhakhang, the temple of the hill of excellent horses. It is a private temple, built in the 15th century. After the narrow rock lined section of the road opens up as Thimphu approaches, Simtokha Dzong lies enroute - this dzong now houses a school for the study of the Dzongkha language.

On arrival in Thimphu we check into our hotel in time for an exploratory walk before dinner.

Day 3 Sight-seeing of the Thimpu Valley and return to Paro

Following breakfast sight-seeing of the Thimphu valley includes visits to:

- **National Library:** a treasure trove of priceless Buddhist manuscripts.
- **Traditional Medicine Institute:** where centuries old healing arts such as acupuncture and herbal remedies are still practised;
- **The Painting School:** where young monks learn the art of Buddhist thangkhas, and the mask maker workshop. There are also workshops for fine metal craft, weaving, ceramics and papermaking.

In the afternoon we visit Tashichhodzong 'fortress of the glorious dharma'. It is the centre of government and religion and site of the King's Throne Room, National Assembly Hall and seat of Je Khenpo or Chief Abbot. Built in 1641 by the political and religious unifier of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang, it was reconstructed in 1961 in traditional Bhutanese manner, without nails or architectural plans. We also visit the King's memorial Chorten continuously circumbulated by His Late Majesty's subjects, spinning prayer wheels and murmuring mantras.

Finally, we visit the Handicrafts Emporium and local shops if you like to browse through examples of Bhutan's fine traditional arts. Here you can buy textiles, thangka paintings, masks, ceramics, slate and wood carvings,

jewellery, interesting items made from local materials and all manner of unique objects. In the evening we drive back to Paro with dinner and overnight in the hotel in Paro.

Day 4 Fly to Kathmandu

In the morning with the rest of the day free to relax by the pool or alternatively, arrange local sight-seeing.

Important Note: Whilst we expect that the tour will run as per the itinerary, participants should accept that there is a possibility of changes being necessary subject to local conditions.

The Price Includes:

- Flights between Nepal and Bhutan
- All the above guided sight-seeing tours, transport and entrance fees to temples in Bhutan and Nepal.
- Accommodation on full board basis in Bhutan,
- Accommodation on bed & breakfast basis in Nepal.
- Transfers between hotel & airport.

Not Included:

- Airport taxes (Approx £10 per departure from Nepal) (Approx £5 from Bhutan)
- Beverages and any expenses of a personal nature including tips (optional) in Bhutan.
- Visa: Bhutan Visa is currently \$20 approx (obtainable by our office in Kathmandu).

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