



TRAVEL THE UNKNOWN

TAKE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

ESSENTIAL BHUTAN & PARO FESTIVAL

11 days

What's included

- Bhutan visa
- Arrival & departure transfers
- Ground transport with driver
- Accommodation
- Meals on full board basis
- Escorted English-speaking guide
- Entrance fees to sites & parks

What's not included

- Meals not mentioned in itinerary
- Drinks
- Visa fees
- Tipping
- Camera / video camera fees
- Personal items (laundry, telephone, etc.)
- Medical expenses
- Any services not mentioned in itinerary

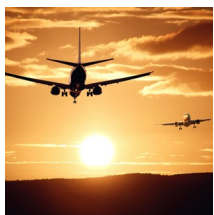
All accommodation subject to availability. Final accommodation choices will be confirmed after booking.

Your Itinerary Explained

Date	Place visited	Meals
	<p>The first part of the text in each day is the itinerary schedule and will explain what you will normally see/do during this day of your itinerary.</p> <p>---</p> <p><i>The part of the day's text in italics (and comes after the three dashes "---") is background information on the places or sites on that day of your itinerary. It is not part of your itinerary and may mention places that will not be visited on your itinerary. If you have any questions please ask us. Travel times where noted are only meant as a guideline.</i></p>	<p>B: Breakfast</p> <p>L: Lunch</p> <p>D: Dinner</p>

Tour Itinerary

Day 1	Arrival	Meals
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Flight

On arrival in Paro, you will be met by a Travel the Unknown representative and transferred to Thimphu. On arrival in Thimphu check-in to your hotel, before an evening guided walk around Thimphu Main Street and market area. Overnight Thimphu.

D

Thimphu is the capital of Bhutan and its governmental, religious and commercial centre. It is nestled in the Wang Chuu river valley and is abundant in natural splendour, wildlife and culture. Thimphu is a very unique city with an unusual mixture of modern developments alongside ancient traditions. With a population of about 100,000 people, it is perhaps the world's only capital city without traffic lights. In fact, there are no traffic lights in the whole of the country. Here, policemen stand in decorated pavilions in the main intersections and direct traffic using hand gestures in a conscious effort to save their culture from modern influences. Every building is still decorated with Dzong-style features and Buddhism influences every part of daily life. There is a variety of cafes, bars, nightclubs and restaurants, and Thimphu is one of the few places in Bhutan to have ATM machines. Altitude: 2,320m.

Overnight in Hotel Thimphu Tower, Thimphu

Day 2	Thimphu	Meals
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Thimphu

Not your average morning, this one revolves around a tour of the Thimphu Valley, including visits to the Buddha Point, Changangkha Lhakang and the lively weekend market.

B L D

In the afternoon, visit Pangri Zampa (a 16th century monastery), Trashichhodzong and the King's Memorial Chorten in the town centre.

Trashichhoe Dzong ('Fortress of the Glorious Religion') is the centre of government and religion, the site of the monarch's throne room and the seat of Je Khenpo or Chief Abbot. Built in 1641 by the political and religious unifier of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was reconstructed in 1960's in a traditional Bhutanese manner, without nails or architectural plans.

The **King's Memorial Chorten** is commonly called the 'most visible religious landmark in Bhutan'. It is continuously circled by people in clockwise direction who murmur mantras and spin large red prayer wheels, as is custom in all Bhutanese religious structures. This landmark was constructed in honor of Bhutan's third king, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk ('the father of modern Bhutan'). Completed in 1974 after his untimely death, the monument is dedicated to world peace and prosperity, as well as a memorial to the king.

The **Buddha Point** (Kuensel Phodrang) is located on a hill in Kuenselphodrang Nature Park, overlooking the southern entrance to Thimphu Valley. Sitting atop the hill is one of the largest Buddha statues in the world, standing at a height of 51.5 metres and made of bronze, gilded in gold and studded with semi-precious stones. 100,000 smaller Buddha statues are hidden within the body, while 25,000 sit along the walls of the meditation halls inside the statue's throne. The creation of the statue symbolises the fulfillment of the Buddhist prophecy to bestow blessings and emanate universal peace and happiness to the world.

Overnight in Hotel Thimphu Tower, Thimphu

Day 3

Thimphu - Gangtey

Meals



Gangtey
Goempa

Before setting off for Gangtey, visit the Textile Museum and the Simply Bhutan open-air living museum. Afterwards drive to Gangtey, en-route visiting the Dochla Pass (at an altitude of 3080m). On arrival in Gangtey, check-in to your hotel before an afternoon walk around Gangtey village, visiting Gangtey Goempa, the only Nyingmapa monastery in this region. Overnight in Gangtey.

The **Gangtey** valley is one of the most beautiful spots in Bhutan. Finding such a large flat valley without any trees after climbing through thick forest is extremely rare in Bhutan. Altitude: 3,000m.

Gangtey Goempa is an important monastery of the Nyingmapa school of Buddhism, located in central Bhutan. The monastery is most famed for the annual arrival of black-necked-cranes, that visit central Bhutan to roost. The monastery's history traces to the early 17th century.

Overnight in Hotel Dewachan, Gangtey

B L D

Day 4

Gangtey - Bumthang

Meals



The Trongsa
Dzong

After breakfast we set off to Bumthang, crossing the Pele-la pass (at 3300m above sea level). Stop off for lunch in Trongsa and visit both the Trongsa Dzong and Ta Dzong.

This afternoon, continue your journey onward to Bumthang across the Yutong-la pass (at 3400m above sea level). Overnight in Bumthang.

Ta Dzong is located above the Trongsa Dzong, and a short, steep walk from the main Trongsa town. Ta Dzong, which means "watchtower", was built in the 17th century and was built to protect Trongsa from any external threats.

Trongsa is situated on a steep ridge that drops off into the clouds on its south side. It offers spectacular views of the deep valleys surrounding it. The various hotels, guesthouses and restaurants all offer stunning views from their balconies. Trongsa Dzong is easily visible from anywhere in town and is always an impressive sight.

B L D

The **Trongsa Dzong** sits overlooking the Mangdechhu River. It was founded by Yingzin Ngagi Wangchuk, a descendant of Ngawang Chogyal and a revered follower of Kuenkhen Pema Karpo. In 1541, he meditated at the village of Yueli in Trongsa, a few kilometers away from the present Dzong. During the meditation, he saw a lit butter lamp below the Goenkhang ridge, which houses the guardian deities Palden Lhamo (Mahakali) and Yeshey Goenpo (Mahakali). Considering the place to be sacred, he built meditation quarters. Once during his meditation in the new quarter, the deity Palden Lhamo appeared and prophesied that this place would play an important role in spreading Buddhist teachings. After this incident, Yingzin Ngagi Wangchuk constructed a small temple and named it **Mondrupley**. Over the years, his disciples built many smaller meditation centers near the Mondrupley temple, which soon began to resemble a small village. The people of Yueli named this new village Trong-sar (new village).

Located in central Bhutan, **Bumthang** is considered the spiritual heartland of Bhutan. This district is dotted with many temples and monasteries, among which are some of the oldest Buddhist temples and monasteries. This beautiful valley of buckwheat and apples has a mysterious history as an abode of gods and is one of the richest cultural places in the country.

Pele La Pass is the traditional boundary between the east and the west. The pass is marked by large white chorten prayer flags and there is an abrupt change in vegetation at this point, where mountain forest is replaced by dwarf bamboo. Altitude: 3,300m.

Overnight in Jakar Village Lodge, Bumthang

Day 5	Bumthang	Meals
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Bumthang

Excursion to Ura Valley. the road climbs to amazingly open countryside, only occasionally running into forest. Large sheep pastures line the road up to 20 km behind the southern tip of the Tang valley. The route crosses Ura la pass (3,600m) with a magnificent view of Mount Gangkhar Puensum. The villages in Ura have clustered houses, which is quite unusual in Bhutan. Above Ura village (3,100m) is a new temple dedicated to Guru Rinpoche. Inaugurated in 1986, it contains a huge statue of the master and remarkable paintings of the cycle of his teachings. Since last 25 years Ura has been transformed from a marginal community to a fairly prosperous valley. You will also visit the Membarstho Lake. Return to the hotel for overnight.

B L D

*Witness the Domkhar festival (Spring tour)
Overnight in Jakar Village Lodge, Bumthang

Day 6	Bumthang - Punakha	Meals
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Punakha

Today is a travel day. After breakfast, leave Bumthang on a lengthy but scenic drive to the Punakha Valley. On arrival in the old capital, Punakha, proceed to your hillside hotel. Settle in and enjoy the panoramic beauty of the valley surroundings. Dine in-house.
Overnight in Four Boutique, Punakha

B L D

Day 7	Punakha	Meals
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Khamsum Yulley
Namgyal
Chorten

Explore this heavenly river valley, starting after breakfast at the Punakha Dzong, a 17th century fortress at the confluence of the Pho and Mo Chhu rivers. Next to Chimi Lhakhang, a hilltop monastery founded in 1499. Enjoy lunch followed by a vigorous stroll through the rice and chilli fields running alongside the Mo Chhu, up to Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten, a stupa of superstitious origins that commands a stunning view over the Punakha Valley.

B L D

Return to your hotel before dark. Dine in.

*The **Punakha valley** has a pleasant climate with warm winters and hot summers. Owing to the favourable climatic conditions, rice grows very well in this region and is the main cash crop cultivated here. Altitude: 1,300m.*

*The majestic **Punakha Dzong**, known as the Palace of Great Happiness, used to serve as Bhutan's religious and administrative centre until the 1950s. The inside courtyards and religious statuary hint at a deep historical and spiritual tradition. It is quite large, measuring over 180m long by 70m wide and has a six-story, gold-domed tower. The dzong sits at the junction of the Pho chhu and Mo chhu rivers and was built in 1637 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan Buddhist lama. Arguably the most beautiful dzong in Bhutan, it was the second to be ever built in the country. Bhutan's most treasured possession, the Rangjung ('Self-Created') Kharsapani image of Chenresig is kept here, but is closed to the public.*

*The **Chimi Lhakhang** temple is commonly known as the Temple of Fertility. It sits on a hillock in the centre of the valley, a site that was blessed by the 'Divine Madman'. This is the maverick saint Drukpa Kuenleyis that was famously obsessed with his 'magic thunderbolt of wisdom'. Therefore it is not unusual to see phalluses (symbol of fertility) painted on the outside of houses! It is widely believed that if couples who do not have children pray at this temple, they are blessed with a child very soon. Besides its fertility blessings, the temple also works to fulfill other religious needs. The trail to the temple leads across rice fields through the tiny settlement of Pana, which means 'field'. A walk through this village will give you a rare glimpse into the daily life of the Bhutanese.*

*The **Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten** was built on a ridge above Punakha valley and took around nine years to build. It is said that the Bhutanese craftsmen consulted Holy Scriptures to construct this 4 storey temple. The temple was built by Her Majesty, the Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck.*

Overnight in Four Boutique, Punakha

Day 8	Punakha - Paro	Meals
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The journey continues this morning to Paro, visiting Simtokha Dzong en-route. On arrival in Paro, check-in to your hotel. This afternoon, visit Ta Dzong, and stroll down the trail to visit Rinpung Dzong.

B L D

Check in to your Paro hotel. Remainder of the evening at leisure with dinner included.



Ta Dzong

*Overlooking Thimphu Valley, the **Simtokha Dzong** is the oldest dzong to have survived a series of attacks as a completed structure. According to legend, the building was created to subdue a demon that was harassing travelers to the area. When the evil spirit vanished into a nearby rock, the dzong was built upon it to enclose and guard the demon. As a result, the dzong gained its name, literally translating to "atop a demon".*

*The **Ta Dzong** was originally built to be a watchtower, but it now houses the National Museum. Its extensive collection includes antique thangka paintings, textiles, weapons, armour, household objects and a rich assortment of natural and historic artifacts.*

*The **Rinpung Dzong**, which means 'Fortress of the Heap of Jewels', has a long and fascinating history. Fine wall paintings line the wooden galleries of the inner courtyard, illustrating Buddhist traditions and knowledge.*

***Paro** is the second largest town in Bhutan although small in size and population. Its main street is lined with buildings richly decorated in traditional architecture that house a scattering of shops and restaurants. Paro is an ideal base for exploring the surrounding attractions, such as Taksang Monastery (Tiger's Nest). After Bumthang, the valley is amongst the most beautiful in Bhutan. Altitude: 2,280m.*

Overnight in Hotel Olathang, Paro

Day 9	Punakha - Paro	Meals
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Paro Tshechu Festival

The moment we've all been waiting for. Today marks the final day of the 5-day Paro Tshechu annual festival. This carnival of colour and folkloric tradition mixes ritual dance with perfectly-choreographed tales of evil spirits and masked deities, all within the intense atmosphere of Paro Dzong's courtyard.

B L D

Spend all day there hypnotised by performers adorned in the most vivid costume and terrifying wooden masks.

Return to your hotel upon the close of this sacred festival. Dine in-house.

*The **Paro Tshechu** festival is one of the most colourful and significant events of the district. On the last day of the festival, monks display a large embroidered painting (thangka) of the Guru Throngdel inside the dzong. It is an impressive example of Buddhist art and is believed to be so sacred, that simply seeing the thangka is sin-cleansing.*

Overnight in Hotel Olathang, Paro

Day 10	Paro	Meals
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Taktshang Monastery (Tiger's Nest)

Lace up your boots for an excursion to Taktshang Monastery, also known as the Tiger's Nest. Getting there involves sturdy effort, so let us know beforehand if you've any problems with mobility.

B L D

After lunch we proceed to the ruins of Drukgyel Dzong, followed by a visit to Kyichu Lhakhang in the evening. Overnight in Paro.

*Also known as the **Tiger's Nest**, the **Taktshang Monastery** is perhaps the most famous of Bhutan's monasteries and is perched precariously on the side of a cliff, 900m above the Paro Valley. It is said that Guru Rinpoche, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism and the Buddha of our time, came here on the back of a tigress to meditate, hence the name. This site has been recognised as a most sacred place and was even visited by the Tibetan Buddhist Lama, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, in 1646. All Bhutanese people visit this monastery at least once in their lifetime. On 19 April 1998, a fire severely damaged the main structure of building, but it has now been restored to its original splendour.*

The hike to the monastery is a 2-2.5 hour strenuous walk uphill. This can be broken down into three stages and a donkey can be used to ride up to two-thirds of the way. The first stage is trekking to the rocky outcrop across a ravine from the monastery, which takes approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Lunch will be served here later today. The second stage is walking from the cafeteria to the lookout opposite the monastery, which takes close to one hour. The third stage is climbing down 475 steps in the cliff face to the bottom of the ravine, crossing over a stream and waterfall and climbing up another 300 steps to the entrance of the monastery. You will spend up to an hour here and view the cave where Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal meditated.

Cameras are not allowed inside the monastery.

It was in the **Ruins of the Drukgyal Dzong** that the Bhutanese finally defeated the invading Tibetans and drove them back. The peak of Jumolhari 'Mountain of the Goddess' can be seen on a clear day from here (7,329 mts/24,029 ft.).

The **Kyichu Lhakhang** temple complex consists of three temples. The first was built in 1652 on the site of the Guru Rinpoche's meditation in the 8th century. The second was built on the site of a cave that contains a most holy rock with the imprint of the Guru's body. The third temple was built in the 1990s by Ashi Kesang, the Queen Mother of the royal family. The three temples are surrounded by a wall that is made of 108 chortens (shrines).

Overnight in Hotel Olathang, Paro

Day 11

Paro - Departure

Meals



Flight

At an appropriate time, you will be transferred to the airport for your flight home, or maybe onward to new pastures.

B