

Bhutan Dharma Trails Tour

Day 1 Paro

Welcome to Bhutan! On arrival at Paro International Airport, your guide will greet you upon exiting the arrival hall. Today we follow a gentle schedule as we acclimatize to the altitude.

Paro Valley (2,200 metres) is home to many old monasteries, temples and sacred sites. It is a wide and spacious valley, covered with fertile rice fields, through which flows the Pa Chhu, fed by Mount Jomolhari's glacial waters.

In the afternoon we visit **Paro Rinpung Dzong** (Fortress of Jewels). Located at the edge of Paro Town, this impressive example of 15th Century Bhutanese architecture now serves as the local government centre of Paro. We then visit nearby **Ta Dzong** (Watchtower) which was built in 1649 and converted into the **National Museum of Bhutan** in 1968. Here we can view antiques, art, textiles, weapons and household items offering a glimpse of Bhutan's fascinating history. In the evening, we have time to relax and enjoy an informal meet-and-greet over dinner.

Day 2 Paro to Punakha

From Paro we head to Punakha, via **Dochula Pass** (3100m elevation), the site of 108 stupas built to commemorate Bhutan's victory, in 2003, over Indian militants and in honor of those who died. On a clear day, the views from here are spectacular, over the forested valley below to the snow-capped Himalayan Mountains. We descend to the expansive river valley of Punakha, at 1200m elevation, where we visit the majestic and beautiful **Punakha Dzong**. Strategically located at the confluence of the rivers Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu, this stunning example of ancient Bhutanese architecture is the second oldest and second largest of Bhutan's Dzongs. Completed in 1637, it served as the country's capital from 1637 to 1907 and continues to serve as the winter residence of Bhutan's Monastic Body and home to some of the country's most sacred ancient relics.

We then visit **Chimi Lhakhang** (Fertility Temple), built in 1499 by Lama Ngawang Chogye on a hill blessed by the rogue 15th century Buddhist leader Drukpa Kinley (the Divine Madman), credited with bringing the Kagyu School of Vajrayana Buddhism to Bhutan. He taught Buddhism in an unconventional way using outrageous sexual humor. Reputedly living a truly bacchanal lifestyle full of wine, women and poetry, he introduced the phallus imagery found throughout the country. Known as the Thunderbolt of Wisdom, the phallus symbolizes both fertility and the power to bring enlightenment to those who can learn from its teaching. It is believed to ward off evils and it brings good luck.

Day 3 Punakha to Bumthang

As we leave Punakha for Bumthang, we ascend adjacent to the **Wangdue Phodrang Dzong** (built 1638), dramatically perched on the spur of a hill, overlooking the confluence of the Puna Tsang Chu and Dang Chu rivers.

Our route passes through diverse beautiful landscapes, with breathtaking mountain views and by early evening we reach **Bumthang in Central Bhutan**. Considered to be the spiritual heartland of Bhutan, with many religious relics and histories found here, Bumthang is home to some of our oldest Buddhist temples and monasteries, such as Jambay Lhakhang, and many Guru Rinpoche sacred sites which remain undisturbed in pristine nature. It was Bumthang where Buddhism was first introduced in the 8th century by the Indian Tantric master, Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) and later many important Tibetan masters and Tertons (treasure-discoverers) lived and practiced in this sacred region.

Visitors are also attracted to the region's scenic beauty and biodiversity, within its glacier-carved broad and gentle valleys forested by native pines. It is an ideal place to practice meditation, learn about the ancient Vajrayana traditions and relax in its peaceful natural environment.

Day 4 Bumthang via Tharpaling monastery

Tharpaling Monastery, located at 3600m, is composed of a series of buildings overlooking Chumey Valley in Bumthang. The main part of the monastery was founded by **Longchenpa** (1308-1363), the great philosopher and practitioner of Dzongchen (Nyingmapa teaching). It was used as a place of meditation by Jigme Lingpa, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. Above Tharpaling Monastery to the north is Chodrak Monastery, where Guru Rinpoche is said to

have meditated, and above Chodrak Monastery is Dzambala Lhakhang, built to house the memorial chorten (Kudung) of the late Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. Above this, is Longchenpa's Seat, a rock throne where Longchenpa wrote part of the Seven Treasure texts (the highest Dzongchen text).

We begin our day with a visit to the sacred site at Tharpaling where the Abbot from Kharchu Monastery will give a brief introduction to shamatha meditation, followed by a period of silent meditation practice. After lunch, we hike to Longchenpa's Seat, from where we have spectacular views of the valley, and along the way visit Chodrak and Dzambala monasteries.

Day 5 Bumthang Sacred Sites

In the morning we drive north from Bumthang town along the Chamkhar River through native pine forest and via a local village, to the sacred place of **Guru Rinpoche's Cave (Shungdra)**. At this 800 year old site, steeped in a rich history, we have a short prayer and meditation session before stopping along the Kurje road for a picnic lunch on the beautiful river bank.

Then we head to **Kurje (body print), considered one of** the most sacred sites in Bhutan as Guru Rinpoche meditated here and left a body print on rock. Legend tells that here, in the eighth century, Sendhu Raja, the king of Bumthang, fell ill and asked Guru Rinpoche to cure him. Finding the illness was caused by Shelging Karpo, a powerful local deity hidden inside a cave; Guru Rinpoche meditated for three months inside the cave, subdued the deity and left his body imprint as a significant symbol of the first introduction of Buddhism to Bhutan. Later the monastery was built to preserve this important holy site and behind it is a tall cypress tree, believed to have sprouted from the walking stick of Guru Rinpoche. Today the Kurje site consists of three big temples displaying majestic statues, paintings, antique ornaments and unique architecture.

From here we take an easy walk through fields to **Jampal Lhakhang (Temple of Maitreya)**. Amongst the oldest monasteries in the country, it is one of several built in the seventh century by the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo to subdue a giant demoness and eradicate evil forces obstructing the spread of Buddhism in Bhutan. The central shrine contains a majestic statue of Maitreya, framed on either side by four bodhisattvas. The walls of the circumambulation path are covered with old paintings of the Buddhas and along the way there is a long row of ornate prayer

Wheels. We explore this ancient site guided by the abbot of the monastery and take time here for a short session of dedication prayers for individual well being and world peace.

Then we drive to **Kharchu Monastery**, the largest Nyingmapa School in the country, where we can observe the ancient tradition of philosophical debates performed daily by the monks on various topics. The monastery will serve us tea and we will have the opportunity to meet and talk with the Kharchu monks.

In the evening there is time to explore Bumthang town before meeting for dinner and sharing an informal question and answer session on the visits of the day.

Day 6 Bumthang to Gangtey

En route from Bumthang to Gangtey, we stop to visit the impressive **Trongsa Dzong** (built 1543). Situated below the township, it is a massive, overpowering five-storey structure sitting on a spur that dip into the Mangde River. It was the ancient seat of power over Central and Eastern Bhutan, from where both the first and second kings ruled, and to this day Bhutan's kings must first become the Trongsa Penlop (Governor) prior to ascending the throne. Within its walls are 25 temples dedicated to tantric deities, a watchtower (Ta Dzong) dating back to 1652, a printing shop still producing religious texts according to ancient tradition and a museum honoring the Wangchuck Dynasty. The Dzong was a major administrative and religious centre and still houses around 200 monks during the winter months.

Our destination of **Gangtey**, famous as the winter home of the endangered Black-Necked Crane (*Grus nigricollis*), is located in Phobjikha Valley, considered one of Bhutan's most beautiful wilderness areas, with many nature trails to enjoy. In Gangtey Village, we visit Gangtey Goempa (monastery), founded by Gyalse Rinzin Pema Thinley (first Gangtey Tulku) in 1613, it is one of the most important sites of the Nyingmapa School and the main seat of the Pema Lingpa tradition.

Afterwards, we take an easy walk beyond Gangtey Goempa, along the Gangtey Nature Trail, overlooking the Phobjikha Valley. In the evening you are invited to join Monk Chimi Rinzin, for an insightful talk on 'The Significance of the Nyingmapa Lineage'.

Day 7 Gangtey to Thimphu

On our return trip to Thimphu, we enjoy lunch at Punakha before ascending to Dochula Pass, where we visit the nearby **Druk Wangyel Lhakhang**. Then as we get closer to Thimphu, we stop to explore the small but historically significant **Simtokha Dzong**. Dating from 1629, this was the first Dzong of its kind to be built by Zhabdrung Rinpoche. Today it houses Bhutan's School of Buddhist Language Studies and within its walls examples of ancient Buddhist art and statues are on display. In the evening, we have time to explore Thimphu City.

Day 8 Thimphu to Paro

Our day begins with a visit to the beautiful sacred site, **Buddha Dordenma (Buddha Point)** in Kuenselphodrang Nature Park, overlooking Thimphu City. Its' awesome focal point, one of the largest statues of Buddha Shakyamuni in the world (completed in 2015), was built to emanate an aura of peace and happiness to the entire world. We join the cheerful throng of local worshippers who gather at **National Memorial Chorten (stupa)** to circumambulate and socialize at the end of the day. This Thimphu landmark and sacred site was built in 1974 in honor of Bhutan's visionary Third King, Jigme Dorje Wangchuck. We visit Thimphu's famous Textile Museum, where both ancient and modern examples of this traditional craft are on view. After lunch we proceed to Paro and en route we take the opportunity to stretch our legs with an easy 10 minute walk to **Tachog Lhakhang** (temple) reached by crossing Paro Chhu (river) on one of the few remaining ancient iron chain bridges, both built circa 1420 by the Tibetan master Tangtong Gyelpo (aka the Bridge Builder). We enjoy a relaxing evening with time to stroll around the town, visit its cafes, eateries and art and craft shops. After dinner you are invited to join to a brief talk about significant and important of the **Tiger Nest's sacred sites and its history**.

Day 9 Paro – Hike to Taktsang

The Tiger's Nest (Taktsang), the most iconic landmark and holy site in the Kingdom, clings impossibly to a sheer cliff face 900 meters above the Paro Valley. It was first built in 1692 at a cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated in the seventh century. Legend says that Guru Rinpoche flew there on a tigress and meditated in the cave for three years in order to subdue evil demons residing within it. The cave has been considered a sacred site ever since and many famous saints have made pilgrimage there. Located approximately 10 km north of Paro town at 3,100 meters altitude, Taktsang is reached after an approximately two and a half hour hike through beautiful, shady pine forests.

We end the day with a visit to **Kyichu Lhakhang**, a beautiful seventh-century Buddhist temple, one of the oldest in Bhutan. According to legend, a giant demoness laid her body across the Himalayas to prevent the spread of Buddhism. Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo built 108 temples throughout the region and around her body to pin her down, with Kyichu Lhakhang built to hold down her left foot.

In the evening there is time for shopping in Paro and we gather for our farewell dinner.

Day 10 Departure

Boarding a morning flight from Paro International Airport, we bid a fond farewell to this beautiful Himalayan country, taking with us cherished memories of Bhutan! We wish you a safe and happy journey and look forward to meeting again in Druk Yul – a land of endless Enchantments! Tashi Delek!