

Bhutan Sacred Sites and Wilderness

Itinerary:

Day 1 Paro to Thimphu

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. After lunch in Paro, we make the one hour drive to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital and home to around quarter of our population.

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 arrive at Thimphu late afternoon, with ample time to relax and settle into your hotel room before getting together for an informal meet-and-greet over dinner.

Day 2 Thimphu

Our day begins with a visit to **Buddha Dordenma (Buddha Point)**, located in Kuenselphodrang Nature Park above Thimphu City. The central feature of this beautiful sacred site is one of the largest statues of Buddha Shakyamuni in the world. Completed in 2015, it was built to emanate an aura of peace and happiness to the entire world.

From here we take a gentle three-hour hike along the ridge from **Buddha Point**, through native forest of blue oaks, rhododendron and pine, to **Changangkha Lhakhang**. After lunch we head to Thimphu's famous Textile Museum, where we can see both ancient and modern examples of Bhutan's traditional woven textile art.

In the evening 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.

Day 3 Thimphu to Punakha

From Thimphu we head to Punakha, via **Dochula Pass**. At 3100m elevation, the Pass is home to 108 stupas which were built to commemorate Bhutan's victory over Indian militants in 2003, and in honor of those who died. On a clear day, the view, across the forested valley below towards the snow-capped Himalayan Mountains, is spectacular.

We then descend to the expansive river valley of Punakha, at 1200m elevation, where we visit the majestic and beautiful Punakha Dzongkhag. 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. It is home to some of the country's most sacred ancient relics.

In the afternoon we follow the Mo Chhu upstream and hike to **Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten** (stupa), majestically situated on a ridge above Punakha Valley, the 30 meter high stupa, a gift from Bhutan's third Queen Mother, Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, was built to ward off evil and bring peace and harmony for all living beings. Its three vividly painted tiers depict scenes from the annals of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Day 4 Punakha to Gangtey

As we leave Punakha for Gangtey, 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 destination today is **Gangtey**, in **Phobjikha Valley**, the winter home of the endangered Black necked crane (*Grus Nigricollis*). Phobjikha Valley is also renowned as one of Bhutan's most beautiful wilderness areas and has many nature trails to enjoy. At the head of Gangtey Village is Gangtey Goempa (monastery). Founded in 1613 by Je Kuenga Gyaltshé, this Goempa is the main seat of the Pema Lingpa tradition and is one of the most important sites of the Nyingmapa school of Vajrayana Buddhism. After leaving Gangtey Goempa, we head for a gentle trek along the nearby Gangtey Nature Trail, which overlooks Phobjikha Valley.

Day 5 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**. Later, as we approach 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, there is time to relax and explore Thimphu.

Day 6 Hike to Dodedrak Monastery

A short bus ride into the hills above Thimphu brings us to the beginning of the trail to **Dodedrak Monastery**. After a two-hour hike through the forest and hillside we are within sight of the buildings of this ancient monastic community, then following the path gently downhill a short distance, we arrive at the entrance to the Monastery grounds. Dodedrak Monastery, built by Chief Abbot Yonten Thaye in the 12th Century, is home to several original 900-year-old paintings and ancient statues. Beneath its altar rooms, a small museum displays monastic artefacts dating from several hundred years ago.

In the 1980s, under the patronage of the 4th King, a Lobdra (Monastic School) and a Shedra (Buddhist College) were added to Dodedrak and today it accommodates over 150 monks, engaged full-time in Buddhist studies and practice. Dodedrak is also home to a colony of the exquisite and rare langur which inhabit the forest around the Monastery, and it is not unusual to see them within the monastery grounds and scampering over its roofs.

We arrive back late in the day and have the evening free to relax and enjoy exploring Thimphu.

Day 7 Thimphu to Paro

Located at 2,200 metres altitude, **Paro Valley** is home to many old monasteries, temples and sacred sites. It is a wide and spacious valley, covered with fertile rice fields and irrigated by the Pa Chhu, which flows from the glacial waters of Mount Jomolhari.

On our arrival here in the afternoon, we head to **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 the nearby **Ta Dzong** (Watchtower) which was built in 1649 and converted into the **National Museum of Bhutan** in 1968. On display here are antiques, art, textiles, weapons and household items, providing a glimpse of Bhutan's fascinating history.

Day 8 Bumdra Trek (Paro)

Trek from Sang Choekor Buddhist College (2,800m) to Yak Pasture, below Bumdra Monastery (3,800m). The adventure begins with an early morning drive up to the Sang Choekor to meet our ponies and while they are being loaded we may pay our respects at the College. After a 1–2-hour ascent of a ridge, we arrive at a clearing from where we have spectacular views of both Paro and Do Chhu Valleys.

About 1-2 hours walk from here is the Chhoe Chhoe Tse Lhakhang (temple), which nestles at the side of the mountain. The trail continues and when we reach the last steep elevation, we will see a temple which overlooks Paro Airport and the snow-capped Himalayas. Continuing from here, we climb for another 20 minutes, past ruins and fluttering prayer flags, then hike through ancient forest for about 40 minutes to reach Yak Pasture, a wide meadow with sacred chortens and prayer flags and awesome views of the Himalayas. Here, we can camp for the night, just below Bumdra Monastery (the Cave of One thousand Dakinis Footprints).

After lunch we can head up to visit Bumdra Monastery (if it is unoccupied) before climbing further (1-2 hours) to reach the north of the peak (about 4000m) from where the view over the Himalayas is even more spectacular.

Day 9 Bumdra to Tiger's Nest (Taktsang) Trek

We enjoy breakfast while taking in the wonderful views from our camp at Yak Pasture, before heading back down the valley towards Tiger's Nest. Following the monks' zig zagging trail through the ancient pine and rhododendron forest, after 1-2 hours of descent, the golden roofs of the temples of Taktsang Monastery below come into view.

Our path continues to wind across the mountainside between monasteries and temples before reaching the Gardens of Zangtopelri (Copper-Coloured Mountain). From here the breath-taking view over edge, looks directly down onto the golden roofs of Taktsang, nestled in the cliffs below. After one hour, we reach the gates of Taktsang, from where we make a steep descent by steps, past a waterfall cascading down from Lady Tsogyal's Cave, before climbing by steps up to the Taktsang Monastery.

The Tiger's Nest (Taktsang) is the most iconic landmark and holy site in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Located approximately 10 km north of Paro town at 3,100 meters altitude, it clings impossibly to a sheer cliff face 900 meters above Paro Valley.

First built in 1692 at a cave where Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) 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.

We return to Paro by late afternoon with time for some shopping before gathering to share a 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!