



## **Explore Bhutan: “The Last Shangri La”**

### ***Wilderness and Travel Medicine Seminar***

The remote Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan is a country of mountains, untouched forests, and fortified monasteries that lies nestled in the high Himalaya sandwiched between the planets two giants: India and China. A country the size of Switzerland with a population of less than one million, it vigilantly protects its ancient traditions, religion and culture. Traveling there is like visiting Nepal or Tibet forty years ago. National Geographic has called it “the world’s last Shangri La”.

Our seminar will take us on a journey that will travel through the heart of Bhutan visiting the famous monasteries and villages at Paro, Thimphu, Bumthang, Trongsa, and Punakha. We will cross the 10,200 foot Dochu La Pass with its spectacular views of Bhutan’s Himalaya as we travel from Thimphu to the famous Punakha monastery.

The culmination of our journey will come at the end of our trip when we hike for 3 hours to visit the "Tigers Nest" of Takstang, the most famous and sacred of Bhutan’s monasteries. It is perched on side of a sheer cliff 3,000 ft above the Paro valley. No other monastery in the world can match the grandeur of Takstang’s natural setting.

Our seminar is designed for the active traveler and will emphasize day hikes on almost every day of our trip. Bhutan’s spectacular mountain scenery provides the perfect setting for day hikers to explore its remote villages and mountain paths.

As part of our medical seminar, we will have a chance to meet with Bhutanese physicians and discuss health care in Bhutan. Although a poor country, Bhutan offers free medical care and education to all of its citizens.

## Detailed Itinerary

### **DAY 1: PARO, BHUTAN / THIMPHU**

Arrive in Paro, Bhutan, from Bangkok, Thailand. Our early morning flight brings us to Bhutan's emerald-green Paro Valley (7,500 feet), where shrines dot the landscape and graceful willow trees grow along the edge of the Paro River as it winds through fields and farmlands. On arrival, we are met for a transfer to Thimphu (7,600'), a wooded farming valley until 1961, when it became Bhutan's official national capital. The massive Tashicho Dzong, about 700 years old, is the main building in town. It was carefully revamped in the 1960s by the late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, the main architect of modern Bhutan, to house the royal and main government offices. This is also the summer residence of the Je Khempo, Bhutan's chief abbot. King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk died in 1972 and was succeeded by his son, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who was age 17 at the time. He abdicated the throne in 2006, as Bhutan changed to a constitutional monarchy, and his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (then 28), was crowned king and became the head of state in November 2008.

In the afternoon we will explore Thimphu's and enjoy free time in the town. Overnight at the Hotel ...LD

### **DAY 2: THIMPHU / TANGO MONASTERY**

A 40-minute hike through a beautiful forest of oaks brings us up to Tango Monastery, a monastic school and retreat built in 1688. The monastery is the residence of the Druk Desi Gyaltzen Tenzin Rabgye, the lama who is a reincarnation of the 16th century monk who founded Tango (tango means "horse's head"—the deity Hayagriva). We will visit the main temple and also linger in Tango's inner courtyard, beautifully painted in bright colors, with lovely views stretching across the Thimphu Valley. We will drive back to Thimphu and have lunch in a local restaurant. Later, we will head to Sangay Gang, where there is a sanctuary for the cattle-sized animal called the takin, the national animal of Bhutan. These rare Himalayan creatures resemble miniature American bison, standing about five feet high with large heads and front quarters. We will also visit Changgangkha Lhakhang, an ancient monastic retreat set on a ridge above Thimphu.

Overnight at the Hotel...BLD Approximate Hiking Time: About 3 hours

### **DAY 3: THIMPHU / COUNTRYSIDE HIKE / PUNAKHA**

A scenic drive through a lushly forested landscape as we climb the Dochula pass, where we will hike through a mixed forest of spruce, rhododendron, hemlock, oak, pine and juniper and reach up to Lungchuzekha Monastery, surrounded by prayer flags. On a clear day, we can enjoy good views of the mountains of the Bhutan Himalaya. We hike down the same way to Dochula pass (10,200), whose summit is festooned with fluttering prayer flags and more than 100 chortens (stupas) dedicated to Bhutan's continued peace and happiness. We will have a late lunch at the restaurant on the pass. After lunch, we board our vehicles and descend to Lobesa village for a half-hour walk through the cultivated fields to Chimi Lhakhang, a monastery and fertility temple dedicated to Lama Drukpa Kuenley, a Tibetan Buddhist saint popularly known "the divine madman" and a folk hero in Bhutan for his unconventional ways. Drukpa Kuenley originally built a chorten on the site in the 14th century. The temple, flanked by nearly 100 tall prayer flags, sits atop a picturesque hill and has long been a pilgrimage site for childless couples. After visiting the

temple, we drive to the Hotel...BLD

Approximate Hiking Time: About 3-4 hours / Driving Time: About 3 hours

#### **DAY 4: PUNAKHA VALLEY**

From the village of Nezigang, we hike up through cultivated fields and small hamlets to visit the Khamsum Yuley Namgay Chorten, a shrine built recently by the royal family. The shrine is an elaborate structure with a rainbow of Guru Rimpoche images and superb views of the Punakha Valley. After lunch, we visit the 17th century Punakha Dzong (fortress), Bhutan's former winter capital, built in 1637 at the confluence of the Mo Chu and Po Chu (the "Mother" and "Father" rivers). The winter capital was established in this location in part because Punakha is a warm valley with a relatively low altitude of 4,100 feet, allowing for the production of two rice crops each year, along with oranges, mangos, and bananas. The Punakha Dzong is an architectural wonder and seat of the head abbot of Bhutan. It has survived six fires, two glacial lake bursts, and an earthquake. This labyrinthine dzong has played a pivotal role in Bhutan's history and has the official name of Druk Pungthang Decchen Phodrang, which translates as "the palace of great happiness."

Overnight at the Hotel ...BLD

Hiking Time: About 3 hours

#### **DAY 5: PUNAKHA / TRONGSA**

We first drive to the Trongsa crossing over Pele La Pass (11,000'). We will have lunch somewhere after crossing this pass. We then continue our journey to Trongsa, the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family. We will visit the important historical Trongsa Dzong, where the Penlop (governor) in the early 1900s consolidated political control over Bhutan to become the country's king.

Overnight at the Hotel...BLD

Driving Time: About 6-7 hours

#### **DAY 6: TRONGSA / BUMTHANG**

In the morning, we will visit the Ta-Dzong Museum, which focuses on the history of the monarchs of Bhutan, with many rare artifacts on display and then drive to Bumthang, crossing Yotongla pass (11,140') and entering Chumey valley. A 10 km road goes up to the Tharpaling Monastery (2800m) from Gyetsa village in Chumey valley, but it may be impracticable in summer due to rain and so walking is often necessary. The Tharpaling Monastery was founded by Lonchen Ramjam (1308-1363) during his exile from Tibeta. He was the abbot of the Samye, one of Tibet's most important monastery and first Buddhist monastery built in the Himalaya. This place was used as a place of meditation. After visiting this important monastery, we continue to hike to Kiki La.

Overnight at the Hotel....BLD

Approximate Hiking Time 4 hours. Driving Time : 3 hours

#### **DAY 7: BUMTHANG**

Nowhere else in Bhutan are there as many temples and monasteries as in Bumthang, and it is also one of the most picturesque regions of the country, with sweeping agricultural valleys dotted with small villages, and forested mountainsides sheltering centuries-old monastic complexes and religious retreats. Today's hike brings us along the Chamkhar River and through meadows and pine forests to the village of Thangbi, where we visit its gumpa (if the caretaker is present). Thangbi was founded in the late 1500s by the 4th Shamar Rimpoche, a patriarch of

Tibet's Karma Kargyüpa sect. After crossing a suspension bridge, we reach Nga Lhakhang (Swan Land), and after visiting the village we drive back to Jakar.

In the afternoon we will visit two important monasteries: Jambay and Kurje. Jambay was originally built by Tibet's King Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century as one of the 108 temples used to subdue the demoness lying across the Tibetan Plateau; this temple is said to pin down her left knee. Kurje is a complex of three temples and one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in Bhutan.

Overnight at the Lodge...BLD

Hiking Time: About 3 hours / Driving Time: 45 minutes

### **DAY 8: BUMTHANG**

In the morning we witness the village Festival, held in the courtyard of a village temple. This age-old festival, established in the 16th century, features costumed monastic dancers and clowns, and is an excellent chance for locals to get together and socialize.

In the afternoon, we will have free time. In the evening, we have a chance to sample ara, the local wine, as well as butter tea, and watch a demonstration of how the local buckwheat noodles (puta) are made at a traditional farmhouse.

Overnight at Lodge...BLD

### **DAY 9: BUMTHANG / PARO (Domestic flight)**

A morning flight brings us to Paro. In the afternoon, we will visit the fascinating National Museum of Bhutan, housed in the Ta Dzong, with its collection of ancient artifacts, weapons, and silver tea ware. We will also visit nearby Paro Dzong, an imposing fortress originally built by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Situated along the river with a beautiful covered bridge, it is the administrative seat of

the Paro district, and also houses a state monastic community.

Overnight at the Hotel... BLD

### **DAY 10: PARO / KILA NUNNERY**

In the morning, we will drive to Chele La pass to view the mountains and from there hike down to the Kila nunnery monastery, one of the few nunnery monastery in the country. We then drive down to Dzongdra Kha monastery which is built on the edge of the cliff.

Overnight at the Hotel...BLD

Approximate Hiking Time : 3 hours. Driving Time : 4 hours

### **DAY 11: TAKTSANG MONASTERY**

Today we hike up through pine forests festooned with Spanish moss to reach the striking monastic retreat of Taktsang, the "Tiger's Nest," built into a sheer cliff face about 2,700 feet above the Paro Valley. This is the most famous temple in Bhutan and one of the venerated pilgrim sites of the Himalayan world. Padmasambhava, the great 8th century Buddhist saint and teacher, is thought to have landed at this spot after flying over the mountains from Tibet on the back of a tigress, thus bringing the teachings of Buddhism to Bhutan. The primary temple was built around Padmasambhava's meditation cave in 1684. We will enjoy our lunch en route at a teahouse midway with fantastic views of the monastery.

Overnight at the Hotel...BLD

Hiking Time: About 3-4 hours

## DAY 12: DEPART

After breakfast, transfer to Paro Airport for homeward-bound flights via Bangkok. Flights typically arrive in Bangkok between 1:00 pm and 5:30 pm...B

*Please Note: Actual festival dates and activities are always subject to change (even once the trip has begun). The itinerary and/or dates may be altered to adjust to the final festival schedule. Sometimes, viewing a festival may not be possible if dates are changed at the last-minute and beyond the control of agents.*

### Recommended Gear and Clothing List

You should pack for Bhutan as you would for a trek in which you will be staying in mountain lodges but not camping. Informal trekking clothes that are easy to wash and dry are definitely all you need. Stylish travel cloths are not necessary. You will be going through Bangkok on your way to Bhutan and if you bring tropical clothing or city clothes for Bangkok, then you should try and leave them in your Bangkok hotel and not take them on the seminar.

The weather should be dry when we are in Bhutan but if the monsoon season lasts into the end of September, we may have rain. Please bring a light weight rain jacket or poncho. Trekking poles are a good idea for some of the day hikes and on our last hike to the Tiger's Nest monastery.

#### Clothes and Equipment

Luggage; **one large soft sided** duffle or roller bag. The soft sided luggage is easier to pack in the vehicles. Druk Air (flight from Bangkok to Paro) allows for one carry-on bag and your checked bag to weigh no more than 20kgs (44 pounds).

Day Back pack for carrying water, cameras and jackets.

Light weight to medium weight hiking boots.

Trail running shoes or sturdy walking shoes with good traction soles.

Teva style sandals. (optional)

One **warm, windproof mountain** jacket for early mornings and evenings.

One lighter weight fleece or wool under jacket or vest.

One rainproof shell or poncho.

One cap or wide brim sun hat.

Warm trekking socks.

Sun screen SPF 30 or 50 and lip balm with sun screen.

Small folding umbrella. Optional

Sunglasses

Digital camera with extra batteries, instruction manual and **extra** memory cards

Binoculars, small light weight (Optional)

(Nikon 8x21 binoculars are excellent and cost less than \$50 online)

Pocket knife

**Informal, comfortable travel/trekking style** micro-fiber pants and shirts (3 changes)

Comfortable underwear, synthetic if possible which is easy to wash and dry.

Walking shorts. (optional)

Comfortable and **warm** sleep wear.

Head lamp or flash light.  
Paperback reading material. (optional)  
Extra pair of reading glasses. (optional)  
Insulated, light weight coffee/tea mug. (optional)  
Foam ear plugs.

There will be laundry services available at many of our lodges.

Important Note: In order for us to be as respectful as possible to the culture and traditions, when visiting Dzongs/Temples/Monasteries, **please do not wear sleeveless shirts, shorts, or sandals.** Thank you!

### **Medicines and Medical Related Supplies**

Antibiotics for traveler's diarrhea (obtained from your physician)  
Iodine tablets  
Pepto-Bismol tablets  
Imodium tablets  
Tylenol or similar pain medication  
Personal medications  
Band Aids and/or mole skin  
Alcohol hand wipes  
Soft soap in pocket size bottle (Camp Suds work well)  
Duct tape, small roll or end of roll.

### **Visas and Passports**

U.S. citizens are required to have a passport that is valid for 6 months after your travel dates begin.

Bio Bio Expeditions will be sending you a copy of your e-ticket receipt out of Bangkok and a copy of your Visas a few weeks prior to departure. Be sure to arrive at least two hours early to the Druk Air desk and check-in with your Passport, Visa and e-ticket information.

### **Flights and Airports**

You are responsible for booking all international flights to Bangkok. We will arrange for the flights from Bangkok to Paro, Bumthang to Paro and Paro to Bangkok. Once ticket price is confirmed, we will update your invoice for these flights which typically cost between \$900-\$1,100, per person. One travel agent we often use to book our international flights is:

Sandesh  
Himalayan Travels  
1-800-223-1813

### **Bhutan time is GMT +6 hours (+14 hrs PST)**

One of the ways that Bhutan controls tourism and protects its culture and traditions is to only allow tourists to travel in Bhutan with a registered Bhutanese tour company and only this

company is allowed to obtain tourist visas for travelers and to buy the roundtrip Druk Air tickets from Bangkok to Bhutan. This means that after you have registered for the trip, we will contact you and have our people in Bhutan buy your international and domestic tickets on Druk Air and obtain a tourist visa for you. If you are a US citizen, you do not need a visa for Thailand.

You will be responsible to obtain your own roundtrip ticket to Bangkok from your home city. You will need to arrive the day prior to day one of the trip, because the flight to Paro will be very early on the first day. We advise spending the night prior to the trip at the Novotel airport hotel (<http://www.novotelsuvarnabhumi.com>), which provides complimentary airport transfers. On the return, you will arrive Paro around 4 PM on the last day of the trip. Please allow plenty of time between your flights (minimum 3 hours).

## **Money Matters**

### **Currency**

Bhutan's currency is the Ngultrum (Nu.) It is at par with the Indian rupee which is accepted as legal tender in the country. Note: INR (Indian Rupees) denominations of 500 and 1000 are not accepted in Bhutan.

On stops and occasionally in villages, you may wish to buy a cold coke or a treat. If you plan on doing some retail therapy in Bhutan, there are a lot of markets with plenty of opportunities to purchase Bhutanese handicrafts, which make great souvenirs. Remember that credit cards are not possible to use in Bhutan in most places so think in advance how much money you'll need and bring it in cash.

### **ATMs**

ATMs are located within all main towns throughout Bhutan, where money can be withdrawn using a Visa or MasterCard. Be aware of counterfeit currency and avoid being followed to and from an ATM machine! Go in pairs!

### **Credit Cards**

Credit cards are not possible to use in Bhutan in most places, so think in advance how much money you will need and bring it in cash.

### **Personal Checks**

Personal checks are not accepted in shops or at your hotels. It's a good idea, however, to bring a few for possible emergencies.

### **Travelers Cheques**

Travel checks are less desirable as fewer and fewer places will change them, and you may end up in long bank lines. You will need to show your passport to cash your checks at the bank.

## **Tipping**

Tipping is, of course, entirely voluntary and how much you give depends on how you feel about the service you have received. Typically, you should designate 10-15% of the land cost of the trip for tips. For example, a \$4000 trip would mean \$400 in tips.

Other smaller tips might be for airport luggage carriers, hotel staff and drivers. This is where \$1 bills or single soles come in handy. The norm at restaurants is approximately 5-15%.

## **Travel Practicalities**

### **Trip Insurance**

Bio Bio Expeditions recommends that you purchase a travel protection plan to help protect you and your travel investment against the unexpected. For your convenience, we offer travel protection through Travelex Insurance Services. For more information on the available plans or to enroll, contact Travelex Insurance Services at 800-228-9792 and reference location number 05-8655. Travelex Insurance Services, Inc CA Agency License #0D10209. Travel Insurance is underwritten by, Berkshire Hathaway Specialty Insurance Company, NAIC #22276. 55Y.

### **Immunizations**

Although there are no immunizations required to travel to Bhutan, it is usually recommended that typhoid and diphtheria-tetanus protection be current. Hepatitis A, taken just before departure, is also recommended. In general, we advise that you consult your physician regarding recommended immunizations and other health precautions. Bio Bio Expeditions does not take responsibility for which medications or inoculations you and your physician deem necessary for your safe participation on the expedition in Bhutan.

For further information, call the CDC's International Traveler's Hotline:

Phone: 1-888-232-4636

Online: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

### **Water**

Although it requires a little extra caution when drinking fluids in Bhutan, it is essential to stay well hydrated. We advise that you not drink any of the tap water in Bhutan; this includes no ice in your drink. Bottled water is fine to drink and can be ordered at most restaurants and found in local grocery stores. When ordering sodas, it is best to request them without ice, as the ice is usually made from tap water. Additionally, be sure to brush your teeth with bottled water.

### **Food**

The major precaution regarding food pertains to raw, unpeeled fruits and vegetables (including lettuce) - avoid them unless you are dining in a high-end restaurant! If you can't peel it, don't eat it as it has probably been washed in tap water, or not washed at all, and that can make you sick. The high altitude also affects one's digestive system so it is recommended to eat in

moderation and avoid rich, thick foods (such as mayonnaise). However, don't be afraid to try new foods and dishes - just be cautious. We want you to experience the many new flavors and local cuisine, but there are some things to consider when making food choices, especially where you are eating. The more high-end restaurants are fairly safe bets for trying new things. Street food should generally be avoided. This brings us to our next topic...

### **Digestive Worries**

Traveling to Bhutan is going to have a notable impact on your body. Despite the many precautions we all take to stay healthy, occasionally one may experience diarrhea. The major problem associated with diarrhea is fluid loss leading to severe dehydration, so it is important to maintain plentiful fluid intake. Avoid milk and avoid caffeine, as it will only further dehydrate you. The best drinks are weak tea, mineral water, and caffeine-free soft drinks. Ideally it is best to let diarrhea run its course, however you may want to bring over-the-counter diarrhea medication to minimize your potential discomfort. The bottom line (no pun intended) is to drink plenty of fluids and get lots of rest! Lastly, we encourage that you, and all our staff, practice impeccable hand hygiene – you can't wash your hands enough! Sanitizer gels are great when hand washing with soap and water is not available.

### **Prescriptions**

If you currently take prescription medications, be sure to have a plentiful supply and also the doctor's written prescription in case you need a refill. It is best to carry medications in your carry-on bag in case of lost luggage. Also, if you wear prescription glasses or contacts, we advise that you bring along a spare set.

### **Voltage**

In Bhutan, most of the hotels have 3 pin plugs. The voltage is 220 - 240V, Primary Socket type (3 pins). If you are carrying 110-120V electronics, you will need to bring a plug adapter and converter.

### **Safety Concerns**

There is relatively little crime in Bhutan. Petty crime, such as pick-pocketing and purse snatching, is occasionally reported. Reasonable precautions should be taken when visiting the town and, in particular, when going out at night.

When traveling in cities, always keep your wits about you and be aware of your surroundings. When with other people, watch out for each other. Large crowds are prime locations for pick-pocketing to occur. Keep your money in a money belt or hidden pouch around your neck and under your shirt. When purchasing items, do not pull out lots of money. **We advise that you leave all valuable jewelry, including watches, at home.** Thieves often work in pairs or groups - one tries to distract you (e.g.: by squirting food or paint on your clothing) and in the ensuing confusion, another one makes off with your belongings.

### **Jet Lag Precautions**

When you cross several time zones to reach your destination, you often lose many hours of regular sleep. On arrival, your body then must suddenly adjust to new sleeping and eating patterns. The result is jet lag. Its symptoms are fatigue – often compounded by insomnia and restlessness – irritability, and vague disorientation. You cannot totally avoid jet lag' but you can minimize it. Here's how:

- Start your trip well rested. Try to begin a gradual transition to your new time zone before you leave
- Switch to your destination time zone when you get on the plane. Attempt to sleep and eat according to the new schedule
- Try to sleep on overnight flights
- Avoid heavy eating and drinking caffeine or alcoholic beverages right before and during your flight
- Drink plenty of water and or fruit juice while flying. You should buy a large bottle of water at a kiosk right before boarding – once you have cleared inside security and are “inside”
- After arrival, avoid the temptation to nap, unless you didn't sleep at all on the plane
- Don't push yourself to see a lot on your first day
- Try to stay awake your first day until after dinner

### **Altitude Sickness**

The altitude can cause some physical reaction in almost anyone. Most people experience shortness of breath, headaches, and some dehydration. We recommend taking it easy your first day and avoiding alcohol and tobacco. If you feel sick, be sure to rest, breathe deeply, drink lots of fluids (bottled water), and perhaps take a mild pain killer for headaches. True altitude sickness is rare, but if the symptoms become severe, please let a Bio Bio Expeditions representative know. The front desk of the hotel often has spare oxygen bottles if needed.

How well your individual body adapts to the thinner air depends a good deal on innate factors that you have no control over. That being said, people in top shape often acclimate better because they expend less energy hiking, leaving their bodies ready for the task of acclimatization. Proper hydration has also been proven to be essential in this task. There is no substitute for being in top shape and staying hydrated!

Many altitude physicians recommend bringing the following medications for prevention and or treatment of altitude related problems.

- Diamox- e.g. 125 mg, twice a day. Beginning 24 hours before ascent to a sleeping elevation of 8,000-10,000 feet and continuing through duration of climb. Please discuss with your physician.

## **Hygiene and First Aid**

It's extremely important that group members follow the simple rules we have to prevent people getting sick on these trips. All drinking water is either boiled or treated with iodine. Any fruit that does not get peeled should be peeled first (i.e. Apples). Any time anyone is handling food they need to wash their hands with Dettol soap and treated water. And always wash your hands after going to the toilet.

We carry a comprehensive first aid kit that has evolved out of 25 years running expeditions in the Himalayas. All the guides are trained in first aid; they are either holders of advanced first aid or EMTs. We need to know from all expedition members if they have any medical conditions that we should know about, eg: severe allergies or if you are diabetic. Its better that we know about these conditions before the trip rather than being surprised later.

If you have any broken skin, infection is always a risk so look after even the tiniest cuts.

Women are advised to bring any feminine hygiene products that may be needed with you on the trip.

It is extremely important that you remember at all times to re-hydrate yourself. On an average day you are recommended to drink around 3 liters of water. While in Bhutan, we recommend that you remember to drink AT LEAST this much and if possible, more.

## **Country Information**

### **Demographics**

Bhutanese people can be generally categorized into three main ethnic groups. The Tshanglas, Ngalops and the Lhotshampas. The other minority groups are the Bumthaps and the Khengpas of Central Bhutan, the Kurtoeps in Lhuentse, the Brokpas and the Bramis of Merak and Sakteng in eastern Bhutan, the Doyas of Samtse and finally the Monpas of Rukha villages in WangduePhodrang. Together the multiethnic Bhutanese population number just over 700,000.

**Tshanglas:** The Tshanglas or the Sharchops as they are commonly known, are considered the aboriginal inhabitants of eastern Bhutan. Tshanglas are according to historians, the descendants of Lord Brahma and speak Tshanglakha. They are commonly inhabitants of Mongar, Trashigang, Trashiyangtse, Pema Gasthel and Samdrup Jongkhar. Besides cultivation of maize, rice, wheat, barley and vegetables, the Tshanglas also rear domestic animals to supplement their living. Weaving is a popular occupation among their women and they produce beautiful fabrics mainly of silk and raw silk.

**Ngalops:** The Ngalops who have settled mostly in the six regions of western Bhutan are of Tibetan origin. They speak Ngalopkha, a polished version of Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Agriculture is their main livelihood. They cultivate cereals such as rice, wheat, barley and maize along with a variety of other crops. In the regions of Thimphu and Paro apples are also cultivated as a cash crop. They are known for Lozeys, or ornamental speech and for Zheys, dances that are unique to the Ngalops.

**Lhotshampas:** The Lhotshampas have settled in the southern foothills of the country. It is believed that they migrated from Nepal in the beginning of the 19th century, attracted by the employment opportunities provided by the many construction works taking place in the kingdom. They speak Lhotshamkha (Nepali) and practice Hinduism. Their society can be broken into various lineages such as the Bhawans, Chhetris, Rai's, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, and the Lepchas. Nowadays they are mainly employed in agriculture and cultivate cash crops like ginger, cardamom and oranges.

**The Bumthaps, Mangdeps and Khengpas:** The people who speak Bumtapkha, Mangdepkha and khengkha respectively inhabit the central areas of Bhutan. The Bumthaps cultivate buck wheat, potatoes and vegetables. A section of this population also rear yaks and sheep and produce fabrics of wool and yak hair. The Mangdeps depend on cultivation of rice, wheat, maize, vegetables, etc besides rearing domestic animals. The khengpas are also dependent on agriculture much like the Mangdeps, however, they are also known for the bamboo and cane craft.

**Kurtoeps:** Kurtoeps inhabit the eastern part of the country. Specifically the district of Lhuentse and the villages are found spread along the banks of Kurichu. Khoma women are expert weavers and are known for their skill in weaving the grandiose Kushithara.

**The Brokpas and the Bramis:** The Brokpas and the Bramis are a semi nomadic community. They are settled in the two villages of Merak and Sakteng in eastern Bhutan. They mostly depend on yaks and sheep for their livelihood and do not typically grow crops due to the high altitude zones they inhabit. They speak a different dialect and have their own unique dress that is made of yak hair and sheep wool. They are also experts in cane and bamboo crafts.

**The Layaps:** To the extreme north are the Layaps who speak layapkha. Like the Brokpas, they are semi-nomadic and their livelihood is dependent upon yaks and sheep. They use the products of their herd animals to barter rice, salt and other consumables with the people of WangduePhodrang and Punakha.

**The Doyas:** A tribal community that has settled mostly in southern Bhutan. They are considered the aboriginal inhabitants of western and central Bhutan, who over the years migrated to and settled in the present areas in Dorokha. They have their own unique dialect and style of dress.

**Monpas:** The Monpas are a small community in Rukha under WangduePhodrang. Together with the Doyas they are also considered the original settlers of central Bhutan. They have their own unique dialect but it is unfortunately slowly dying out as they are now being absorbed into the main stream Bhutanese society.

### **Society**

Bhutanese society is free of class or a caste system. Slavery was abolished by the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck in the early 1950s through a royal edict. Though, a few organizations to empower women were established in the past Bhutanese society has always maintained relative gender equality. In general this nation is an open and a good-spirited society.

Living in Bhutanese society generally means understanding some accepted norms such as Driglam Namzha, the traditional code of etiquette. Driglam Namzha teaches people a code of conduct to adhere to as members of a respectful society. Examples of Driglam Namzha include wearing a traditional scarf (kabney) when visiting a Dzong or an office, letting the elders and the monks serve themselves first during meals, offering felicitation scarves during ceremonies such as marriages and promotions and politely greeting elders or seniors.

Normally, greetings are limited to saying “Kuzuzangpo” (hello) amongst equals. For seniors and elders, the Bhutanese bow their head a bit and say “kuzuzangpo la” (a more respectful greeting). Recently, shaking hands has become an accepted norm.

The Bhutanese are a fun-loving people fond of song and dance, friendly contests of archery, stone pitching, traditional darts, basketball and football. They are a social people that enjoy weddings, religious holidays and other events as the perfect opportunities to gather with friends and family.

The openness of Bhutanese society is exemplified in the way they often visit their friends and relatives at any hour of the day without any advance notice or appointment and still receive a warm welcome and hospitality.

### **Religion**

The Bhutanese constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Citizens and visitors are free to practice any form of worship, so long as it does not impinge on the rights of others. Christianity, Hinduism and Islam are also present in the country.

### **Buddhism**

Bhutan is a Buddhist country and people often refer to it as the last stronghold of Vajrayana Buddhism. Buddhism was first introduced by the Indian Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava in the 8th century. Until then the people practiced Bonism a religion that worshipped all forms of nature, remnants of which are still evident.

Until then the people practiced Bonism a religion that worshipped all forms of nature, remnants of which are still evident even today in some remote villages in the country.

With the visit of Guru Padmasambhava, Buddhism began to take firm roots within the country and this especially led to the propagation of the Nyingmapa (the ancient or the older) school of Buddhism.

Phajo Drugom Zhigp from Ralung in Tibet was instrumental in introducing yet another school of Buddhism – the Drukpa Kagyu sect. In 1222 he came to Bhutan, an event of great historical significance and a major milestone for Buddhism in Bhutan, and established the DrukpaKagyu sect of Buddhism, the state religion. His sons and descendants were also instrumental in spreading it to many other regions of western Bhutan.

By far the greatest contributor was Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal. His arrival in 1616 from Tibet was another landmark event in the history of the nation. He brought the various Buddhist

schools that had developed in western Bhutan under his domain and unified the country as one whole nation-state giving it a distinct national identity.

The Buddhism practiced in the country today is a vibrant religion that permeates nearly every facet of the Bhutanese life style. It is present in the Dzongs, monasteries, stupas, prayer flags, and prayer wheels punctuate the Bhutanese landscape. The chime of ritual bells, sound of gongs, people circumambulating temples and stupas, fluttering prayer flags, red robed monks conducting rituals stand as testaments to the importance of Buddhism in Bhutanese life.

### **Gross National Happiness: Development Philosophy of Bhutan**

Economists the world over have argued that the key to happiness is obtaining and enjoying material development. Bhutan however, adheres to a very different belief and advocates that amassing material wealth does not necessarily lead to happiness. Bhutan is now trying to measure progress not by the popular idea of Gross Domestic Product, but by through Gross National Happiness.

His Majesty the third Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck expressed his view on the goals of development as making “the people prosperous and happy.” With this strong view in mind, the importance of “prosperity and happiness,” was highlighted in the King’s address on the occasion of Bhutan’s admission to the United Nations in 1971.

While the emphasis is placed on both, prosperity and happiness, the latter is considered to be more significant. The fourth Druk Gyalpo emphasized that for Bhutan “Gross National Happiness,” is more important than “Gross National Product.” Thus, Gross National Happiness is now being fleshed out by a wide range of professionals, scholars and agencies across the world.

Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck said that the rich are not always happy while the happy generally considered themselves rich. While conventional development models stressed on economic growth as the ultimate objective, the concept of Gross National Happiness is based on the premise that true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other.

The philosophy of Gross National Happiness has recently received international recognition and the UN has implemented a resolution “...recognizing that the gross domestic product [...] does not adequately reflect the happiness and well-being of people,” and that “...the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal”.

### **Language**

Bhutanese speak a variety of languages with Dzongkha being the national language and one of the most widely spoken. English is also spoken by the majority of Bhutanese making communication very easy. It is encouraged to speak with the local Bhutanese, especially in the urban areas and towns, as it will enhance your knowledge on Bhutan.

### **Environmental Concerns**

Population increase in Bhutan is putting more pressure on this fragile pristine environment. It's

important that any impact tourism has is positive. So often the influx of tourists to a beautiful area seems to change the area and people to the point where it's no longer desirable to visit that area. This need not be the case. With the right attitude, tourism can bring about a cross-cultural exchange that is beneficial to everyone.

All our expeditions are run with total respect for the environment and cultures of the countries we visit. Our campsites are left scrupulously clean, leaving only footprints that will hopefully be blown away. All burnable waste is burnt. All non-biological waste, like tins and bottles, are washed and carried off the trek. Vegetable waste is buried away from the camp, and toilet pits are dug well away from the camp. Toilet paper is collected in a disposable bag and burnt on the campfire in the morning just before breaking camp. Perhaps the most important thing to bring is a good mental attitude...

### **Photography**

Bhutan offers immense opportunities for photography especially during outdoor sightseeing trips. However you should check with your guide before taking pictures or filming inside Dzongs, temples, monasteries and religious institutions as in some area photograph/filming is not permitted.

You are free to capture images of the landscape, the panoramic views of the mountain ranges, rural life, flora and fauna, distinctive Bhutanese architecture and the exterior of Dzongs and Chortens in particular.

## **CULTURAL CONCERNS**

### **Communication**

A smile and a cheerful greeting will open doors. Charades is the usual second language in Bhutan. Be creative. The Bhutan language is relatively easy to learn, and even knowing a handful of words will increase your enjoyment of Bhutan immeasurably.

### **Other**

As in most of Asia, the right hand is used for eating, giving or accepting things. The left hand is considered unclean because it is used with water in place of toilet paper. Therefore you should always use your right hand to give or receive anything.

It is also considered rude to step over people, point your feet at people or walk across the hearth, as the feet are also considered to be unclean. And it is not polite to touch people on the head as this is a sacred part of a person. When in doubt, watch what the local people do and emulate (not everything, mind you)!

### **Flora and Fauna**

Bhutan is one of the last remaining biodiversity hotspots in the world, forest cover has now increased to over 72% of the country, with 60% of the country under protection. The array of

flora and fauna available in Bhutan is unparalleled due to conservation and its wide altitudinal and climatic range. Physically, the country can be divided into three zones:

1. Alpine Zone (4000m and above) with no forest cover
2. Temperate Zone (2000 to 4000m) with conifer or broadleaf forests
3. Subtropical Zone (150m to 2000m) with Tropical or Subtropical vegetation.

Forest types in Bhutan are fir forests, mixed conifer forest, blue pine forest, chirpine forest, broadleaf mixed with conifer, upland hardwood forest, lowland hardwood forest, and tropical lowland forests. Almost 60% of the plant species found in the eastern Himalayan region are present in Bhutan.

Bhutan boasts of about 300 species of medicinal plants and about 46 species of rhododendrons. Some common sights for the visitors are the magnolias, junipers, orchids of varied hues, gentian, medicinal plants, Daphne, giant rhubarb, the blue and trees such as fir, pine and oaks.

A wide range of rare and endangered animals can also be found frequenting the dense jungles and high mountains of Bhutan. Due to the countries conservation efforts and its unspoiled natural environment Bhutan supports thriving populations of some of the rarest animals on earth and has thus been classified as one of the last biodiversity hotspots in the world.

Some high altitude species are the snow leopards, Bengal tigers that are found at altitude ranging 3000 to 4000 meters, the red panda, the gorals and the langurs, the Himalayan black bear, sambars, wild pigs, barking deer, blue sheep and musk deer.

In the tropical forests of Southern Bhutan one can come across clouded leopards, the one horned rhinoceros, elephants, water buffaloes and swamp deer. You can even find the Golden Langur, a species of monkey that is unique to Bhutan.

Bhutan also has a great variety of bird species. It is recognized as an area of high biological diversity and is known as the East Himalayan 'hot spot', the hub of 221 global endemic bird areas. The recorded number of bird species is over 670 and is expected to rise as new birds are discovered.

In addition, 57% of Bhutan's globally threatened birds and 90% of the country's rare birds are dependent on forests. Bhutan has about 415 resident bird species. These birds are altitudinal refugees, moving up and down the mountains depending upon the seasons and weather conditions. Of about 50 species of birds that migrate during the winters are the buntings, waders, ducks, thrushes and the birds of prey. Some 40 species are partial migrants and they include species such as swifts, cuckoos, bee-eaters, fly catchers and warblers.

Bhutan is also home to about 16 bird species that are endangered worldwide. These include the White bellied heron, Pallas Fish eagle and Blyth's King fisher to name a few. Phobjikha valley in Wangdue Phodrang and Bomdeling in Trashigang are also two especially important locations of the endangered Black Necked Cranes.

As one of the ten global hotspots, Bhutan is committed to preserve and protect its rich environment through its government and environmental organizations. This commitment is

apparent in the fact that the kingdom has the distinct honor of being one of the only nations whose forest cover has actually grown over the years.

### Weather

#### Average Temperature in Degree Centigrade. (oC) Max / Min

Places	Months											
	Jan	Feb	March	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Paro	9.4 / -8	13.4 / 0.6	14.5 / 0.6	17.6 / 4.6	23.5 / 10.6	25.4 / 14.1	26.8 / 14.9	25.3 / 14.7	23.4 / 11.7	18.7 / 7.4	13.9 / 1.4	11.2 / -1.7
Thimphu	12.3 / -2.6	14.4 / 0.6	16.4 / 3.9	20.0 / 7.1	22.5 / 12.1	24.4 / 15.2	18.9 / 13.4	25.0 / 15.8	23.1 / 15	21.9 / 10.4	17.9 / 5.0	14.5 / -1.1
Punakha	16.1 / 4.2	19.6 / 5.3	21.12 / 9.2	24.4 / 1.2	27.2 / 14.8	31.2 / 19.5	32.0 / 21.6	31.4 / 19.8	29.9 / 20.4	27.8 / 18.9	22.3 / 13.0	15.0 / 7.9
Wangdi	17.0 / 4.3	19.0 / 7.8	22.8 / 10.4	26.2 / 12.9	29.1 / 17.7	29.2 / 20.1	18.4 / 16.2	29.1 / 20.0	27.5 / 19.1	26.1 / 14.7	22.6 / 9.6	19.1 / 6.3
Trongsa	13.0 / 0.2	13.9 / 0.4	16.7 / 4.4	20.1 / 6.6	21.0 / 11.6	22.2 / 13.6	25.3 / 15.3	23.8 / 15.0	22.6 / 14.2	21.8 / 11.7	19.8 / 6.4	18.2 / 2.5
Bumthang	10.8 / -5.1	10.0 / -1.4	16.2 / 3.5	18.7 / 3.9	21.3 / 9.5	22.5 / 3.5	14.1 / 10.9	23.0 / 13.7	21.6 / 12.1	19.5 / 5.9	16.1 / -0.5	12.3 / -2.3
Mongar	15.5 / 8.2	15.9 / 8.3	20.0 / 11.6	28.0 / 14.0	25.1 / 17.4	26.1 / 19.5	16.1 / 15.8	25.4 / 19.6	24.7 / 19.4	22.7 / 15.8	19.9 / 11.2	15.7 / 9.5
Tashigang	20.4 / 10.5	21.7 / 11.5	24.8 / 14.4	28.3 / 17.0	30.0 / 20.6	30.7 / 22.6	31.5 / 23.1	30.2 / 22.7	30.0 / 23.9	29.1 / 17.7	26.1 / 13.6	23.0 / 11.6

#### Recommended Reading

- *Bhutan: Himalayan Mountain Kingdom* by Francoise Pommaret
- *Beyond the Sky and Earth* by Jamie Zeppa
- *Dreams of the Peaceful Dragon* by Katie Hickman
- *Under the Holy Lake* by Ken Haigh
- *Married to Bhutan* by Linda Leaming
- *The Blessings of Bhutan* by Russ and Blyth Carpenter
- *So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas* by Barbara Crossette
- *Seeing with the Third Eye* by T.Sangay Wangchuk
- *Bhutan Travel Guide* by Lonely Planet

## Travel Resources

### Travel

[www.lonelyplanet.com/bhutan](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/bhutan) - Lonely Planet

### Money

[www.xe.net/ucc](http://www.xe.net/ucc) - This is a universal currency converter site.

[www.oanda.com](http://www.oanda.com) - Exchange rates and currency forecasts

[www.bob.bt/contact-us/atm-locator](http://www.bob.bt/contact-us/atm-locator) - A list of ATM machines in Bhutan

### Clothing / Gear

[www.patagonia.com](http://www.patagonia.com) - Expedition clothing.

[www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com) - Expedition gear and clothing.

[www.mountainhardwear.com](http://www.mountainhardwear.com) - Tents, sleeping bags, expeditions wear.

[www.exofficio.com](http://www.exofficio.com) - Lightweight travel clothes - Great for Safaris!

[www.eaglecreek.com](http://www.eaglecreek.com) - Excellent travel gear and packing tips from the experts

[www.cameraworld.com](http://www.cameraworld.com) - The best prices on camera and video gear!

[www.nrsweb.com](http://www.nrsweb.com) - Anything you could ever want for the river.

[www.llbean.com](http://www.llbean.com) - Gear and clothing for any adventure.

### Health

[www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel) - All the latest recommendations on vaccination and important information on health concerns worldwide.

### Passport and Embassy Information

[www.travel.state.gov/passport](http://www.travel.state.gov/passport) - How to get a passport fast! - List of Embassies worldwide.

### Weather

[www.accuweather.com](http://www.accuweather.com) - Find out the weather anywhere in the world!

### Travel Warnings

[www.travel.state.gov/travel/](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/) - State department warnings for overseas travelers.

### Conservation

[www.bhutanfound.org](http://www.bhutanfound.org) - The Bhutan Foundation - Contributes to strategies of conservation of the environment, equitable and sustainable development, good governance, and preservation of culture in Bhutan.

[www.edf.org](http://www.edf.org) - Environmental Defense Fund - Stay current on all environmental issues

[www.tnc.org](http://www.tnc.org) - The Nature Conservancy - Saving the last great rivers

[www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org) - World Wildlife Fund - Their mission is to stop the degradation of our planet's natural environment, and build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

[www.irn.org](http://www.irn.org) - International Rivers Network - Supports local communities working to protect their rivers and watersheds.

# Map of Bhutan

