



LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

BHUTAN : AN ANCIENT SPIRITUAL PATH COMMENCING 22 MAY 2017

This comprehensive exploration of Bhutan from west to central east – Bumthang known as the “ sacred valleys of Bhutan “ traverses areas of incredible natural beauty, visiting isolated monasteries, villages and valleys, and high-mountain passes offering breath-taking scenery.

This tour also explores the highlights of Bhutan's cultural richness from western, central to central –east valleys of Paro, Thimphu, Wangdi, Punakha, Trongsa and Bumthang.

- * Walk through landscapes of lush valleys, dense forests and rushing streams.
- * Experience life in traditional Bhutanese villages and home stay in Tang valley.
- * Explore the stunning Phobjikha Valley, winter home to the Black-Necked Crane.
- * Attend and participate in a “ Tse wang “ an elaborate long life blessing ceremony.
- * Discover some of the most sacred Buddhist monasteries and temples in the Himalaya.
- * Private visit to Pema Choling Nunnery where you will have interaction with them and lunch prepared by them.
- * Experience Bhutan's unique culture up-close with farmhouse visits and village excursions.
- * volunteer and take part in traditional Rice transplantation with local farmers.
- * Consultation with Master Astrologer for individual reading as per birth signs according to the Bhutanese lunar calendar
- * Visit many cultural attractions including medieval fortresses (Dzongs), markets and museums.
- * Hike up to the famous Taktsang Monastery, perched on a cliff 2000ft above the valley floor.
- * Marvel at the elaborate and ancient wall paintings and carvings in Dzongs and temple.

Monday, May 22

BANGKOK TO PARO

Druk Air TBA

As we near Bhutan, (if the weather is clear) we may see the massive peaks of the eastern Himalayan mountain range, including Kanchenjunga (the third highest mountain in the world) and Bhutan's holy mountain, Chomolhari. On arrival in Paro, we proceed through customs and immigration to meet our Expedition Leader Tshering Dorji.

After taking a rest at the hotel and having lunch, we visit Ta Dzong (dzong means “fortress”), a circular fortification that once protected the Paro Valley from Tibetan invasion. Dzongs originally served three purposes: Fortress, administrative centre of local government, and centre for the monks' religious activity. The dzong commands sweeping views of the valley below, and is a short walk from Paro's traditional center, Paro Rinpung Dzong.

This evening we will have a brief orientation during a introductory cocktail hour at the hotel.

Overnight Paro (L, D)





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Tuesday, May 23 & Wednesday, May 24

PARO TO BUMTHANG

This morning we return to the airport for our flight to Jakar, in central Bhutan. Jakar is the capital of the spectacular Bumthang region, a collection of four valleys that mark the easternmost point of our trip. One of the most gorgeous parts of Bhutan, Bumthang (which literally translates to “beautiful valley”) has been compared to Switzerland. It is famous for woodcarving, especially masks, and yathra, a form of weaving unique to the area that’s distinguished by unusual patterns and bright colours.

EXPLORING BUMTHANG, We have two full days to explore Bumthang. Bumthang also has the country’s highest concentration of ancient temples and sacred monuments. Its history is replete with the numerous visits from Padmasambhava as he brought the Buddha’s message to Bhutan. He meditated in many local caves that now have temples and shrines dedicated to him.

Kurje Lhakhang, a 17th-century temple, now features a spectacular new monastery built in traditional style. From Kurje, we begin our rambles through the countryside, crossing a footbridge over rushing Chamkhar Chu meandering our way through the ripening paddy fields to Tamshing. Tamshing was founded in 1501 by Pemalingpa, “the treasure discoverer.” Pemalingpa was a famous 14th-century blacksmith from Bumthang who is one of Bhutan’s most revered Buddhist saints and teachers. We end our walk with a visit to the Swiss Project – an industrious complex producing cheese, beer, apple juice, and honey.

Next we visit Membartsho, the “burning lake,” a sacred place associated with Pemalingpa. Membartsho. It is not actually a lake but rather a water-worn defile in a granite streambed where the water moves slowly. Legend has it that Pemalingpa had a vision in which Padmasambhava instructed him to retrieve a ter, or hidden treasure, from this spot. He dove into the water holding a lamp (a lamp that miraculously stayed lit) and returned with texts and treasures of the Guru. Ters are an important aspect of Mahayana Buddhism as they provide a continual stream of teaching and revelation to future generations. Pemalingpa was one of the greatest tertons (treasure finders).

Explore the town of Chamkhar Bazaar and our one of the highlight will be attend an evening tea and prayer ceremony with monks in Kharchu Dratsang (Monastery).

Overnight Bumthang (B, L, D)





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Thursday, May 25

JAKAR TO TANG VALLEY

In the morning we visit Jambe Lakhang (Lakhang means temple), along with Kyichu Lakhang in the Paro valley, which is one of the two oldest temples in Bhutan. It was built circa 750 by King Srongsten Gampo of Tibet as part of his pledge to build 108 temples to the Buddha during his lifetime. Kurje Lakhang, a 17th century temple, is also on our programme today, we may decide to gently walk the traditional paths through the local villages nearby and experience daily life up close.

In the afternoon we visit Pema Choling Nunnery and spend time with nuns and experience daily life inside this wonderful nunnery and attend a special prayer ceremony by nuns – “Choed “ prayer ceremony perform with drums and bells.

PEMA CHOLING INSTITUTE is a residential Buddhist community of 100 women and girls aged 12 -60 located in the Bumthang region of Bhutan. Many of the women arrive at Pema Choling with little or no education, from families of farmers or road labourers. The center offers basic education, vocational training and the opportunity to pursue traditional Buddhist studies at the highest academic level. The highlight of the day would be to dine and have lunch at the nunnery, which is prepared by nuns.

We continue our journey roughly about 1 – 2 hours’ drive to Tang valley to settle and experience a traditional Bhutanese farm house and home stay.

Overnight Tang Farmhouse (B, L,D)

Friday, May 26

EXPLORE TANG VALLEY

We have a full day to explore this beautiful valley. We start with a hike to Ugyen Choling Palace - hike approximate 3 hours plus walking through villages and village temple Ugyencholing “the palace of Ugyen,” an old ancestral home with dramatic views. We visit the surrounding village and see how people work and spend their day in the field and, the ancestral home.

This area is well known for its yathra - Yathra is the name of the locally-produced woollen cloth. Unique patterns and bright colours distinguish this earthy fabric, which is used throughout Bhutan.





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Highlights:

* Experience and partake in local cooking with village hosts

Local delicacy – buckwheat pancakes and noodles

* At night, witness the local folk dancing with the villagers

Overnight Tang Farmhouse (B,L,D)

Saturday, May 27

TANG TO TRONGSA

Today we commence our journey back towards western Bhutan. The drive from Tang to Trongsa takes about 3 to 4 hours. While in Trongsa, we will explore its town, which forms the central hub of the kingdom and is historically the place from where attempts at unifying the country were launched.

You will explore the stunningly situated Ta Dzong, which overlooks the main fortress from a perch high above. You'll get to venture inside the watchtower, where you'll find a well-organized museum featuring artefacts from the treasure rooms of the main dzong. Now known as "Tower of Trongsa " where the museum is dedicated to the Monarchs of Bhutan. Ta Dzong, the ancient watchtower above Trongsa, is an excellent example of the medieval fortresses that controlled Bhutan well into the mid-20th century. Inside is a small chapel dedicated to King Gesar, an epic hero of Tibetan history.

Our hotel is located with an excellent view of the Dzong and surrounding black mountains.

Overnight Trongsa (B,L,D)

Sunday, May 28 & Monday, May 29

TRONGSA TO PHOBJIKHA

Today we drive to Phobjikha valley 2 – 3 hours roughly. Near the summit of Pele La we turn down a side road leading to Phobjikha. This stunning valley is encircled by pine-covered mountains and rhododendron forests.

Phobjikha Valley is located in the Black Mountain National Park. The park incorporates alpine, temperate and subtropical ecosystems alike and it links up with Royal Manas National Park to the south. The combined reserve provides a pristine habitat for various species such as tiger, red panda, Himalayan black bear, guar, leopard cat, wild pig and several bird species, including monal pheasant and four sub-species of hornbill, but the area





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

is most famous for being the winter abode of the endangered black-necked crane. Experts estimate that fewer than 6000 cranes exist in the wild.

The cranes migrate from Tibet in mid-November and stay through March.

Some of the highlight during our stay in Phobjikha valley:

- 🏠 Hike in the stunning valley following the Nature trail for about 2 – 3 hours.
- 🏠 Gangtey Gompa monastery - a visit to the Gangteng Gompa. This 17th-century monastery commands a beautiful location overlooking the verdant hills of Phobjikha. The complex consists of a central monastery, meditation hall, monks' quarters and a school. The head lama of Gangteng Gompa is the ninth incarnation of the body of Pemalingpa
- 🏠 Attend and participate in a " Tse wang " an elaborate long life blessing ceremony performed by the head lama and monks of Gangtey monastery.
- 🏠 Discussion and private tea ceremony with the monks.
- 🏠 Attend evening prayers at the monastery with the shedra monks.

Monday 29 May is a free day to rest, catch up on things, to gather with the group and participate in a mini workshop. We will make plans for the day as we travel.

Two nights in Phobjikha (B,L,D)

Tuesday, May 30

PHOBJIKHA TO PUNAKHA

In the morning we make our journey through to the Wangdi region and onward to the Punakha region, the lower valley in western Bhutan, considered as fertile land mainly cultivating the famous Bhutanese red rice.

In the afternoon explore and enjoy Punakha, which served as Bhutan's capital for 300 years. We begin our explorations with a visit to Punakha's impressive Dzong, located at the confluence of the Mo and Po Chus (Mo means "mother," Po means "father," and chu means "river"). Guarding the northern and southern approaches to Punakha Valley, Punakha Dzong was the national capital until 1966. One of the holiest of the many Dzongs throughout Bhutan, it was built in 1637 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and contains the preserved body of this founder of modern Bhutan. Since the Shabdrung (meaning "at whose feet one submits") was such a powerful leader, his attendants and advisors were very concerned about who would be selected as his successor. Because of this, his death was kept a secret for 50 years! We will attend a Special Prayer ceremony and Butter lamp offering in Punakha Dzong.





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Those interested can take an invigorating hike to Khamsum Yuelley Namgyel Chorten. It takes about an hour and a half from the trailhead to the top of the hill where the chorten is located. Crossing through farm-fields, there are nice views of this fertile valley along the way. The chorten itself houses hundreds of images of various protector deities and commands excellent views of the valley below. The return from the chorten to the trailhead only takes 45 minutes or so, as it is all down-hill.

Overnight Punakha (B,L,D)

Wednesday, May 31

PUNAKHA TO THIMPHU

We'll visit Chimi Lhakhang, a small but famous temple in the center of Punakha Valley. It takes about 45 minutes to walk from the trailhead to the temple. Built in 1499, the yellow-roofed temple honours Lama Drukpa Kinley, the "divine madman" whose unconventional teachings and ribald exploits are spoken about by Bhutanese people to this day. The temple houses a phallic effigy of the lama's "magic thunderbolt of wisdom," which childless women visit to receive a prayer for conception. The murals to the right of the chapel depict famous stories from Kinley's life.

This morning depart for Thimphu, the current-day capital of Bhutan and home to the royal family. The drive is long (approximately 6-7 hours), but we'll break it up with stops for photos and short walks. En route, we re-cross the Dochu La, where thousands of prayer flags flutter in the wind and 108 chortens (small memorials) dot the landscape. The weather permitting, you will capture images of 200 miles of Himalayan summits from atop the pass.

With a current population of approximately 100,000 residents, Thimphu is Bhutan's largest city. It is the seat of the Royal Government of Bhutan, the home of the Royal Family, and the main centre for most international aid organizations. As the only true city in Bhutan, it is a unique mix of Himalayan and Western sensibilities.

Some of the possibilities of sightseeing and visits in Thimphu include:

- 🏠 The textile museum
- 🏠 Zorig Chuk sum (Institute of thirteen traditional art & crafts)
- 🏠 Weekend market
- 🏠 National Handicraft Emporium
- 🏠 Tashichho Dzong
- 🏠 Memorial Chorten
- 🏠 Consultation with Master Astrologer for individual reading as per birth signs according to the Bhutanese lunar calendar – Master from the National Institute of Astrology, Thimphu.





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Introduction to Traditional Herbal medicine and its spiritual healing - by Indigenous doctor. at the Indigenous Hospital.

Overnight Thimpu (B, L, D)

Thursday June 01

THIMPHU TO PARO

This morning we will take a gentle hike to the south of Thimphu to see the huge bronze Dordenma Buddha, dedicated to everlasting happiness and enlightenment. When finished it will be the largest seated Buddha in the world.

After lunch we continue our westward journey to Paro, where we will drive the winding road following the Thim Chu downstream to its confluence with the Wang Chu, then up-valley to Paro. Before we settle to our hotel, we make a visit to the 7th Century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the 108 temples constructed by the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo. Kyichu is built in a manner similar to the Jokhang in Lhasa. Inside there is a great golden image of Maitreya Buddha and Guru Rimpoche.

We settle early and restful night in preparation for our spiritual and excursion hike to Tiger's Nest tomorrow early morning.

Overnight Paro (B, L, D)

Friday, June 02

PARO – PILGRIMAGE TO TIGER'S NEST

This morning we make a pilgrimage to one of the most important religious sites in the Himalaya, Taktsang Lhakhang, known as the Tiger's Nest.

This magical monastery clings to a vertical granite cliff 2000 feet above the valley floor. The legend of Taktsang dates back to 747 AD when Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), in the wrathful form of Guru Dorji Drolo, is believed to have arrived at this site on the back of a tiger and subdued the evil spirits in the region. The Guru then meditated in the holy cave, which is the site of the PelphugLhakhang today.

According to Tantric Buddhist mythology, the vanquished local deities became the protectors of the Dharma and one of them, Singye Samdrup, is recognized today as the guardian deity of Taktsang.





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Guru Rinpoche is also believed to have concealed among the rocks of Taktsang various forms of Dharma treasures known as Ters, that were destined to be discovered later by Tertons (treasure discoverers) for the propagation of Dharma.

As you may have heard, Taktsang was severely damaged by fire on Sunday, April 19, 1998. His Majesty the King commanded the restoration of the Taktsang Monastery soon after the fire. It was a royal command that the original aura, authenticity, and architectural splendour must be preserved at all costs. The project was immediately mobilized to restore the monastery and to preserve and strengthen Bhutan's unique spiritual heritage. The project has been widely seen as an act of devotion, involving all sections of Bhutanese society, and homage to the nation's heritage. It also proved to be an opportunity for Bhutan's traditional artists and craftsmen to hone the skills inherited from their forefathers down through the ages. On March 26, 2005 the monastery's Lhakhangs, restored to their original grandeur and enriched with new religious images and other treasures, were sanctified and their spirituality immortalised in a ceremony attended by His Majesty the King, their Majesties the Queens and the Royal Family, together with representatives of the clergy, officialdom and the general public, as well as the international community.

To facilitate the restoration work, a road was built to the base of the mountain facing the temple. We will drive to the end of this road and begin our hike up the mountain for a closer view of the temple. In approximately one hour, we reach a small teahouse that has a wonderful panoramic view of the temple. We have special permission to visit the complex, which is a further hour's climb. Anyone who does not wish to hike further can relax at the teahouse and enjoy the view.

Tonight we celebrate the end of our journey with a special farewell dinner.

Overnight Paro (B, L, D)





LIFESTYLE JOURNEYS

Saturday, June 03

PARO TO BANGKOK

This morning we bid farewell to the Dragon Kingdom as we board our flight to Bangkok.

Druk Air Time to be advised

****Important Note****

Itineraries are subject to change and are meant as a guideline only. Daily hikes are subject to revision due to weather, trail conditions, Government restrictions, unforeseen incidents and other reasons beyond our control. Joining this departure means that you understand the above terms and agree to them.

In addition, frequent reconnaissance of routes sometimes determines a better routing - we do our best to ascertain that the most beautiful and best route possible is taken. Of course, due to the nature of our small group, we also have benefit of altering our planned hikes to suit the mood and abilities of the group.

