

EXPLORING THE KINGDOM OF THE THUNDER DRAGON – A CULTURAL JOURNEY THROUGH BHUTAN – WEST TO EAST FEBRUARY 2020



DAY ONE: Arrive Delhi

You will be met on your arrival at Delhi International Airport and transferred to your hotel.

DAY TWO: Delhi – Agra (Drive)

After breakfast complete check out procedures.

This morning you will make a visit to Old Delhi to see Jama Masjid and a unique glance at local life by way of an exploration to the bustling local bazaar of Chandni Chowk on rickshaw. Pass by Red Fort before you drive to Humayun Tomb. Continue to Raj Chat, drive along the city landmark viewing the India Gate, President's House, Parliament House and Government Secretariat Buildings, plus a photo stop opportunity.

After visiting Humayun Tomb you will continue the drive to Agra. Lunch will be enroute to Agra at a restaurant half way (own expense).

DAY THREE - Agra

We will take an early morning visit to take in the stunning sight of the lavish **Taj Mahal**, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Taj Mahal, is a poem in white marble, built by Shah Jahan in memory of his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. You will then head back to the hotel for breakfast.

After breakfast we will visit the Agra Fort (Fort and Palace) which resonates with rich Mughal culture, situated on the West Bank of the river Jamuna. After Lunch we will visit Itmad Ud Ullah - the Baby Taj.

This is one of the most beautiful Mughal tombs. Itmad-Ud-DAulah's Tomb was built by Nur Jahan, the empress of Jehangir for her father in 1628. The tomb is the resting place of the powerful personality, Itmad-Ud-Daulah, whose life was very interesting. Formerly a very poor Persian merchant then named Mirza Ghiyas or ghiyas Beg he became a minister and a trusted treasure in Akbar's court. After Akbar's death in 1605, his son Jahangir rose into power. Jahangir

made Ghiyas Beg his chief minister and honoured him with the title of Itmad-Ud-Daulaj, the Pillar of State. Later, Jahangir met a beautiful daughter of Ghiyas Beg named Mehr-Un- Nissa and married her. You will then return to your hotel and have the evening free.

Overnight Agra

DAY FOUR: Agra – Delhi (drive)

After breakfast we will drive back to Delhi. Upon arrival check into your hotel and the evening is free.

Overnight Delhi

DAY FIVE: DELHI TO PARO – THIMPU - Bhutan

Transfer provided to the airport for your connecting flight to Bhutan.

During the journey to Paro, if weather permits, you will experience breathtaking views of Mount Everest, Kanchenjunga and other famous Himalayan peaks, including the sacred Chomolhari and Mount Jichu Drake in Bhutan.

On arrival at Paro Airport, you will be met by our Lifestyle Journeys guide, who will escort you to your hotel. You will drive the winding road along the Paro Chu (Chu means water or river, firstly down stream to the confluence with the Wang Chu and then you turn upstream and travel along the Wang Chu to Thimphu, the Capital.

DAY SIX: EXPLORING THIMPHU

As Bhutan's largest city, with a current population of approximately 100,000, Thimphu is Bhutan's "Big Apple"! 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 and crafts)
- National Handicraft Emporium
- Tashichho Dzong

The Memorial Chorten, dedicated to the Late Third King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck.

A must Visit while in the city is to the Buddha Dordenma (tallest seated Buddha in the world – 169 ft/52 meters tall) and wonderful view of the city.

DAY SEVEN: THIMPHU TO PUNAKHA

In the morning, we continue our journey with a dramatic drive over the 10,300 ft mountain pass of Dochu La and on to Punakha Valley. Sights on the way include one of Bhutan's first fortress monasteries, the 17th-century Simtokha Dzong. The journey continues over the pass offering spectacular views of towering Himalayan peaks on a clear day. The descent into Punakha Valley along the Kingdom's only east-west highway takes you into the lower sub-tropical vegetation and rice paddy region of Bhutan. Before we settle in to our wonderful resort we will 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 still spoken of 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.

DAY EIGHT: EXPLORING PUNAKHA

After a relaxing breakfast, we take an opportunity to hike (approximate 2 hours hike) through rice fields and up to Khamsum Yueley Namgyal Chorten, built by Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuk, dedicated to her son The King of Bhutan. Perched high on a hill on the bank of the river, the Chorten houses paintings belonging to Nyingmapa traditions.

After lunch we drive to Punakha Dzong, built in 1637 by the Shabdrung, the 'Unifier of Bhutan' as predicted by the great Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava). It is situated at the confluence of the Mo Chu and Pho Chu (Mother and Father Rivers) and is the winter headquarters of the Je Khenpo, or Chief Abbot of the country, and hundreds of monks, who move en masse from Thimphu to this warmer location. The three storey main temple of the Punakha Dzong is a breath-taking example of traditional architecture with four intricately embossed entrance pillars crafted from cypress and decorated in gold and silver. Our visit here is perhaps the most important visit of any Dzong, particularly to see the incredible workmanship in the main prayer hall, which during recent years has been reconstructed following a disastrous fire and flood. Some people consider this work to be of comparable importance to that of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

DAY NINE: PUNAKHA TO PARO

We continue our journey over the Dochula pass and if weather permits, we will see the eastern Himalaya peaks from the pass. 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 checking into our hotel we will visit the Paro Dzong which houses the national museum of Bhutan and make a visit to the 7th Century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the 108 temples constructed by the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo Kyichu. Inside there is a great golden image of Maitreya Buddha and Guru Rinpoche.

DAY TEN: PARO – PILGRIMAGE TO TIGER'S NEST

This morning we make a pilgrimage to one of the most important religious sites in the Himalaya's, 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 Pelphug Lhakhang 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. Guru Rinpoche is also believed to have concealed among the rocks of Taktsang various forms of Dharma treasures known as Ters, which 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 as 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 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.

DAY ELEVEN AND TWELVE: PARO TO BUMTHANG

Today 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’s famous for woodcarving, especially masks, and yathra, a form of weaving unique to the area that’s distinguished by unusual patterns and bright colors.

EXPLORING 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 and winding 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 and 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.

In the morning we visit Jambe Lhakhang (Lhakhang means temple), along with Kyichu Lhakhang in the Paro valley 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 Lhakhang, 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 first hand. Explore the town of Chamkhar Bazaar and one of the highlights will be to attend an evening tea and prayer ceremony with monks in Kharchu Dratsang (Monastery) during the prayer ceremony.

We visit Membartsho, the “burning lake,” a sacred place associated with Pemalingpa. Membartsho 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).

In the afternoon we visit a Nunnery to spend time with nuns. You will experience daily life inside this wonderful nunnery along with the opportunity to attend a special prayer ceremony conducted by the nuns – “ Choed “ prayer ceremony performance with drums and bells.

The Nunnery 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.

DAY THIRTEEN: BUMTHANG TO MONGAR via Thrumshing La Pass (3780 m/12,400ft)

Today is a relatively a long driving day through spectacular scenery. We will be travelling over the highest pass we encounter on our drive across central Bhutan. Carrying on, you pass through a valley of Ura, known as the highest valley of Bumthang. Traveling this far East in Bhutan is a truly unique opportunity that few westerners have experienced. Today’s drive is among the most spectacular drives in Bhutan as you climb a series of switchbacks toward the stunning Thrumshing La Pass (3780 m/12,400ft), a protected national park. Thrumshing La is famous for its forests of rhododendrons species in Bhutan.

We continue our drive to lower valleys through villages of Sengor, Yonkola and Limethang until we hit the lowest point in Kuri Zampa at 570m above the sea level. From here it is little over

1100m climb to the town of Mongar located on the hillside. It is a long drive, but nonetheless a scenic one.

DAY FOURTEEN: DAY TRIP TO LHUNTSE

In the north-eastern corner of Bhutan, a little more than 75 kilometres north of Mongar, lies one of the most remote and isolated districts in Bhutan: the ancient region of Kurtoe, or Lhuntse as it is known today. It is the ancestral home of Bhutan's kings and location of several of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in the country. Despite the relatively short distance between Mongar and Lhuntse, the drive nevertheless takes about three hours, due in large part to windiness of the narrow road. The landscape is spectacular, with stark cliffs towering above river gorges and dense coniferous forests. Due to the steepness of the terrain, most villages in Lhuntse are built on the crest of ridges, with steep terraces flowing down the slopes below. The region is famous for its weavers, and their distinctive textiles are generally considered to be the best in the country. Kurtoep women are especially adept at weaving a textile called Kishuthara. We will spend time in the village of Khoma where we will get time to see the women weaving first hand.

Lhuntse is one of the least developed dzhongkhags (districts) of Bhutan. There are few roads, and the first gas station in the region was only opened in September 2005. Electricity is not well distributed and the difficult terrain makes distribution of social welfare difficult. Despite its favourable climate, farming is also made more challenging by the difficult terrain.

Lhuntse Dzong, popularly known as Lhundub Rinchentse, sits upon a hill overlooking the Kurichu River. It was constructed in 1654 by the Trongsa Penlop Chogyal Minjur Tempa upon the site of an older temple built by Nagi Wangchuk in 1552. Today the dzong is the administrative and the religious center of the district. It houses many sacred artifacts that were installed by the 4th Druk Desi, Tenzin Rabgay. After visiting the dzong and exploring the valley on foot, you'll drive back to Mongar, arriving late in the day. You can relax before dinner.

DAY FIFTEEN: MONGAR TO TRASHIGANG via Korila pass (2440 metres)

After a leisurely morning we visit the Mongar Dzong and monks who are in residence. Our drive today takes us over the Korila pass. We will descend down to the villages of Yadi following the contours of Dangme chu (chu means water or river in Bhutanese), the largest river in Bhutan as we continue the drive to Tashigang, the largest district of Bhutan and arguably the commercial center of eastern Bhutan. On the way we stop in the village of Ngatshang, a small temple where we can get the opportunity to see young monks in studies and also how they live. In the afternoon we explore the small town of Tashigang and take a visit to its spectacular dzong. It is a must to see as it is a fine display of Bhutanese architecture. The accommodation tonight will be in the quaint Linghar Lodge with stunning views of the villages and surrounding mountain.

DAY SIXTEEN: TRASHIGANG TO SAMDRUP JONGKHAR

After breakfast, we will begin our journey to Samdrup Jongkhar, The drive takes us on a stunning journey passing through varied tropical vegetation to broadleaved forests, villages and varied vegetation zones. En route, visit the Handloom Development Project at Khaling, where you can see women weaving tapestry of textiles and you can also witness the techniques of Bhutanese dyes.

From Khaling, we continue to descent our journey through the small town Womrong, Reserbu, Deothang and finally reach the frontier town of Samdrup Jongkhar. Mondalf. If time permits, we can explore the town of samdrup Jongkhar, a big hub of trade and commerce to the eastern districts of Tashigang, Mongar and Lhuntse. Our hotel is located in the heart of town.

DAY SEVENTEEN AND EIGHTEEN: Kazarangi National Park

This morning we will travel to Kazarangi National Park - an amazing sanctuary and wild life park - now a World Heritage Site, which hosts two-thirds of the world's great one-horned rhinoceroses. Your accommodation is in air-conditioned cottages nestled amongst the stunning nature setting.

There are two jungle safaris a day – one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There are other activities available depending on the group size. This will be explained in further detail once bookings are confirmed.

DAY NINETEEN: March

Your tour finishes today. You will be transferred to the airport for your homeward bound flight.