

BHUTAN – THE LAST SHANGRI - LA





Bhutan is rightly known to the world today as the Last Shangri-La. It was the mighty Himalayas that protected Bhutan from the rest of the world and left this Himalayan jewel blissfully untouched. The Drukpa Kagyupa sect of Mahayana Buddhism provided the essence of a rich culture and fascinating history. The Bhutanese people protected this sacred heritage and unique identity for centuries by choosing to remain in a jealously guarded isolation.

This country of rolling hills and towering crags certainly exudes charm. The mountains are magnificent, the forests are dense, the people are delightful, the air is pure, the architecture inspiring, the religion exciting and the art superb. Like timeless images from the past, the traveller encounters the full glory of this ancient land through its strategic fortresses known as Dzongs, numerous ancient temples, monasteries and stupas which dot the countryside, prayer flags which flutter along the high ridges, wild animals which abound in dense forests, foamy white waterfalls which are the ethereal showers, and the warm smile of its friendly people. With its beautiful and largely unspoiled Himalayan setting, its rich flora and fauna and its vibrant Buddhist culture, Bhutan has become an increasingly popular destination for international tourists.

Facts and Figures

Land area	: 38,394 square kilometres
Forest area	: 72 %
Altitude	: between 240metres and 7570metres above sea level
Inhabitants	: 7,55,000
Language	: official language 'Dzongkha', English widely spoken
Religion	: Vajrayana stream of Mahayana Buddhism (Also known as Tantric Buddhism)
Currency	: Ngultrum (equal to Indian Rupee)
Capital	: Thimphu
National Tree	: Cypress
National Bird	: Raven
National Flower	: Blue Poppy
National Sport	: Archery
National Animal	: Takin
Local time	: 6 hours ahead of GMT

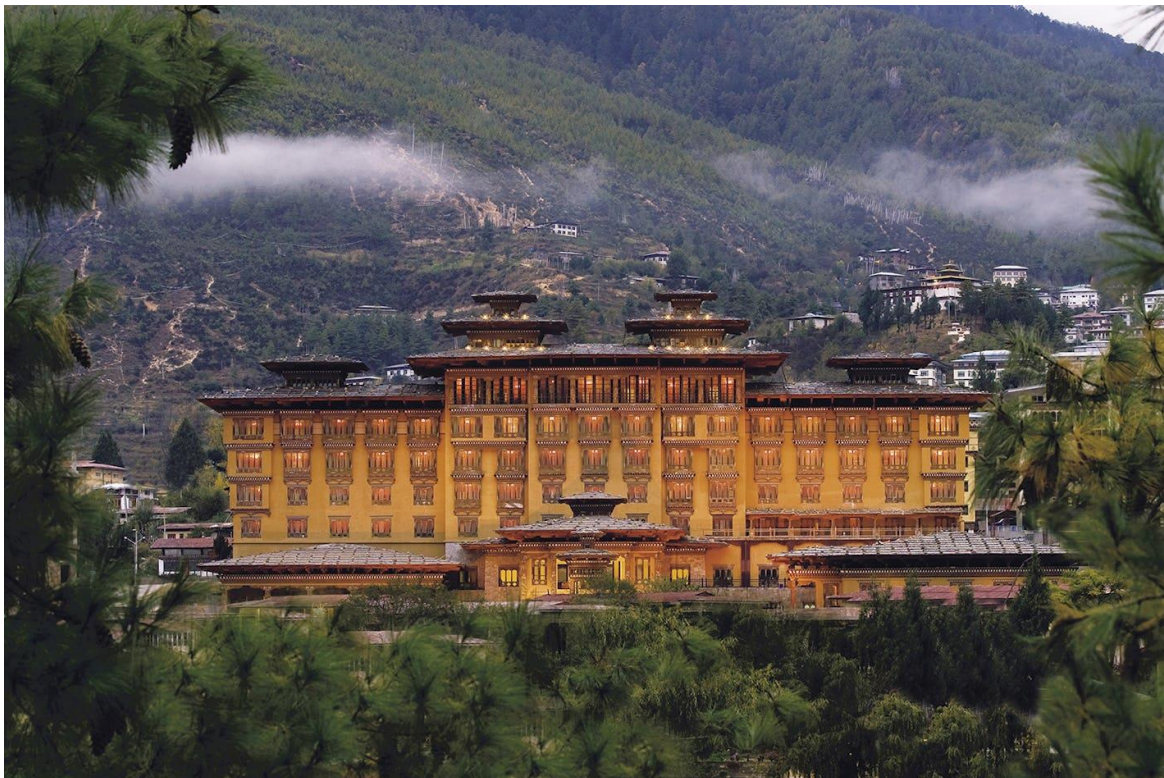
Day 01 – Delhi/Paro by flight
Paro-Thimphu by car

The flight to Paro is one of the most spectacular in entire Himalayas. Flying over Himalayan foothills, the journey offers fascinating views and an exciting descent into the Kingdom. Bhutan's first gift to you as you disembark from the aircraft will be cool, clean fresh mountain air.

After immigration formalities and baggage collection you will be welcomed by our representative with a **'tashi khaddar'** (*white scarf offering to the guest which is an auspicious way to welcome guest*) and drive to Thimphu, the capital town of Bhutan. The road leads through the Paro valley to the confluence of Paro and Thimphu rivers at **Chuzom** (confluence).

Shortly before reaching Chuzom, you will see on your left **Tamchog Lhakhang**, the temple built by Thangtong Gyalpo, a pioneering engineer who introduced the construction of suspension bridges into Bhutan and Tibet (several of which are still in use today). The present bridge to Tamchog Lhakhang was restored in 2005 in the design of a traditional style with iron chains and crossing this iron bridge is a wonderful experience. (*approx. 50 min, roundtrip walk*).

On arrival, in Thimphu check-into the hotel, **Six Senses OR Pemako Thimphu**.



The capital town of Bhutan and the centre of government, religion and commerce, Thimphu is a unique city with unusual mixture of modern development alongside ancient traditions.

Later in the evening visit to **Trashichhoedzong, 'fortress of the glorious religion'**. This is the center of government and religion, site of monarch's throne room and seat of Je Khenpo or Chief Abbot. Built in 1641 by the political and religious unifier of Bhutan, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, it was reconstructed in 1960s in traditional Bhutanese manner, without nails or architectural plans.



Day 02 - Thimphu

After breakfast, embark on a fascinating Nature walk to **Cheri monastery** which is now an important centre for meditational retreats and was established in 1620 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal as the home for Bhutan's first monk body. An elaborated decorated silver chorten inside the upper monastery enshrines the ashes of the Zhabdrung's father. It is believed that Guru Rinpoche meditated in a cave above the monastery when he came to Bhutan in 8th century.

To reach Cheri, one needs to drive for 14km (30 min) towards northern end of Thimphu valley up to Dodena (2600m) from where the hike starts. The trail commences by crossing a nicely covered traditional wooden bridge that spans the Thimphu Chhu (river) and then heads up to steadily to the monastery. The steep nature trail is serene, tranquil on which you get chance to breathe through cool, breezy fresh area under the magnificent, wooded area while the view from top is stunning.

Being the place where the Zhabdrung spent many years in meditation, Cheri today has number of hermitages and small temples located on its slopes, commanding spectacular views.

Difficulty Level: Moderate / Maximum elevation: 2650m / Elevation gain: 330m
Walking distance: 6.5 km (round trip) / Walking time: 2.5 hour (round trip)



Post lunch visit to **Textile Museum**. With the opening of Textile Museum, under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden, Bhutanese textile have reached new heights as one of the most visible distinct art forms. The textile museum has opened its exhibition on six major themes - warp pattern weaves, weft pattern weaves, role of textiles in religion, achievements in textile arts, textiles from indigenous fibres and the Royal collection.

For an insight into traditional crafts of Bhutan, visit **National Institute for Zorig Chusum**, established in 1971, it is the premier institute to preserve and promote thirteen traditional art and crafts of Bhutan. Commonly known as Arts & Crafts School or Painting School, the Institute offers 4-to-6-year courses in 13 traditional arts and crafts of Bhutan.

Then take a short drive to the north of town to **Buddha Dordenma**, located atop a hill in Kuenselphodrang Nature Park. The statue fulfils an ancient prophecy dating back to the 8th century A.D that was discovered by Tertön Pema Lingpa (Religious Treasure Discoverer) and is said to emanate an aura of peace and happiness to the entire world. This massive statue of Shakyamuni made of bronze and is gilded in gold, measures 51.5 meters in height, making it one of the largest statues, in Bhutan. 125,000 smaller Buddha statues have been placed within the Buddha Dordenma statue, each of these also have been cast in bronze and gilded. *Here at Buddha point, you've option to perform meditation at a designated area.*



The crown jewel of Thimphu, Motithang Takin Preserve is a protected area where the national animal of Bhutan, Takin, is preserved. A half an hour walk here would unveil many exotic birds and animals to you, who wander around the area freely and in the most natural of habitat. Overflowing with serenity, the wildlife here is exquisite and should be seen once.



Later in afternoon visit **National Memorial Chorten**, a large white structure crowned with a golden spire. It is located close to the center of Thimphu city and is one of its most iconic monuments. This is the most ideal spot to interact with locals who throng in large numbers to circumambulate the chorten, whirl the large red prayer wheels and pray at a small shrine inside the gate.

The paintings and statues inside the monument provide a deep insight into Buddhist philosophy.

Evening explore **Centenary Farmers Market**. Popularly known as Weekend market, this bustling, colourful market centre is the biggest where farmers from different part of the country gather to sell their farm products. With its wide assortment of products including handicrafts and its picturesque and colourful setting, the Farmer's Market is a favourite spot for many.

Day 03 – Thimphu/Punakha by surface

Sumptuous breakfast is followed by scenic drive to Punakha.

Before entering Punakha town, on the way visit Wangduephodrang Dzong. Founded by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1638, on the top of high ridge between Punak Tsang Chhu and Dang Chhu rivers, offering fantastic of the valley below, Wangdue Dzong holds special place in Bhutan's history. The strategic location of the dzong, provided *Penlop* (Governor) of Wangduephodrang, chance to protect the routes to Trongsa, Punakha, Dagana and Thimphu making him the third most powerful ruler after Governors of Paro and Trongsa. The Dzong had been damaged by fire in 2012 and restored to its original grandeur and splendour recently (in 2022).

On arrival, check in at your hotel; **Six Senses OR Uma Como OR Pemako**



Day 04 : Punakha

Punakha served as the capital of Bhutan and seat of government until 1955 and still it is the winter seat of Je Khenpo (the chief abbot). Blessed with temperate climate and owing to its natural drainage from Pho Chhu (male) and Mo Chhu (female) rivers, the fertile Punakha valley produces abundant crops and fruits. Located at an elevation of 1300m above sea level, Punakha enjoys mild winters and is popular year-round destination.

After breakfast, visit Punakha Dzong or 'Palace of Great Happiness', built at the junction of the Pho chhu and Mo chhu rivers in 1637 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. This majestic dzong served as both the religious and the administrative centre of Bhutan in the past. It measures some 600 by 240 feet and has a six-story, gold-domed tower. Inside are courtyards and religious statuary that hint at the depth of history and spiritual tradition embodied here. Your guide will illuminate your understanding of this intricate culture that is exotic to us, though long established here.



Next, stroll across the Punakha Suspension Bridge, gracefully suspended over the rushing waters of the Mo Chhu River. A marvel of engineering, this bridge provides a thrilling experience for visitors. Spanning approximately 160 meters, it ranks among Bhutan's longest suspension bridges, offering a unique perspective of the picturesque Punakha Valley. With prayer flags fluttering in the wind and the river's roar below, crossing this bridge provides an exhilarating blend of natural beauty and cultural significance.

Then a short excursion to Chimi Lhakhang.

The Chimi Lhakhang, situated on a hillock in the centre of the valley, also known as the temple of fertility. It is widely believed that couples who do not have children and wanting one, if they pray at this temple, they are usually blessed with a child very soon. The trail leads across rice fields to the tiny settlement of Pana, meaning 'field'. A walk through the village near the temple will give you rare glimpses into the daily life and lifestyle of the villagers.



The glory of Bhutan is not hidden from anyone. The country, as beautiful as heaven itself, is known for its vivid culture, vibrant festivals and its richness in sports. It is true that no matter how developed or beautiful a country is; it never becomes complete until its citizens have an unleashed spirit for sports. And it is the royal sport of archery or "Da" (as it is called in Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan) which completes Bhutan. Enjoy the session of archery with the locals.



[Day 05: Punakha - Paro \(125 km, approx. 4-hour drive\)](#)

After breakfast, embark on a scenic hike leading to the majestic Khamsum Yuelley Namgel Chorten (approx. 2-hour round trip nature walk). This remarkable structure was erected with the intention of dispelling negative energies and fostering peace, stability, and harmony in a world marked by constant change. The chorten stands as a commanding presence in the upper Punakha Valley, offering breathtaking panoramas that sweep over the Mo Chhu River and extend towards the towering peaks of Gasa and the surrounding landscape.



Hike is followed by drive to Paro along scenic highway. En route visit handsomely proportioned Simtokha Dzong built in 1629 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and modelled on Gyal Gyad Tshel Institute of Ralung (Tibet). Officially known as Sangak Zabdhon Phodrang (Palace of the Profound Meaning of Secret Mantras), Simtokha is often said to be the first dzong built in Bhutan. It is in fact also the oldest dzong to have survived as a complete structure.

On arrival in Paro, check into the hotel; **Six Senses OR Uma Como**



The beautiful valley of Paro encapsulates within itself a rich culture, scenic beauty and hundreds of myths and legends. It is home to many of Bhutan's oldest temples and monasteries, National Museum and country's only international airport. Mount. Chomolhari (7,314m) reigns in white glory at the northern end of the valley and its glacial water plunge through deep gorges to form Pa Chhu (Paro River). Paro is also one of the most fertile valleys in the Kingdom producing a bulk of the locally famous red rice from its terraced fields.

Post lunch, proceed to visit Ta Dzong, originally built as Watchtower, which now houses National Museum. The extensive collection includes antique thangka paintings, textiles, weapons & armour, household objects and a rich assortment of natural and historic artifacts.

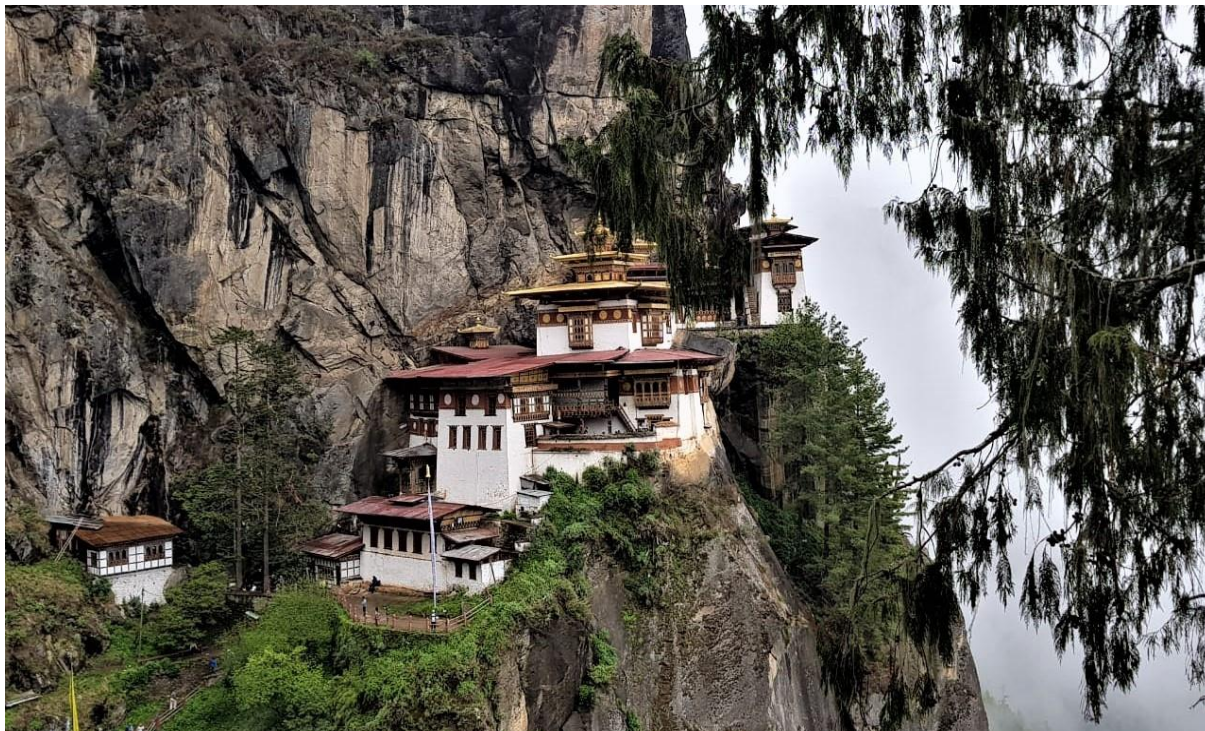
Ta Dzong visit immediately followed by a short walk down the trail to visit Rinpung Dzong (Paro Dzong), meaning ("fortress of the heap of jewels"), which has a long and fascinating history. Along the wooden galleries lining the inner courtyard are fine wall paintings illustrating Buddhist lore such as four friends, the old man of long life, the wheel of life, scenes from the life of Milarepa, Mount. Sumeru and cosmic Mandala.



Walk in to visit a traditional farmhouse. These charming structures, often adorned with intricate woodwork and painted in vibrant colors, are a testament to Bhutan's architectural heritage. Visitors have the opportunity to experience the warmth of Bhutanese hospitality, savor authentic local cuisine; witness traditional farming practices, and immerse themselves in the tranquil ambiance of the countryside. It's a unique and enriching way to connect with the traditions and way of life that have endured for generations in this picturesque region of Bhutan.

Day 06: Paro

Following breakfast, embark on a captivating journey to Taktshang Monastery, also known as Tiger's Nest, which involves approximately a 5-hour round-trip hike. This monastery holds a position of utmost prominence among Bhutan's monastic institutions, clinging to the side of a cliff at an elevation of 900 meters above the Paro valley floor. Legend has it that Guru Rinpoche arrived at this sacred site on the back of a tigress and engaged in meditation, hence earning it the name 'Tiger's Nest.' Recognized as one of the most sanctified places in Bhutan, it was visited by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1646 and is now a pilgrimage site frequented by all Bhutanese at least once in their lifetime.



Late afternoon, drive end of the Valley to newly restored Drukgyel Dzong. Built by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1646 to commemorate an early military victory over Tibetan invaders, the dzong name means, indeed, 'victorious Druk'. Historically and strategically, this Dzong withstood all its glory and was featured in 1914 vide National Geographic magazine. The glory of Drukgyel Dzong remained even when it was destroyed by fire in 1951. On a clear day, one can see the commanding view of Mount. Chomolhari (7,314m) from the village, below the Dzong.

While driving to Paro town, stop en route at the 7th century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the 108 temples built in the Himalayas by Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo. The building of this temple marks the introduction of Buddhism in Bhutan.

Day 07: Paro/Delhi Fly

In the morning, assistance & private transfer to the airport for flight to Delhi or to your next destination.

TASHI DELEK