



## TIMELESS BHUTAN: TWELVE-NIGHTS ITINERARY

1. Four Nights Paro
2. Two Nights Thimphu
3. Two Nights Punakha
4. One Night Gangtey
5. Three Nights Bumthang

In those twelve days we discover why Bhutan is known as the 'last Shangri-La', the stunning environs beholds a rich cultural heritage which has not lost any of its sheen to the trappings of modernism. A culture which has been enriched and shaped by Mahayana Buddhism, whose natural surroundings are inseparable from its identity as the land has been sanctified and marked ubiquitously by Buddhist Saints and Masters who first propagated Buddhism in Bhutan. We will discover Bhutan through cultural visits to ancient temples built as early as the 7th century to thwart evil spirits, to sites of historical relevance such as the 'mebar tsho' or the burning lake where extremely rare and precious Buddhist relics were uncovered by one of the greatest Buddhist treasure discoverers or 'tertoens'.

Similarly we will revel in the rarefied and pristine nature through excursions to Phobjika valley where the endangered Black Neck Crane finds a winter home. Enjoy the stunning vistas of fortresses and terraced rice fields as you make your way down the 'pho chu' or male river in Punakha whilst white water rafting. Birding along the Pho Chu is also another memorable and popular activity. The carefully preserved relics and treasures can be enjoyed at several locations including the Folk Heritage Museum and National Library in Thimphu, and Taa Dzong in Paro. A fertility temple, a long life temple, myriad themes and significances provide panaceas for the spirit and soul. A trip to Bhutan will not be complete without soaking in a hot stone bath with medicinal and healing properties. Bhutan has not been lax in using its immense flora; it has developed a certain proficiency in producing effective herbal and ayurvedic medicines.

## DAY 1

**Arrive in Paro. Introductory lecture and relaxation. Overnight in Paro.**

## DAY 2

Paro - Paro local sightseeing today, includes visiting the **Paro Rinpung Dzong** (**Dzong** i.e a fortress structure which house both administrative and religious quarters) an impressive fortress built in the 17th century by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgay, the political and spiritual leader who unified Bhutan in the 17th century, the **Kyichu Lhakang** (Lhakang i.e temple) which dates back to the 7th century and is believed to be built by a Tibetan King Songten Goempa in his quest to build 108 temples to subdue a ferocious demon and **Taa Dzong** a national museum which is home to a collection of rare paintings, stamps, bronzes, textiles, handicrafts and jewelry.

**Overnight in Paro**

## DAY 3

Paro – Start the morning by hiking to **Taksang**, the hike to Taksang is a vigorous climb to one of the most sacred pilgrimages in Bhutan. Taksang, which translates to *Tigers nest* is perched on a steep cliff about 500 m above Paro valley, where according to legend Guru Padmasambhava flew to Taksang mounted on a tigress. Padmasambhava also known as Guru Rinpoche is a prominent spiritual leader who introduced Vajrayana Buddhism and spread Buddhism to all the corners of Bhutan.

Visit local markets in the evening.

### Overnight in Paro

## DAY 4

Thimphu - Drive to Thimphu, (65 kms away from Paro), Lunch in Thimphu, in the afternoon visit the **memorial chorten** which was built by the Royal Grandmother Ashi Phuntsho Choden in memory of her son the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck who died in 1972. The chorten is a prominent landmark in Thimphu, it is always teeming with people ritually circumbulating the chorten to gain religious merit and atone for present sins.

Also part of the program are visits to the **National Zorig Chusom school** or the school of thirteen traditional arts and crafts where you will be able to see the best examples of Bhutanese traditional arts and crafts. In the early evening we drive to the **Tashichoedzong** which is Thimphu's fortress and the seat of the monarch and the summer residence of chief abbot and the central monastic body.

### Overnight in Thimphu.

## DAY 5

Thimphu: hiking to **Chari and Tango** monastery in the North of Thimphu valley. The two monasteries are constructed on two steep hills facing one another. Both monasteries are historical landmarks in Bhutan and are home to monks undergoing lengthy periods of meditation in devotion to the *Dharma*. In the evening drive up to **Sangaygang**, a gentle hill popular for its cross country track/ jogging trail, stunning panoramic views and the preserve for our national animal the *Takin*.

### Overnight in Thimphu.

## DAY 6

Punakha: Drive to Punakha, (2.5 hrs away from Thimphu).

Lunch in Punakha, in the afternoon we will visit the impressive fortress **Punthang Dechen Phodrang** (Palace of Great Bliss) which rises from the land at the confluence of two important rivers the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu. This fortress has special historical significance as our first king was crowned there in 1907 and our present 5th Kings royal wedding celebrations took place in October 2012. At present it is also used as the winter residence of the Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot) and the entire central monk body.

**Overnight in Punakha.**

## DAY 7

Punakha: we will spend the entire morning birding inside the **Jigme Dorji National Park** and along the Phochu river. The birds we might see include Red-headed Trogon, Slaty-bellied and Grey-bellied Tesia, Small and Rufous-bellied Niltavas, Black-chinned and Whiskered Yuhinas, a trio of Forktails, Pygmy and Spotted Wren Babbler, Lesser Yellowthroat, Bay Woodpecker, White-throated, Rufous-chinned and Bhutan Laughingthrushes, Black, Red-vented and Mountain Bulbul, Grey-hooded, Chestnut-crowned and Blyth's Leaf Warblers and many more. Later in the evening you will drive along the Phochu River to try for White-bellied Heron and Pallas Fish Eagle. Alternatively we can walk to the Khamsum Yuley Namgay Chorten, a shrine recently built by the royal family. This ornate and elaborate structure has a rainbow of Guru Rinpoche images and superb views. A third option could be to go whitewater rafting which is available year round, the 'temple stretch' is mostly leisurely with the rapids running up to grade II with long calm sections.

**Overnight in Punakha.**

## DAY 8

Bumthang: Drive to Bumthang, (7.5 hrs away, 210 kms) Drive via Pelela Pass and then retrace our steps to take a road that heads to Gangtey Gompa over Tashi La Pass.

Descend towards Phobjikja valley, the famous winter dwelling for the Black Neck Crane. We continue our descent through the open meadows and valley of yak herders and several villages via Chendeji Chorten built in a form of Nepalese style in 15th century. Enroute we stop to admire the Trongsa Dzong, and continue to drive to Bumthang.

### **Overnight in Bumthang.**

## **DAY 9**

Bumthang: Bumthang is the cultural and spiritual heartland of Bhutan. Guru and the Tertoens (treasure hunters) lineage originate in this spectacular valley. Therefore a handful of very important temples and heritage sites are located here. Bumthang's valleys are wide and fertile by Bhutanese standards, traipsing through its green meadows and valleys will evoke strong spiritual sentiments and leave you awestruck. Many recreational activities including light hiking, cycling and just reclining amidst stunning views and environs with a picnic basket highlight the idyllic itinerary. Sightseeing visits to **Jakar Dzong**, the largest Dzong in Bhutan. It has a circumference of 1500 meters. Visit the **Kurje Lhakhang**, **Jambay Lhakhang**, **Tamshing Monastery** and the Swiss Farm. Check in to Hotel.

### **Overnight in Bumthang**

## **DAY 10**

### **Ura Sightseeing**

Ura: Proceed to Ura (48 kilometers from Jakar), a valley to the southeast of Jakar. It is believed to have been the home of the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan. Ura is a very beautiful valley with Buddhist monasteries and traditional houses. After lunch, Drive back to Bumthang.

### **Overnight in Bumthang**

## **DAY 11**

Gangtey: After breakfast drive to Gangtey Goempa in Phobjikha valley (3 hrs, 151 kms). Gangtey Goempa overlooks the large green expanse of Phobjikha valley, a glacial valley on the western slopes of the black mountain range.

The valley is an important wildlife center in Bhutan and is the roosting ground of the endangered black-necked cranes that fly there from the Tibetan plateau during the winter months.

### **Overnight in Gangtey**

**DAY 12** Paro: drive from Gangtey to Paro, (3 hrs, 171 kms)

Lunch on the way in Thimphu. Overnight Halt at Paro.

### **Overnight in Paro**

**DAY 13** Paro: drive to Paro airport. Check in airport.

