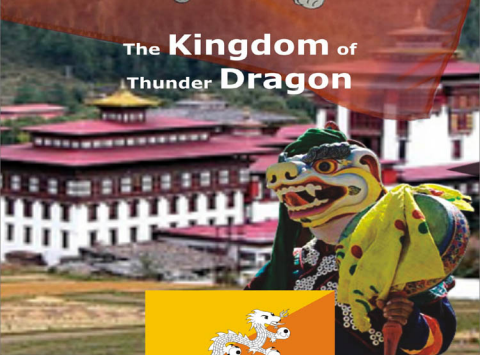




The **Kingdom** of Thunder **Dragon**



Bhutan

Destination SAARC

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A foretaste of Bhutan

Country name: Kingdom of Bhutan

President: King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

Prime Minister: Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk

Government type: Monarchy

Capital: Thimphu

Language: Dzongkha

State Religions: Vajrayana stream of Mahayana Buddhism (Also known as Tantric Buddhism)

Area: 38,394 square kilometers

Population: 634,982

Literacy rate: 59.5%

Currency: Ngultrum (Nu)

Time: GMT/UTC +6:00

Electricity: 230V, 50Hz

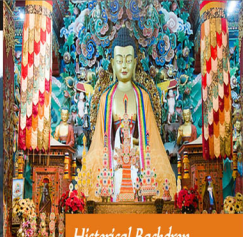
Altitude: between 240 meters and 7541 metres above sea level



Geographical Overview

Location and Size: Landlocked between China and India; total land area 46,500 square kilometers.

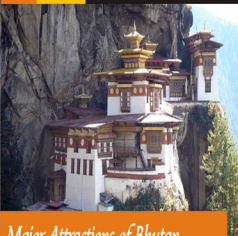
Topography: Rugged, mountainous, snowcapped or glaciercovered terrain in north, part of Himalayas; high mountains in center, southern spurs of Himalayas; foothills and subtropical plains in south. Highest point Kuha Gangri (7,554 meters). Numerous, rapidly flowing rivers largely unnavigable, but provide water for irrigation and hydroelectric-power generation.



Historical Backdrop

Mystery surrounds Bhutan's distant past, as priceless documents were lost in fires and earthquakes. However, legend has it that in the 8th Century AD, Guru Rimpoche (second Buddha) made his trip from Tibet to Bhutan "on the back of a flying Tigress" to subdue the evil spirits that hindered Buddhism. After defeating them he blessed them as guardians of the doctrine introducing Tantric Buddhism to Bhutan. It is believed that the name "Bhutan" is derived from the Sanskrit "Bhotani" meaning "the end of Tibet" or from "Bhutan" meaning highland. Historically the Bhutanese have referred to their country as Druk Yul "Land of the Thunder dragon. Bhutanese refer to themselves as the Drukpa people.

Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan lama of the Drukpa School, arrived in Bhutan in 1616 AD. He introduced the present dual system of religious and secular government, creating and building the system of dzongs throughout Bhutan. Shabdrung unified the country and established himself as the country's supreme leader and vested civil power in a high officer known as the Druk Desi. For two centuries following Shabdrung's demise civil wars intermittently broke out and regional penlops (governors) became increasingly more powerful. This ended when an assembly of representatives of the monastic community, civil servants and the people elected the Penlop of Tsongsa, Ugen Wangchuck, the first king of Bhutan in 1970. The monarchy has thrived ever since and commands the overwhelming support of the people of Bhutan.



Major Attractions of Bhutan

Culture

Bhutan is a rich mosaic of different cultures, traditions, life styles, ethnic groups, languages and belief systems. It is astounding that this country, with the population of just over half a million speaks as many as nineteen different dialects and a few major languages. Diverse as it may seem, yet the Bhutanese socio-culture fabric is well interlaced and harmonized mainly due to the common thread of simple Buddhist values that the people share.

Monasteries and Temples

Isolated from the rest of the city, erected in a valley or hanging against a cliff face, the temples and monasteries of Bhutan have contributed to the country's glorious past. Over the centuries, saints and lamas have supervised their construction. Like in Tibet, the temples in Bhutan are referred as 'lha-khang' (home of the gods) and the monasteries 'gom-pa' (solitary place). The monasteries are basically places of study, with the teaching and training of novices forming an important part of their work.

Rituals and Music

The religious dances, rituals, folk music and dances form an integral part of all celebrations and social activities. No functions begin without a ritual to seek blessings. The Royal Academy of Performing Arts trains professionals in the field of traditional Bhutanese music, dances (both religious and folk) and songs.

Lifestyle

Most of the population lives in small rural villages and supports itself through agriculture, growing crops or breeding yaks; urbanisation, however, is increasing. The Buddhist religion is an important part of life.

Bhutan, the last Mahayana Buddhist Kingdom, is influenced with teachings of this school of Buddhism even today. Spirituality is pervasive even in the urban centres where the spinning of prayer wheels, the chanting of mantras and the glow of butter lamps in the houses are still important features of everyday life.

Textiles and Handicrafts

Bhutanese textiles are renowned for their distinctive patterns inspired by nature and the textiles are now prized among collectors as a rare form of art that is being practiced only among a very small community in the remote kingdom of Bhutan. Because of its importance, weaving receives royal patronage and in order to help keep tradition alive, competitions are held and prize awarded.

Bhutan's arts and crafts also reflect the unique spirit and identity of the Himalayan kingdom. The art of Zorig Chusum or the thirteen arts and crafts of Bhutan remains very much alive today.



Fetes & Festivals

The largest annual festival in Bhutan is the **Tshechu**, an event honoring Guru Rinpoche, through Religious dances performed by the monks as well as by lay people. The dates and duration of the Tshechu festivals vary among dzongkhags (Districts) but they always fall on or around the 10th day of the month in the Bhutanese calendar.

The dances are known as **Cham** and are performed to bless onlookers, to teach them the Buddhist dharma, to protect them from misfortune and to exorcise all evil; the dancers who take on the aspects of wrathful and compassionate deities, heroes, demons, and animals do this. **Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal** and **Pema Lingpa** were main figures who composed many of the dances.

It is believed that merit is gained by attending this Religious festival. The dances invoke the deities to wipe out misfortunes, increase luck and grant personal wishes. Onlookers rarely fail to notice the **Atsaras** or clowns who move through the crowds mimicking the dancers and performing comic routines in their mask with long red noses. A group of ladies perform traditional Bhutanese dances during the intervals between **mask dances**. An auspicious event of the many of the **Tshechus** is the unfurling of the **Thongdrol** from the main building overlooking the dance area. This is done before sunrise and most people rush to witness the moment. Thongdrols are large **Thangkas** or **Religious pictures** that are usually embroidered rather than painted. The word itself means "liberation on sight." It is believed that bad karmas are wiped away simply by viewing it. Apart from its Religious implications, the Tshechu is also an annual social gathering where people dress in their finest clothing and jewelry. A small fair may be organized outside the **Dzong** for those looking for a variety of entertainments.



How to Get There?

Entry & VISA Formalities

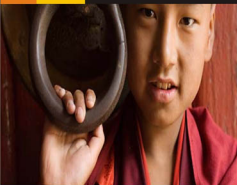
Except for India, Maldives and Bangladesh, all visitors to Bhutan require a visa; all visas are issued from Thimphu; visas are only issued to tourists booked with a local licensed tour operator, directly or through a foreign travel agent. Applications for tourist visas are submitted by the tour operator. Visa clearance from Thimphu must be obtained before coming to Bhutan. Visa clearance takes at least 10 days to process. Air tickets to Bhutan cannot be purchased without visa clearance. Visas are issued for a 15 day period; extensions can be obtained in Thimphu at a cost of Nu.\$10. An airport tax of about US\$12 is levied on departure.

Airport Information

Bhutan's national airline, Druk Air is the only airline that operates in and out of Bhutan. It flies daily and connects the only International airport in Paro district to several destinations: Delhi, Kolkata, Kathmandu, Dhaka, Bangkok. In the winter, Druk Air also operates a helicopter service and can be chartered for special mountain flights for a view of the Himalayan panorama. The helicopter service is also used for rescue operations.

Custom Formalities

The Bhutanese authorities strictly prohibit the export of any religious antiquity or antiques of any type. Cameras, video cameras, computers and personal electronic equipment may be brought into the country but they must be listed on the customs form provided on arrival at Paro and will be checked at departure.



Before leaving for Bhutan

Travelers Essential

Climate

It varies with altitude. Year-round snow in north, heavy monsoon rains in west, drier but temperate central and eastern areas, humid and subtropical in south. Normally, in Bhutan days are warm and nights are quite chilly.

Winter: December-February;

Spring : March-May;

Summer : June-August;

Autumn : September-November.

Health Requirements

Most travelers to Bhutan will need vaccinations for hepatitis A, typhoid fever, and polio, as well as medications for travelers' diarrhea. Travelers to the southern part of the country will need malaria prophylaxis, in conjunction with insect repellents and other measures to prevent mosquito bites. Additional immunizations may be necessary depending upon the circumstances of the trip and the medical history of the traveler, as discussed below. All travelers should visit either a travel health clinic; or their personal physician 48 weeks before departure.

What to wear?

The traditional dress worn by men in Bhutan is gho and women wear kira.

On formal occasions, it is advisable for women to wear long skirts and a blouse, where as for men it is a lightweight or tropical suit or a shirt and tie for the south. In the capital, a full business suit and tie are recommended. Warm woolen clothes are recommended for tourists in the winter and it is advisable to bring light sweaters or jackets even in the summer. Comfortable walking shoes are indispensable to all while trekkers should be equipped with strong boots and medium to heavy sleeping bags.

Currency

Bhutan's unit of currency is the Ngultrum (Nu), which is at par to the Indian Rupee (100 Chetrams = 1 Ngultrum) Most major foreign currencies are accepted. Traveler's cheques, American Express cards and Visa cards are also accepted in certain establishments





When you are in Bhutan

Accommodation

There is a wide variety of accommodation available in Bhutan from the simple, farmhouse stay to the high end resort in some districts. Most tourist hotels are clean and offer simple comforts and culinary fare. Each hotel is designed in the unusual traditional Bhutanese style yet retains its own character and is set in unusual and dramatic locations. All hotels are well connected with telephones, fax machine and Internet.

The Department of Tourism categorizes and monitors the quality of accommodation in the country. For trekking, designated campsites are put in place by the concerned authority. On some trails, you may also stay in farmhouses.

Getting Around

The free health care system in Bhutan is a blend of modern and traditional medicines. The two systems co-exist and are complementary, starting from the basic dispensaries to the national hospitals. Traditional Medicinal Services in Thimphu has its own production unit

Public Holidays (Fixed)

- January 2 Winter Solstice
- January 22 Traditional Day of Offerings
- February 21 & 22 LOSAR (New Years Day)
- April 30 Shabdrung Kuchoe
- May 2 Birth Anniversary of Third King Jigme Dorje Wangchuck
- June 2 Coronation Anniversary of HM King Jigme Wangchuck
- June 3 Lord Buddha's Parinirvana
- June 27 Birth Anniversary of Guru Rinpoche
- July 21 First Sermon of Lord Buddha
- July 27 Death Anniversary of Third King
- September 22 Blessed Rainy Day
- September 18 -22 Thimphu Drupchen (For Thimphu Only)
- September 23 -25 Thimphu Tshechu (For Thimphu Only)
- October 23 Dashain
- November 4 descending days of Lord Buddha
- November 11, 12, 13, Birth Anniversary of HM King Jigme. Singye wangchuck
- December 17 National
- December 18 Meeting of the Nine Evils

Medical Facilities

The free health care system in Bhutan is a blend of modern and traditional medicines. The two systems co-exist and are complementary, starting from the basic dispensaries to the national hospitals. Traditional Medicinal Services in Thimphu has its own production unit and the hospital for the indigenous treatment.



overlooking the highway that fork to the east and south of the country. As the road heads towards Trongsa in central Bhutan, a turn-off below Pelela pass takes you into the magical valley of Phobjikha, home to the rare Black Necked Crane that has made Phobjikha its winter home for centuries. The birds fly in from Tibet in October and November and leave just before spring.

Central Bhutan

Trongsa: elevation 2,316m

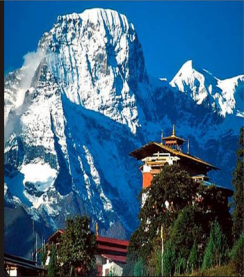
About four hour's drive from Wangduephodrang is the central district of Trongsa, the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family and from where the first two kings ruled the kingdom. The resplendent Trongsa Dzong is lying in the valley centre. Its labyrinth of temples, corridors, offices and living quarters for the monks add up to a masterpiece in Bhutanese architecture preserved through professional restoration in 2004.

Bumthang: elevation 2,600m 4,000 m

Bumthang is often described as the spiritual heartland of the kingdom. There are numerous monasteries and spiritual sites in this charming valley where history and mythology help to bring alive much of Bhutan's culture and traditions. Some of the well-known temples include Kurjey Lhakhang (associated with Guru Rimpoche, who brought Tantric Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet), Jampey Lhakhang (dating from the 8th century) and the historic Jakar Dzong.

Eastern Bhutan

For those with enough time on their hands, venture into Eastern Bhutan for something quite unusual. This is the land of the Sharchhops who speak their own language and nurture their own culture and weave beautiful textiles.



Trashigang: elevation 1,151 m

Trashigang, the largest district of Bhutan, is a 3.5-hour drive from Mongar and 547 km from Thimphu. The historic Trashigang dzong, atop a vertical hill above the Sherichu river, is a fine example of the strategic role that these monastic fortresses played in keeping enemies out in ancient times.

Trashi Yangtse: elevation 1,830m

A 3.5 hour drive from Trashigang is Trashi Yangtse, also home to the Black Neck Crane, and the eastern-most district of Bhutan, bordering the Indian district of Arunachal. Both Bhutanese and tribes across the border enjoy the Chhorten Kora festival in this district.

The Southern Region

The southeastern town of Samdrup Jongkhar is a small border town, six hours drive from Trashigang. With a generally warm weather, the district is ideal for birdwatching.

Phuentsholing:

To the south west lies Phuentsholing, a bustling industrial town that is the southern gateway to India.





Things to do in Bhutan

Adventure tourism

Comprising three tiers from the sub-tropical to the temperate and the alpine, each distinguished by their rich eco-systems, there is no dearth of adventure here. Much of the pleasure of visiting Bhutan is enjoying the breathtaking scenery by **trekking** around the valleys and the mountain gorges. The rivers offer superb trout fishing. The country boasts over 320 varieties of **birds**, including the rare black-necked crane. The Manas Game Sanctuary has a wide **variety of wildlife** (a special permit is necessary). **Archery** is popular and competitions are held frequently providing an opportunity for the visitor to appreciate the skills of the Bhutanese in their national sport.

Dining out in Bhutan

Bhutanese meals are characterized by the hot chili pepper and cheese; put them together and you have the national favorite --Aema datsi (literally chili and cheese). Most restaurants in Bhutan offer the standard Chinese or Indian fare. International cuisine is limited. Always ask what is available and what is in season. There are more restaurants in the capital, Thimphu, and the southern town of Phuentsholing. In the capital, there are a few small cafes where a hot steaming cup of tea or coffee is available with snacks. For the adventure, try a cup of suja (butter tea) that is the local favorite and a great way to warm you up on cold nights. There is also the local brew called arra

(distilled from rice, barley or wheat.) Locally produced beer and whiskey is also available. Whereas, if you go trekking, your tour company will provide all meals made on the spot by an accompanying cook.

Shopping

Bhutan has a small but vibrant cottage industry. Traditional craftsmen use crude tools to make a variety of crafts specifically designed for use in Bhutanese homes rather than for sale in the tourist market although the concept of souvenirs is catching on.

Wood: Wooden bowls, plates, and containers are made mostly by an artisan community in eastern Bhutan using pedal lathes on burl wood of prized wood like rhododendron and Daphne.

Cane, bamboo: Bhutan is famous for its cane Tupperware - baskets known as bangchung that snap together to form a container. Woven bamboo is also used to decorate wood and bamboo containers for alcohol and quivers. Carved and painted wooden souvenirs are available in the shops, the most popular being the eight lucky signs. Hand carved and painted Bhutanese tables (chodrums) are available for those who can carry heavier souvenirs.

Thangka painting: Bhutanese scroll paintings known as Thangkas are stylized paintings depicting religious imagery.

Bhutanese stamps: Attractive stamp albums, stamp sheets and a variety of first day covers are available at the Thimphu General Post Office and handicraft shops around the country.

Shopping hours are unpredictable; Shops are open on all days from 8:30am - 8:00 pm except on Tuesday and Wednesday, depending on the location.





Some Do's & Don'ts to Follow

- Request permission before taking photographs of people, events, or objects. Inside the premises of temples, dzongs or monastery, taking photo is not permitted. But taking photograph is only permitted from court yard area
- Please do not climb on or do anything that would show lack of respect to all Buddhist artefacts or antiques, large or small, ruined or not, are regarded as sacred. Purchase of religious items especially antiques is prohibited
- Please wear shirts with collars, preferably with long sleeves. It is safer to dress up in "smart casual".
- Please take off hats while entering a dzong, temple or monastery. Shorts/half pants are not permitted while entering a dzong, temple or monastery.

The Bhutanese way

- Please remember not to point with a single finger but use an upturned flat extended hand especially to indicate a sacred object or place.
- Please do not walk over any clothes, books, hearth or materials left open in religious sites.
- Please refrain from smoking or drinking alcohol while visiting religious places
- Please always walk in clockwise direction while visiting religious places or objects like temples, monasteries, stupas (chortens), prayer flags, etc.
- Please refrain from touching any ritual objects or mural paintings.

For more information contact:

Department of Tourism, P.O Box No 126, GPO
Thimphu, Bhutan. Tel: - +975 2 323251/323252

Email: dot@tourism.gov.bt

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