

Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Tour operators should book you into Department of Tourism (DOT) approved hotels. Since most visitors effectively pay the same rate whether staying in a budget or midrange

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

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hotel, it makes sense to ask for the best when you make your travel arrangements. During the high season, particularly at *tsechu* (festival) time, you may not get the hotel you have asked for, and you may be accommodated in a hotel that caters primarily to local travellers. Still, these can be comfortable, though the toilet facilities may not be what you're used to.

The prices in this book are for standard rooms at normal foreign-tourist rates and do not include the usual 10% tax and 10% service charge. For a guide to price ranges used in this book, see the inside front cover.

Hotels

There is a variety of hotels in Bhutan, ranging from simple huts that cater to Bhutanese yak herders to five-star luxury resorts. All rooms in the DOT-approved, midrange hotels in Thimphu, Paro and Phuentsholing have electricity, telephone, private bathroom and hot water. Every hotel has a restaurant that serves buffet meals when a group is in residence and à la carte dining at other times. Restaurants invariably serve alcohol and often have a bar. Several hotels advertise IDD, but this can mean that the phones simply connect to the front desk and the hotel operator will then dial the international number.

All the hotels publish their room rates, which usually just apply to Bhutanese, Indians and project staff. Many have various rates for standard, deluxe or suite accommodation, although the difference between standard and deluxe in most hotels is minimal. When you book a trip, you may specify which hotel you wish, but unless you are particularly charming to the agent, you'll probably get a standard room. If you want fancier accommodation or a single room, you may be asked to pay a little more than the standard tourist tariff. If you are travelling off season you can often pay less for a special room; if it's *tsechu* time, you may pay more. The handful of top-end hotels all provide international-standard accommodation and services and charge a substantial additional cost to the usual tourist tariff.

A confirmed hotel reservation does not always guarantee a booking in hotels as small as those in Bhutan. A large tour group can exert

PRACTICALITIES

- The biweekly national newspaper of Bhutan, *Kuensel* (www.kuenselonline.com) is available on Wednesday and Saturday mornings in English, Dzongkha and Nepali editions. The *Bhutan Times* (www.bhutanimes.com) is a privately owned newspaper published every Sunday in English. The *Bhutan Observer*, the second private newspaper, is published on Fridays in Dzongkha and English. Indian newspapers and magazines are available in Phuentsholing and Thimphu two to three days after publication.
- Bhutan Broadcasting Service (www.bbs.com.bt) broadcasts radio from 4pm to 8pm on the 60MHz band (5030kHz) and FM 96 Monday to Saturday. On Sunday it broadcasts from 10am to 4pm on the 49MHz band (6035kHz) and FM 96. Programmes are in Dzongkha, English, Nepali and Sharchop. The English news is at 11am and 2pm daily. BBS TV broadcasts from 6pm to 11pm daily with news in English and Dzongkha, and additional locally produced programming. Cable companies serve Thimphu and other large towns with feeds from satellite broadcasts including the BBC, CNN and a vast array of Hindi channels.
- The voltage in Bhutan is the same as India: 230V, 50 cycles AC. Bhutan uses the standard Indian round-pin sockets and multi-adapters are available in Thimphu.
- The metric system is used throughout the country. In villages, rice is sometimes measured in a round measure called a *gasekhorlo*. There is a scale called a *sang* that is used for butter and meat.

a powerful influence and you may discover that there is an extended negotiation taking place between your guide and the desk clerk when you check in. Don't worry; *something* will be arranged.

It's *cold* at night in Bhutan and central heating is rare. In Thimphu and Paro there are small electric heaters, and in Bumthang many hotel rooms are heated by a wood stove called a *bukhari*, which often has a pile of rocks on the top to retain the heat. All hotels provide sheets, blankets or quilts, and a pillow. Unless you are trekking, you won't need to carry bedding or a sleeping bag, but in the winter you may find yourself wearing all your clothing to bed. Hotel pillows tend to be extra firm and mattresses on the thin side.

If there is an electric water heater (called a geyser) in the room, turn it on as soon as you check in. The water flasks in hotel rooms are not always filled, and there is no assurance that the water they contain is boiled (see p272).

Some hotels have a *dotsho* (traditional hot-stone bath), a simple wooden structure containing water warmed with fire-heated rocks. The red-hot rocks tumble and sizzle into the water and a grill protects the bather's skin. Expect to wait up to two hours for the rocks to heat up and to pay extra for the experience.

ACTIVITIES

There are lots of things to do in Bhutan after you have had your fill of dzongs and temples, and several tour operators are developing activities in an effort to convince visitors to stay longer and discover more about Bhutan. For details of companies offering activity-based tours in Bhutan, see p262.

There are many possible day hikes, particularly in Thimphu, Paro and Bumthang, and these are described in the relevant destination chapters. For serious treks ranging from three to 25 days, see the Trekking chapter (p199). Horse riding is available in Paro and on some treks, but remember the Bhutanese adage: It is not a horse that cannot carry a man uphill, and it is not a man who cannot walk downhill.

Bird-Watching

Bhutan is rightly celebrated for its wintering populations of the vulnerable black-necked crane, but with over 600 recorded species and a spectacular range of habitats (see p87) this tiny country is a bird-watchers' paradise.

Although several companies specialise in bird-watching tours (see p262), Bhutan's plentiful mature forests and lack of hunting makes any travel a bird-spotting opportunity.

General wildlife viewing is generally confined to Royal Manas National Park in the south, currently off-limits because of the dangers posed by separatist groups in India,

but the closure was under review at the time of research.

Fishing

Fishing with lure or fly for brown trout is possible in many rivers, though it is frowned upon by many Bhutanese. A licence (Nu 500 per day) is required and fishing is prohibited within 1km of a monastery, temple, dzong or *shedra* (religious school). A closed season applies from October to December and fishing is banned on many religious days throughout the year. The most popular lure is the 'Tasmanian Devil' available in general shops in Thimphu. Yangphel Adventure Travel (www.yangphel.com) operates fly-fishing tours and encourages a 'catch and release' approach.

Golf

There's an international-standard golf course in Thimphu and there are small courses in Haa and Deothang. The Thimphu course is used mainly by Bhutanese and expatriates, though it welcomes tourists playing there. It is popular with Japanese golfers both for the experience and because it's very inexpensive

compared with green fees in Japan. For details see p107.

Cycling

Mountain biking is rapidly gaining popularity with Bhutanese and expats, who have formed the **Bhutan Bicycle Club** (☎ 02-321905; www.bhutanmtb.com), which has mountain bikes for hire (see p107). Some adventure travel companies have organised trips that allow bikers to bring their own cycles and travel throughout Bhutan accompanied by a 'sag wagon' for support. Long journeys are challenging because there's a lot of uphill peddling and approaching vehicles roar around corners, not expecting cyclists. Local cycling excursions in the Paro, Thimphu and Bumthang valleys offer a safer and less strenuous mountain-biking experience. A number of dedicated trails have been developed in Phobjikha (see p153) and Punakha (see p148).

Rafting & Kayaking

Though rafting in Bhutan is in its infancy, those who have scouted the rivers feel that it has the potential for some of the best rafting on earth.

RIVERS FOR RAFTING & KAYAKING

River (chhu)	Location	River section	km	Grade	Recommendation
Amo	Haa	middle & lower	35	III & IV	rafting & kayaking
Bumthang	Bumthang	Thankabi	5	II & III	rafting & kayaking
Dang	Wangdue Phodrang	upper Dang Chhu	3	IV & V	kayaking
Dang	Wangdue Phodrang	middle Dang Chhu	5	IV & V	rafting with an experienced team & kayaking
Dang	Wangdue Phodrang	lower Dang Chhu	5	III	rafting & kayaking
Kuri	Lhuentse	upper run	14	IV & V	kayaking
Kuri	Lhuentse	middle run	20	IV with a couple of V	kayaking
Kuri	Lhuentse	lower run	10	III	rafting & kayaking
Mangde	Trongsa	Ema Datsi Canyon	7	III & IV at medium flow	kayaking
Mo	Punakha	upper Mo Chhu	3	IV & V	kayaking
Mo	Punakha	Sonam's put-in	5	III & IV	rafting & kayaking
Mo	Punakha	lower Mo Chhu	6	I & II	rafting & kayaking
Paro	Paro	Mitsi Zam	10	III & IV	kayaking
Paro	Paro	lower Paro Chhu	7	III with 1 class IV	kayaking
Pho	Punakha	upper Pho Chhu	7	III & IV	rafting & kayaking
Pho	Punakha	lower Pho Chhu	7	III	rafting & kayaking
Puna Tsang	Tsirang	Wakley Tar	15	III & IV	rafting & kayaking
Tang	Bumthang	Mesithang Tang	10	III	kayaking
Upper Wang	Chhuzom	Chhuzom to Tam Chhu	4	IV & V	kayaking
Lower Wang	Tam Chhu	Tam Chhu	4	III	rafting & kayaking

From small alpine runs like the Paro Chhu to the big-water Puna Tsang Chhu, the white water of Bhutan is as diverse as its topography. Since 1997 small groups of paddlers have been exploring 14 rivers and over 22 different runs that vary from class II (beginner with moderate rapids) to class V (expert only).

There are two superb day trips on the Pho Chhu and the Mo Chhu. The trip on the Pho Chhu combines a hike up the side of the river through forest and farmland to the put-in at Samdinka. The raft trip has a couple of class III rapids and ends in a bang with the 'Wrathful Buddha' rapid next to the Punakha Dzong.

The second trip, a very easy scenic float on the Mo Chhu, is suitable for all abilities and is a good introduction for the novice. The run starts about 6km above the Punakha Dzong at the Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten. As the river meanders through the wide valley you float past one of the queen's winter residences, the king's weekend retreat and some beautiful farmland before taking out just below the dzong.

The fees for river rafting are the same as cultural tours and trekking, though there are extra charges for hiring equipment. Presently only one overseas operator, Needmore Adventures (see p263), and one Bhutanese operator, Lotus Adventures (see p263), has trained river guides and equipment for river running in Bhutan.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices open at 9am and close at 5pm in the summer and 4pm in the winter, Monday to Friday. Banks are open from 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday and 9am till noon Saturday. Shops are usually open from 8am to 8pm or 9pm. In Phuentsholing shops are open on Saturday and Sunday, but closed Tuesday. Some restaurants in Thimphu stay open as late as 10pm, but many close earlier. Nightclubs and discos stay open till the early morning on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and most bars are closed on Tuesday – the national 'dry' day. Reviews in this book mention business hours only if different from these standards.

CHILDREN

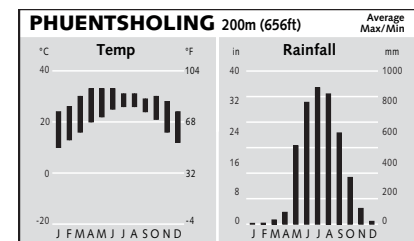
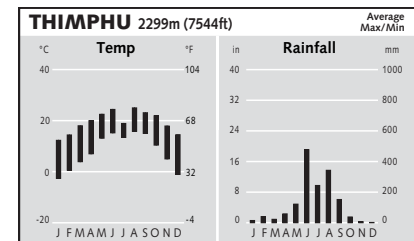
As there are discounts for children travelling in Bhutan, it needn't break the bank if you bring kids along. Up to the age of five, children are free, and kids from six to 12 accompanied by parents or guardians receive a 50% discount on the daily rate. Kids may become

bored with long, monotonous drives, limited availability to TV and little other 'entertainment' available. On the other hand, they will be immediately accepted by local kids and their families, and they could make many new friends. Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* has lots of useful advice and suggestions.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Bhutan is at the same latitude as Miami and Cairo. The climate varies widely depending on the elevation. In the southern border areas it is tropical; at the other extreme, in the high Himalayan regions, there is perpetual snow. Temperatures in the far south range from 15°C in winter (December to February) to 30°C in summer (June to August). In Paro the range is from -5°C in January to 30°C in July, with 800mm of rain. In the high mountain regions the average temperature is 0°C in winter and may reach 10°C in summer, with an average of 350mm of rain. For more on Bhutan's climate see p13.

Rain occurs primarily during the southwest monsoon season from June to September. Bhutan bears the brunt of the monsoon, receiving more rainfall than other Himalayan regions – up to 5.5m a year. During the monsoon, heavy rain falls almost every night; in the day there may be long periods without rain. Low clouds hang on the hills, obscuring views and, if they are too low, forcing the cancellation of flights at Paro airport.



Precipitation varies significantly with the elevation. The average rainfall varies from region to region.

Himalayan regions Less than 500mm per year.

Inner central valleys 500mm to 1000mm per year.

Southern foothills 2000mm to 3500mm per year.

Southern border area 3000mm to 5000mm per year.

COURSES

There are no formal courses offered in Bhutan but your tour operator may be able to arrange programs (meditation, Buddhism, cooking etc) to meet your particular interest. Given sufficient notice, the Dzongkha Development Commission can arrange brief courses and lectures on language and music.

With prior arrangement through your tour operator, **WWF** (www.wwfbhutan.org.bt; see p92) and **RSPN** (www.rspn-bhutan.org; see p87) can arrange lectures and discussion groups on wildlife and environmental issues, and the Folk Heritage Museum (see p104) can provide courses in Bhutanese cooking and paper making.

CUSTOMS

You will receive a baggage declaration form to complete when you arrive in Bhutan. For tourists, the main purpose of this form is to ensure that you re-export anything you bring into the country. List any expensive equipment that you are carrying, such as cameras and portable computers. Customs officials usually want to see the items that you list, and then they endorse the form and return it to you. Don't lose it as you must return it when you leave the country.

Duty-free allowances include 2L of liquor but cigarettes attract a 200% duty upon arrival and your limit is 200 (ie one carton). There are no restrictions on other personal effects, including trekking gear, brought into the country.

Departure formalities are straightforward, but you'll need to produce the form that you completed on arrival and may need to show all of the items listed on it. A lost form means complications and delays. If you lose the form, let your guide know as soon as possible so that special arrangements can be made to avoid any inconvenience.

The export of antiques and wildlife products is prohibited. If you purchase a souvenir that looks old, have your guide clear it as a nonantique item with the **Division of Cultural Properties** (☎ 02-322284; fax 02-323286). Customs authorities pay special attention to religious

statues. It would be prudent to have any such statue cleared, old or not.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Fortunately, travel in Bhutan is still largely immune to the major banes of travel in Asia – theft and begging. It does, however, have some irritations of its own.

Altitude

The maximum elevation that you can reach on a Bhutanese road (3140m in the west and 3750m in the east) is lower than that which causes altitude problems for most people. There are rare individuals who can suffer from altitude problems even at elevations as low as Thimphu (2320m); if you have had previous altitude problems at these elevations, avoid travelling to Bhutan.

Most treks go to extremely high elevations. If you are planning a trek, see p272 for advice about acclimatisation.

Dogs

Those same cute dogs that wag their tails for you during the day turn into barking monsters at night. Don't forget to bring earplugs. There is little danger of dog bites, but occasional rabies outbreaks occur in rural Bhutan, and if you are going trekking, be wary of big dogs guarding properties.

Weather

You are always close to nature in Bhutan, and often this proximity affects your travel schedule, especially Druk Air flights. Even on a cultural tour you will be windblown in towns such as Paro, Wangdue Phodrang and Jakar. Clouds often obscure the mountain views that you made such an effort to see. Rain can turn trails and paths into a sea of mud, and flights are often delayed by bad weather. Leeches inhabit the lower valleys and can be a real irritation in the monsoon season. A rainstorm can turn small streams into torrents, moving huge boulders and smashing bridges.

Winding Roads & Breakdowns

If you venture east of Thimphu, you will spend hours driving on rough, winding roads. Even those who have never been carsick before can get squeamish with the constant bouncing and motion, especially in the back seat of a van or bus. Vehicles do break down, no matter how well maintained they are, and there is

no emergency road service. It's unlikely, but not impossible, for you to be forced to spend a night sleeping in a vehicle at the side of the road, or hitch a ride in a crowded bus to the next town.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It is not possible to apply for a Bhutanese visa through a Bhutanese embassy. All tourist visas must be channelled through a tour company and the Department of Tourism (DOT) in Thimphu, and from there through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Bhutanese Embassies & Consulates

Bhutan does not have a wide network of resident embassies abroad.

Bangladesh (☎ 02-882 6863, 882 7160; fax 882 3939; House No 12 (CEN), Rd No 107, Gulshan Ave, Dhaka 1212)

India (☎ 011-26889807, 26889230; fax 2687 6710; Chandragupta Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi 100021)

Kuwait (☎ 2516640; fax 2516550; Adailiya-Block 3, Essa Abdul Rahman Al-Assoussi St, Jaddah No 32, Villa No 7, Kuwait)

Switzerland (☎ 022-799 0890; fax 799 0899; Palais des Nations, 17-19 Champ d'Avier, CH-1209 Geneva)

Thailand (☎ 02-274 4740; fax 274 4743; 375/1 Soi Ratchadanivej, Pracha-Uthit Rd, Samsen Nok, Huay Kwang, Bangkok 10320)

USA (☎ 212-682 2268; fax 661 0551; 763 United Nations Plaza, 1st Ave, New York, NY 10017)

Embassies & Consulates in Bhutan

Only a handful of foreign countries have an official presence in Bhutan. Bhutan's relations with other countries are handled through its embassies in Delhi and Dhaka.

Bangladesh (☎ 322539; fax 322629; Thori Lam, Thimphu)

India Phuentsholing (☎ 252635, 252992) Thimphu (☎ 322280; www.eoithimphu.org; India House, Zhung Lam)

Korea (☎ 02-323027; fax 323666; PO Box 423 GPO Thimphu; Clocktower Sq, Thimphu) Inside Tashi Tours & Travel.

Thailand (☎ 02-323978; fax 323807; PO Box 1352 GPO Thimphu; Doendrup Lam, Thimphu)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The New Year is called Losar, and is celebrated according to the lunar Bhutanese calendar. Losar usually falls between mid-January and mid-March. To complicate matters further, there are different dates for the New Year in various parts of the country.

On an auspicious day near the end of the monsoon season the people celebrate Blessed

Rainy Day. This is the day when *khandromas* (celestial beings) shower blessings on the earth in the form of rain to wash away bad luck. People wash their hair and shower to help wash off evil and sins.

On the first day of the 10th month the Thimphu *rabdey* (district monk body) moves to Punakha. The procession includes the Je Khenpo (the Chief Abbot of Bhutan), the four *lopons* (senior monks) and the entire monk body. The Khamsum Zilnoen, a sacred image of the Zhabdrung, and other relics are also moved with the monks. Local people line up outside the dzong to get blessed with the image and relics. The *rabdey* returns to Thimphu on the first day of the fourth month.

The Black-Necked Crane Festival in Phobjikha (see p154) is always held on 12 November, the day after the king's birthday.

FOOD

Since most travel in Bhutan is via an all-inclusive package, you can expect to eat most of your meals in your hotel dining room. Most hotels cater to groups and habitually provide buffet-style meals. There is usually a continental dish, and sometimes an Indian, Chinese or Bhutanese dish. There is almost always rice, either white or the local red variety, and dal. If you are in a small group, or have booked your tour directly, you can specify that you want to order from the menu, though sometimes the buffet meals offer a wider selection. Most experienced Bhutan travellers recommend that you stick to Bhutanese or Indian food rather than Western fare.

Drinks, including mineral water, are usually charged as extras, and payment is collected at the end of the meal or the following morning when you check out of the hotel.

On long drives or hikes you will not return to your hotel for lunch, and most tour operators arrange packed lunches from the hotel. These tend to be an uninspired collection of sandwiches, boiled potatoes, eggs, fruit and a small carton of juice. Consider a visit to a bakery for some bread or rolls and perhaps buy some biscuits to make your picnic more interesting.

The other way to liven up lunch is to forego the packed lunch and eat in a local roadside restaurant. As long as you stick to cooked food that is served hot, it should be safe to eat.

The food in hotels is often the best in town, but if you want to sample local restaurants, your guide can arrange it so that the tour

FESTIVAL DATES

The following are the festival dates according to the Bhutanese calendar and the estimated corresponding months in the Western calendar. Dates for subsequent years can vary by two weeks or more, especially if they are adjusted to auspicious dates. Before you schedule a trip around a specific festival, check with a tour operator or the **Department of Tourism** (DOT; www.tourism.gov.bt) for the correct dates for the year in which you plan to travel.

Festival	Bhutanese month	Days	Place	Western months
Punakha Domchen	1	5-9	Punakha	Feb/Mar
Chorten Kora	1	13-15	Tashi Yangtse	Feb/Mar
Gom Kora	2	8-10	Tashi Yangtse	Mar/Apr
Chhukha tsechu	2	8-10	Chukha	Mar/Apr
Paro tsechu	2	11-15	Paro	Mar/Apr
Ura Yakchoe	3	13-15	Bumthang	Apr/May
Nimalung tsechu	5	8-10	Bumthang	Jun/Jul
Kurjey tsechu	5	10	Bumthang	Jun/Jul
Wangdue tsechu	8	8-10	Wangdue Phodrang	Sep/Oct
Thimphu tsechu		5-11	Thimphu	Sep/Oct
Tamshing Phala Choepa	8	9-11	Bumthang	Sep/Oct
Thangbi Mani	8	14-16	Bumthang	Sep/Oct
Jampey Lhakhang Drup	9	15-18	Bumthang	Oct/Nov
Prakhar tsechu	9	15-18	Bumthang	Oct/Nov
Ngang Lhakhang Shey	10	15-17	Bumthang	Nov/Dec
Mongar tsechu*	10	7-10	Mongar	Nov/Dec
Trashigang tsechu*	10	8-11	Trashigang	Nov/Dec
Lhuentse tsechu	10	9-11	Lhuentse	Dec/Jan
Trongsa tsechu*	11	9-11	Trongsa	Dec/Jan

* The first day is Cham Ju. *Cham* means 'dance' and *ju* means 'ending'; it is the last day of the rehearsal and the dances are performed without masks.

operator pays for your restaurant meals. For more information see p94.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Like most Asians, the Bhutanese believe that what one does in private is strictly a personal matter, and they would prefer not to discuss such issues. Public displays of affection are not appreciated and everyone, regardless of orientation, should exercise discretion. Officially, male homosexuality is illegal.

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays follow both the Gregorian and lunar calendars and are announced by the **Royal Civil Service Commission** (www.rsc.com.bt). Bhutan's national day is 17 December, the date of the establishment of the monarchy in 1907. Other important holidays are the king's birthday on 11 November and Coronation Day on 2 June. The birth of third king is commemorated on

2 May following the Gregorian calendar, while the anniversary of his death is also a holiday but it follows the lunar calendar and changes from year to year.

INSURANCE

A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is always highly recommended. Most policies will cover costs if you are forced to cancel your trip because of flight cancellation, illness, injury or the death of a close relative. If you have such a problem, travel insurance can help protect you from major losses due to Bhutan's prepayment conditions and hefty cancellation charges.

Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', and these can include motorcycling and even trekking. Read your policy carefully to be sure it covers ambulance rides or an emergency helicopter airlift out of a remote region, or an emergency flight home.

BHUTANESE CALENDAR

The Bhutanese calendar is based on the Tibetan calendar, which evolved from the Chinese. In the 17th century the Bhutanese scholar Pema Karpo developed a new way of computing the days of the week. This caused a divergence between the Tibetan and Bhutanese calendars, and dates do not agree between the two systems.

In the Bhutanese system, months have 30 days, with the full moon on the 15th. The eighth, 15th and 30th days of the month are auspicious. The fourth is also auspicious: Buddha first preached his religious principles on the fourth day of the sixth month.

Years are named according to the Tibetan system of five elements and 12 animals, producing a 60-year cycle. For example, the year 1998 is Earth-Tiger year, and 1974, the year of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's coronation, is the Wood-Tiger year.

The calendar operates according to a very flexible system that allows bad days to be avoided. Astrologers sometimes add a day if it's going to be an auspicious one or lose a day if it's not. They can even change months. In some years, for example, there may be no October because it has been deemed an inauspicious month, or there may be two Augusts because that happens to be a good month.

Bhutanese include the nine months in the womb in the calculation of their age. Everyone considers themselves a year older on Losar, New Year's day, and thus people can be nearly two years younger than they say they are.

If you have to stretch out you may need two seats. Many travel insurance policies include repatriation and evacuation through the worldwide network of International SOS Assistance.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than your having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (they suggest reversing the charges, an impossibility from Bhutan) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

It's a good idea to photocopy your policy in case the original is lost. If you are planning to travel for a long time, the insurance may seem very expensive – but if you can't afford it, you certainly won't be able to afford to deal with a medical emergency overseas.

INTERNET ACCESS

Full international internet service was inaugurated on 2 June 1999, the 25th anniversary of the king's coronation. You can access **Druknet** (www.druknet.bt), Bhutan's internet provider, from any telephone in Bhutan by dialling ☎ 100 or ☎ 101. At the time of research Bhutan had not yet joined any of the global internet roaming agreements, so a local Druknet account was needed to log in. There are internet cafés in many large towns. For more info on internet resources, see p18.

LEGAL MATTERS

Although you will probably notice cannabis growing in any bit of spare dirt, even in the towns, there is not a tradition of use and possession is illegal. Bhutan recently implemented restrictions on smoking and the sale of tobacco products. Don't sell any cigarettes brought into the country. The age of consent is 18 years.

MAPS

There is a dearth of maps on Bhutan and a good map can be hard to source outside the country. Kathmandu bookshops are the best bet for finding a map. **International Travel Maps** (www.itmb.com) produce a 1:380,000 *Bhutan* and *Nepa Maps* produce two maps: 1:380,000 *Bhutan* and *Bhutan Trekking Routes*. The laminated Berndtson & Berndtson 1:500,000 *Bhutan Road Map* is hard to find inside Bhutan but available in Kathmandu and (with some difficulty) elsewhere.

In Bhutan, bookshops sell Thimphu and Paro city maps as well as country maps published by the Survey of Bhutan. The Survey publishes a large 1:250,000 country map that is a composite of Landsat Images overlaid with roads and major towns and district boundaries, as well as several specialised maps showing historical places and points of interest. The *Trekking* chapter (p199) lists details of topographical maps and their availability.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the *ngultrum* (Nu), which is equivalent to one Indian rupee. The ngultrum is further divided into 100 *chetrum*. There are coins to the value of 25 and 50 chetrum and Nu 1 and notes of Nu 1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 and 500. The Nu 1 coin depicts the eight auspicious symbols (see p64), while each note depicts a different dzong. Indian rupees may be used freely anywhere in Bhutan (don't be surprised if you get change in rupees), but ngultrums are not welcome in India.

It is OK with the Bhutanese if you bring a reasonable amount of Indian currency into Bhutan, though Indian regulations prohibit currency export. Consult the inside front cover for exchange rates and p15 for information on costs.

ATMs

At the time of research, the few Bhutan National Bank ATMs could only be used by local customers. The bank does have plans, however, for extending the network and providing credit-card facilities.

Black Market

There is no black market in Bhutan. The Indian rupee is a convertible currency, and the rate is set by market conditions, not by the Indian government. Subject to some restrictions, Indians and Bhutanese can buy dollars officially to purchase goods from abroad. Therefore, there is not much difference between the market rate and the official rate for the Indian rupee, and thus, the ngultrum.

It's sometimes possible to buy Indian rupees at a slightly better rate in Bangkok or Hong Kong and then bring them to Bhutan, but the small gain is hardly worth the hassle.

Cash

If you plan to make a major purchase, for example textiles or art, consider bringing US dollars in cash. Most shops will accept this, and it can save you the hassle of exchanging a large quantity of money in advance and then attempting to change it back if you don't find the exact piece you were looking for.

Credit Cards

You should not count on using a credit card in Bhutan. Credit cards are accepted at the government-run Handicrafts Emporium, a few other handicraft shops and some of the

larger hotels in Thimphu, but these transactions do take time. The credit-card companies charge high fees and the verification office is only open from 9am to 5pm. This precludes paying your hotel bill at night or when you check out early in the morning. The Bhutan National Bank has plans for rolling out point of sale credit-card facilities, so check with your tour agent for the latest news.

Moneychangers

Since your trip is fully prepaid, theoretically you could manage in Bhutan without any local money at all, though you'll probably want some to pay for laundry, drinks, souvenirs and tips.

The exchange counters at the airport, larger hotels and the banks in Thimphu and Phuentsholing can change all the currencies listed on the inside front cover, and sometimes Scandinavian currencies. If you are heading to central and eastern Bhutan, you will do better with more common currencies such as US dollars or pounds sterling. In smaller towns foreign-currency exchange may be an unusual transaction so be prepared for delays.

You may change your unused ngultrums back to foreign currency (though usually only into US dollars) on departure from Thimphu or Paro. Travellers departing via Samdrup Jongkhar don't have this facility at the time of research. You will need to produce your original exchange receipts. Ngultrums are useless outside of Bhutan (except as a curiosity).

Bhutan has two banks, the Bank of Bhutan and the Bhutan National Bank, each with branches throughout the country where money can be exchanged. The Bank of Bhutan's main branches are open 9am to 1pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 11am on Saturday, though the branches in Trongsa, Trashigang and Mongar are open on Sunday and closed Tuesday. It also has a branch in Thimphu that stays open later for the convenience of office workers (and travellers).

Tipping

Tipping is officially discouraged in Bhutan, but it's becoming a common practice and it's OK to do so if you want to reward good service.

You will usually be accompanied throughout your visit to Bhutan by the same tour guide and probably the same driver. Though it's against the official DOT policy, these people expect a tip at the end of the trip. Many leaders on group

tours take up a collection at the conclusion of the trip and hand it over in one packet. With a large group this can be a substantial amount and the practice has created high expectations on the part of Bhutanese guides.

If you've been trekking, it's appropriate to tip the guide, cook and waiter. Horsemen also expect tips, but this can be minimal if they are the owners of the horses or yaks and are making money by hiring out their animals. The stakes go up, however, if they have been especially helpful with camp chores and on the trail.

Travellers Cheques

You can cash travellers cheques at any bank, most hotels and the foreign-exchange counter at the airport. There are bank charges of 1% for cheque encashment. You should carry only well-known brands such as American Express, Visa, Thomas Cook, Citibank or Barclays. There is no replacement facility for travellers cheques in Bhutan.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO Film & Equipment

A limited supply of colour print film is available in Bhutan and is sold in shops throughout the country. If you are shooting transparencies, bring all your film with you, as slide film is not readily available. Memory cards are still hard to find, but you will have no problem finding an internet café in Thimphu that can burn digital images to a CD.

There are colour-printing facilities in Thimphu and Phuentsholing. **Kuenphen Colour Lab** (☎ 02-324058; Norzin Lam) in Thimphu has an automatic machine. No lab in Bhutan has facilities to process colour slides.

Many of the dzongs and mountain peaks are best photographed at a distance with a telephoto lens. Bear in mind that there will be little or no opportunity for photography inside buildings, therefore you don't need to organise a flash attachment and tripod for that purpose. A polarising filter will help make your mountain pictures more dramatic by increasing the contrast between the sky and the white peaks and clouds. Carry spare batteries, as these are hard to find in rural Bhutan.

In Thimphu the **Sony Shop** (☎ 02-324414; Norzin Lam) below the NT Hotel and **Jimmy Bros Stationery** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 02-323388; Clocktower Sq) sell blank video cartridges. Grab a copy of Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography* for tips and advice.

Restrictions

Bhutan is generally liberal about photography by tourists. There are a few places with signs prohibiting photography such as the telecom tower above Thimphu and it would also be prudent to refrain from taking pictures of military installations.

There are no restrictions on photographing the outside of dzongs and goembas, but photography is *strictly* prohibited inside goembas and lhakhangs. There are several reasons for this. One is that tourists in the past have completely disrupted holy places with their picture taking. Another is the fear that photos of treasured statues will become a catalogue of items for art thieves to steal. And thirdly, some early tourists made photographs of religious statues into postcards that were then sold, which is unacceptable to the Bhutanese religious community.

During festivals you may enter the dzong courtyard where the dances take place. This provides an excellent opportunity to photograph the dzongs, people and local colour.

Remember, however, that this is a religious observance and that you should behave accordingly. Use a telephoto lens without a flash. Don't intrude on the dance ground or on the space occupied by local people seated at the edge of the dance area. If you do end up in the front row, remain seated.

There is an extensive set of rules and restrictions, including payment of royalties, for commercial movie making in Bhutan. DOT publishes a booklet that details all these rules.

Photographing People

Always ask permission first. Bhutanese people are naturally shy but will usually allow you to take a photograph, especially if you ask them first. Many people, especially children, will pose for you, and a smile or joke will help to make the pose a little less formal. Remember that almost everyone understands English, even if they are too embarrassed to try to speak it.

After you take a picture, many people will write down their address so that you may send them a copy. Don't take pictures of people unless you are prepared to honour your promise to send a copy (many people leave their best intentions at Paro airport on their way home). Don't photograph a member of the royal family, even if you happen to be at a festival or gathering where they are present.

POST

Postal Rates

Airmail postage rates for the first 20g of ordinary (nonpackage) mail are Nu 20 for most countries (Nu 4 for India, Nepal and Bangladesh).

Sending Mail

You can send mail from hotels and post offices. The mail service from Bhutan is reliable, and no special procedures are necessary. It would be better, however, to avoid sending important letters, money or film through the mail.

If you mail cards or letters from the Thimphu post office, you can buy exotic postage stamps from the philatelic bureau.

Bhutan Post offers both outgoing and incoming Expedited Mail Service (EMS), which is a reliable and fast international mail delivery facility that is cheaper than courier services. It also has a Local Urgent Mail (LUM) service for delivery within Thimphu.

If you have made a purchase and want to send it home, it's best to have the shop make all the arrangements for you. Keep the receipt and let your guide know what you are doing so they can follow up in case the package does not arrive. Send all parcels by air; sea mail, via Kolkata, takes several months.

DHL (☎ 02-324730; dhl@druknet.bt; Thori Lam, Thimphu) provides efficient international courier service to and from Bhutan. There are several smaller courier companies that specialise in service to India.

Receiving Mail

The best way to receive mail is to have it sent to the post office box of the Bhutanese tour operator that is handling your trip. Unless you are on a long trek, you will probably not be in Bhutan long enough for a letter to reach you.

SHOPPING

Bhutan boasts a variety of handicrafts. Until recently, nothing in Bhutan was made especially for sale to tourists and it was possible to find high-quality arts and crafts almost everywhere. Now there is a fair amount of tourist schlock on offer; one of the worst places for this is alongside the trail to Taktshang Goemba. A few creative souvenir items, such as Dragon Kingdom T-shirts, coin purses shaped like *bangchung* (round covered bamboo baskets) and mini *atsara* (clown) masks are available.

There are many handicraft shops in Thimphu and Paro, and most hotels have a shop selling Bhutanese crafts. As you shop, remember that it is illegal (and immoral) to export antiques.

Some of the crafts sold in Bhutan are actually made in Nepal or India; if in doubt, ask. Most shopkeepers will be honest with you, and your guide can probably offer some independent advice.

Thangkas

Thangkas are Buddhist paintings, usually on canvas. Traditionally, they are mounted on a background of brocade and hung by a dowel sewn across the top. You can also buy an unmounted painting and roll it up to take home. If you buy an expensive one and don't want it damaged in your luggage, stop at a hardware shop and get a short length of plastic pipe to protect it. Prices vary tremendously, with small paintings made by students selling for Nu 500 and large mounted *thangkas* starting at Nu 30,000. The price depends on size, quality of work and detail.

Textiles

Hand-woven fabric is the most traditional and useful item you can buy in Bhutan. The quality is almost always good, but the price will vary depending on the intricacy of the design and whether any expensive imported silk was used in the weaving. Hand-woven fabric is sold in 'loom lengths' that are 30cm to 45cm wide and 2.5m to 3m long. Bhutanese sew three of these lengths together to make the traditional dress of *gho* and *kira*. You can find handmade cloth in the Khaling handloom project in eastern Bhutan (see p196), in handicraft shops or in ordinary fabric shops. Also check out the National Textile Museum (p105), the Gagyel Lhundrup Weaving Centre (p113) and the Handicrafts Emporium (p114) in Thimphu. Indian machine-made cloth, in a variety of Bhutanese designs, is also sold at a price far lower than handmade cloth.

Hand-woven woollen cloth is also available. *Yathras* are lengths of rough woollen cloth that can be sewn together to make sweaters, scarves or blankets. A length costs Nu 1000 to 3000, depending on the tightness of the weave and whether wool or cotton threads were used for the weft. The best place to shop for *yathras* is in Zungney in Bumthang's Chhume valley (see p166).

Other Items

Brass statues and Buddhist ritual items, such as prayer wheels, bells, cymbals, trumpets and *dorjies* (stylised thunderbolts) are available from handicraft shops and at the weekend market in Thimphu (p103).

Jewellery and other silver items are best purchased from a reputable shop or from the artisans themselves. Much of the low-priced silverwork sold in Bhutan is actually made in Nepal from white metal.

If you have lots of space in your luggage, you can choose from a variety of carved wooden pieces. Useful items such as picture frames and furniture are available, as are wooden masks similar to those used in the tsechu dances. Wooden bowls, either plain or lined with silver, are a speciality of eastern Bhutan.

Bamboo work is available in most of the handicraft shops and sometimes at roadside stalls. The round *bangchung* baskets, which some people have nicknamed 'Bhutanese Tupperware', can easily be stuffed into a bag or suitcase. The large baskets called *zhim* that are fastened on horses to carry gear on treks are hard to find, but a smaller version is available in many shops. Another unusual item is the large bamboo pipes covered with weaving that are used for carrying local liquor.

Handmade paper is available in large sheets and sometimes is packaged into handy packets of letter-writing size. Several local artists sell their paintings in small art galleries in Thimphu and Paro, and sometimes in hotel shops.

Carpet manufacturing is a recent innovation in Bhutan; traditionally most carpets in Bhutan were imported from Tibet or Nepal.

There is a large factory in Phuentsholing and a small carpet workshop in the Phobjikha valley. Carpets are available in most handicraft shops, and a limited supply is on hand at the workshop behind the Phuntsho Chholing Guest House in Phobjikha (see p154).

Some of Bhutan's minority groups wear 'interesting' hats, which make for curious gifts and conversation pieces. If you look carefully, you can find bamboo hats from Laya, Brokpa yak-hair 'spider' hats and conical bamboo Bumthang hats in shops throughout Bhutan.

Traditional Bhutanese songs can be haunting, if monotonous. The popular songs are an interesting combination of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Indian influences. You can find recordings of both classical and popular Bhutanese songs in most towns. Locally produced CDs cost Nu 200 to 400.

Bargaining

Bargaining is not a Bhutanese tradition, and you won't get very far with your haggling skills here, except with trailside vendors on the hike to Taktshang and in the local handicrafts section of the Thimphu weekend market (p103). Shops, restaurants and hotels all have fixed prices.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Solo travellers attract a hefty surcharge (US\$40) on the daily tariff (see p15 for details) and may find that larger groups get priority at hotels and restaurants. But apart from these inconveniences they should enjoy the personal service and potential flexibility of travelling solo. For issues related to women travellers see p256.

BIZARRE BHUTANESE STAMPS

You probably won't strike it rich by buying postage stamps from Bhutan, but they make a colourful addition to any collection. Some items are issued specifically for sale to collectors by an agency in New York, and others are locally produced by the government itself. There is not much demand for Bhutanese stamps and the value is generally low. However, the number of stamps issued in each series is generally so small that any increase in demand sends prices skyrocketing.

The price of 3D mushroom stamps shot up when topical collectors of mushroom stamps discovered them and exhausted the supply. The issue of playable record stamps sold out quickly in Bhutan, and only a few thousand were produced because of the expense. These are now worth hundreds of dollars a set. Most stamps, however, are available in adequate quantities at a reasonable mark-up over face value. Bhutanese stamps often are auctioned on the internet through eBay.

Some shops sell older issues and handsome souvenir sheets, but the philatelic counter in the Thimphu post office has the largest selection. For more information on Bhutanese stamps check the websites at www.bhutan.org and www.bhutanpost.com.bt.

TELEPHONE & FAX

There are numerous public call offices (PCOs) throughout the country from which you can make STD (long-distance) calls within Bhutan or to India at a standard rate of 30% above the normal tariff. Some PCOs also offer international subscriber dialling (ISD) calls overseas. Most hotels can arrange both local and international calls, though very few have in-room direct-dial facilities.

International telephone rates are Nu 47 per minute with a 10% discount from 6pm to 9am. Domestic direct-dial calls cost Nu 8 per minute, also with a 10% discount from 6pm to 9am. Directory inquiries is ☎ 140 for Bhutan and ☎ 116 for international numbers. Trunk calls may be booked through the operator on ☎ 117 for international numbers, ☎ 119 for domestic numbers and ☎ 118 for calls to India.

Bhutan Telecom (www.telecom.net.bt) also provides satellite phones using the Thuria system, which allows direct dialling from anywhere in the country, even on a trek. Some tour operators have these phones and can rent them, though the charges are higher than for normal calls. Check the website for information of all phone tariffs from satellite to mobiles.

Fax

Nearly all hotels and some PCOs have facilities to send and receive faxes. Tour operators in Bhutan rely on email for most of their communications, but will use fax for documents such as visa authority letters if they don't have a scanner.

Mobile Phones

You can buy a pre-paid mobile phone kit (SIM card and phone number) from numerous outlets. That is, when demand doesn't outstrip supply! As B-Mobile keeps expanding it will be easier to get a SIM card in towns other than Thimphu and the arrival of a new service provider in late 2006 will further advance the service. The cost of a B-Mobile SIM is Nu 600 (Nu 400 is the activation charge and then you get a balance of Nu 200). Refills for Nu 100 to Nu 2000 are available.

Phone Codes

The country code for Bhutan is ☎ 975. The international access code is ☎ 00. Local dialling codes:

Bumthang (☎ 03)

Mongar (☎ 04)

Paro (☎ 08)

Phuentsholing (☎ 05)

Samdrup Jongkhar (☎ 07)

Thimphu (☎ 02)

Trashigang (☎ 04)

Trongsa (☎ 03)

TIME

Bhutan time is GMT/UTC plus six hours; there is only one time zone throughout the country. The time in Bhutan is 30 minutes later than in India, 15 minutes later than Nepal, and one hour earlier than Thailand. When it is noon in Bhutan, standard time is 6am in London, 4pm in Sydney, 1am in New York and 10pm the previous day in San Francisco.

TOILETS

Most hotels provide Western toilets and loo paper, though there are some exceptions, particularly in eastern Bhutan. There are very few public toilets so take full advantage of hotel and restaurant facilities before that long drive. There is an excellent pay'n'pee facility outside Paro airport, but the few public loos in Thimphu, near the market and on Norzin Lam, are less salubrious. Most are of the Asian squat variety and toilet paper isn't available, though a container of water may be present.

Keep an eye out for traditional Bhutanese long-drop toilets hanging precariously off the side of the upper story of old houses and goembas. This is a strange hobbyhorse commode featuring a large square pipe leading straight down to a pit. There's an example in the Folk Heritage Museum in Thimphu.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Department of Tourism** (DOT; ☎ 02-323251, 323252; fax 02-323695; www.tourism.gov.bt; PO Box 126, Thimphu) has a very limited amount of literature available. However, it has a comprehensive website and it can refer you to tour operators who can assist with arrangements to visit Bhutan. There is no official government tourist office outside Bhutan.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

A cultural tour in Bhutan is a challenge for a traveller with physical disabilities, but is possible with some planning. The Bhutanese are eager to help, and one could arrange a strong companion to assist with moving about and getting in and out of vehicles. The roads are rough and pavements, where they exist, often

have holes and sometimes steps. Hotels and public buildings rarely have wheelchair access or lifts, and only the newest will have bathrooms designed to accommodate wheelchairs.

For further general information there is a website for and by disabled travellers at www.travelhealth.com/disab.htm.

VISAS

Most countries issue visas from their embassies abroad and stamp it in your passport, but not Bhutan. Visas are issued only when you arrive in the country, either at Paro airport or (if entering by road) at Phuentsholing. You must apply in advance through a tour operator and receive approval before you travel to Bhutan.

All applications for tourist visas must be initialised by a Bhutanese tour operator and are approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thimphu. The operator submits the visa application to DOT in Thimphu. It, in turn, checks that you have completely paid for your trip and then issues an approval letter to the tour operator. With this approval in hand, the tour operator then makes a final application to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which takes up to a week to process the visa.

It's not necessary to fill in a special visa application form. Just provide the following information to the operator in Bhutan: your name, permanent address, occupation, nationality, date and place of birth, passport number and its date and place of issue and date of expiration. If any item is missing the whole process is delayed. Double-check that the information you send is correct; if there are any discrepancies when you arrive in Bhutan, there'll be further delays and complications in issuing the visa.

When the visa clearance is issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it sends a visa confirmation number to the tour operator and to Druk Air. Druk Air will not issue your tickets to Paro until it receives this confirmation number and then rechecks the visa information when you check in for the flight.

The actual visa endorsement is stamped in your passport when you arrive at one of the two ports of entry for tourists. You will receive a visa for the exact period you have arranged to be in Bhutan. If some unusual event requires that you obtain a visa extension, your tour operator will arrange it.

It's surprisingly efficient considering all the time, distance and various levels of bureaucracy involved. When you arrive in Bhutan, the

visa officer will invariably be able to produce your approval form from the file and the visa will be issued on the spot. It's helpful, however, to have the reference number or even better a faxed/emailed scan copy of the visa authority available to aid the immigration officials and Druk Air to find your information quickly.

Visa Extensions

A visa extension for a period not exceeding six months costs Nu 510. Since tourist visas are issued for the full period you have arranged to stay in Bhutan, it's unlikely that you would need a visa extension.

Visas for Indian Nationals

Upon arrival, Indian visitors are issued a 14-day permit, which may be extended in Thimphu. No passport or visa is required, but some form of identification such as a passport, driving licence or voter's registration card is necessary. Indians arriving by road at Phuentsholing need five photos: three for the Indian certificate and two for the Bhutanese permit. Those arriving by air need two photos for the arrival permit in Paro.

Visas for Neighbouring Countries

INDIA

Nationals of most countries need a visa to visit India. If you are travelling overland to or from Bhutan via the border post in Phuentsholing you will need an Indian visa.

The government of India strongly prefers that you obtain your Indian visa in the country that issued your passport. It's usually a simple task to get your Indian visa before you leave home, but it's complicated to get one overseas. It is possible to obtain a seven-day transit visa overseas if you have confirmed flights in and out of India and can produce the appropriate tickets. Otherwise, you must pay a fee to the overseas embassy to send a fax to the Indian embassy in your own country and wait up to a week for a reply.

Tourist visas are issued for six months, are multiple entry, and are valid from the date of issue of the visa, not the date you enter India. This means that if you first enter India five months after the visa was issued, it will be valid for one month.

NEPAL

Visas for Nepal are available on arrival at Kathmandu airport or at land border crossings,

including Kakarbhitta, the road crossing nearest to Bhutan. Normal visas are valid for 60 days. If you are making a side trip to Bhutan from Kathmandu, get a double-entry visa the first time you arrive in Nepal. You can obtain a visa for Nepal in advance from embassies abroad or from the Nepali embassy or consulate in the gateway cities of Bangkok, Delhi, Dhaka or Kolkata.

Travel Permits

RESTRICTED-AREA PERMITS

All of Bhutan outside of the Paro and Thimphu valleys is classified as a restricted area. Tour operators obtain a permit for the places on your itinerary, and this permit is checked and endorsed by the police at immigration checkpoints strategically located at important road junctions. The tour operator must return the permit to the government at the completion of the tour, and it is scrutinised for major deviations from the authorised program.

There are immigration checkpoints in Hongtsho (east of Thimphu), Chhukha (between Thimphu and Phuentsholing), Rinchening (above Phuentsholing), Wangdue Phodrang, Chazam (near Trashigang), Wamrong (between Trashigang and Samdrup Jongkhar), and in Samdrup Jongkhar. All are open from 5am to 9pm daily.

PERMITS TO ENTER TEMPLES

Tourists are allowed to visit the courtyards of dzongs and, where feasible, the *tshokhang* (assembly hall) and one designated lhakhang in each dzong, but only when accompanied by a licensed Bhutanese guide. This provision is subject to certain restrictions, including visiting hours, dress standards and other rules that vary by district. Permits are issued by the National Commission for Cultural Affairs and all the necessary paperwork will be negotiated by your tour company. If you wish to know which dzongs and goembas are included in your itinerary, or you wish to make specific requests, contact your tour company well in advance. If you are a practising Buddhist, you may apply for a permit to visit certain dzongs and religious institutions usually off limits. The credibility of your application will be enhanced if you include a letter of reference from a recognised Buddhist organisation in your home country.

Dzongs are open to all during the time of a tsechu, when you may visit the courtyard, but not the lhakhangs.

VOLUNTEERING

Bhutan is selective about the type of projects it wants in the country and disdains indiscriminate assistance. Each donor or charitable agency is limited to specified projects or activities, and is allowed only a certain number of volunteers. The opportunities for volunteer work in Bhutan are therefore limited. Americans will find it difficult to get a position because the US Peace Corps does not have a Bhutan programme.

The UN has numerous programmes in Bhutan, all coordinated through the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Different agencies feed into the programme.

UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)

UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco)

UN Volunteers (UNV)

World Food Program (WFP)

Other agencies that operate programmes in Bhutan include the following:

ACB (Austria)

Danida (Denmark)

GTZ (Germany)

Helvetas (Switzerland)

JOCV & JICA (Japan)

Save the Children

SNV (Netherlands)

VSA (New Zealand)

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women, both foreign and Bhutanese, are not usually subject to harassment and do not need to take any special precautions. Men have a reasonably liberated attitude towards their relations with women. There are several opportunities for misunderstanding if you don't make your intentions clear from the very outset. Female travellers should be aware that romantic liaisons between tourists and Bhutanese guides are quite common. You might also be invited to a 'party' at the home of a Bhutanese male, and discover too late that you are the only guest.

For information on women's groups and the status of Bhutanese women, see p53.

Transport

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

There are only two entry points to Bhutan open to foreigners. Most travellers arrive by air at Bhutan's only international airport in Paro. The alternative is to travel through the Indian state of West Bengal and enter Bhutan by road at Phuentsholing on the southern border of Bhutan. At the time of research, it was possible for foreigners to depart but not enter Bhutan via Samdrup Jongkhar in the east of the country. Furthermore, unless you are an Indian national, foreigners are required to fly in or out of Bhutan using Druk Air, the national carrier. Most travellers will choose to fly both routes.

Passport

You need a passport to enter Bhutan and its neighbouring countries. You should ensure that it has sufficient empty pages for stamps, especially if you are travelling via India or Nepal. If your passport has less than six months of validity left, it is worth getting a new one, because many countries in this region will not issue visas to persons whose passports are about to expire.

Keep your passport safe. No country other than India has the facility for issuing a replacement passport in Bhutan. If you lose your passport, you must travel 'stateless' to another country to get it replaced. You should

carry some additional form of identification and a photocopy of your passport to help in such an event.

For details of how to organise a Bhutanese visa, see p255.

AIR Airports & Airlines

Bhutan has one airport, **Paro** (PBH; ☎ 08-271423) and one airline, Druk Air.

The schedule changes by season, but normally there are three flights per week from New Delhi (via Kathmandu) and a daily flight from Bangkok via Dhaka or Kolkata, depending on the day of the week. To allow for extra visitors to the Thimphu *tsechu* (festival) in October and the Paro *tsechu* in April, the airline usually provides extra flights.

Reconfirm your Druk Air flight with your tour operator a few weeks before departure to ensure that the schedule has not changed, and also check the flight time the day before your departure. Druk Air is quite good about announcing schedule changes at least a week in advance in *Kuensel* and on BBS TV. Check in early for Druk Air flights as they occasionally depart before the scheduled time, especially if the weather starts to change for the worse. Flights are often delayed because of weather and Druk Air recommends that you travel on nonrestricted tickets and allow at least 24 hours transit time with your connecting

THINGS CHANGE

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change: prices for international travel are volatile, routes are introduced and cancelled, schedules change, special deals come and go, and rules and visa requirements are amended. You should check directly with the airline or a travel agency to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

flight in order to minimise the complications of delays. When flights cannot land in Paro there is no charge for the unscheduled tour of Bagdogra, near Siliguri, or Kolkata.

There are only a few aircraft that can operate on a runway that is as short and high as Paro's. All landings and takeoffs in Paro are by visual flight rules (VFR), which means the pilot must be able to see the runway before landing, and see the surrounding hills before takeoff. No flights can be operated at night or in poor visibility. When Paro valley is clouded in, flights are delayed, sometimes for a few days. When this happens your tour program will have to be changed and everything rebooked. The up side of such a delay is that you can probably put some spontaneity into your schedule in Bhutan and make a few modifications as you go, depending on what you find interesting.

Druk Air is not allowed to issue tickets to Paro for foreign visitors until they receive a 'visa clearance' from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thimphu. When the visa is authorised, the information is entered into the computer record for your reservation even though the actual visa will not be issued until you arrive at Paro airport. Druk Air will issue your ticket once it receives this number. For

this reason, it's difficult to get tickets for Paro flights issued along with your other international air tickets.

Because Druk Air has no interline agreements with other carriers, your ticket to Paro will be separate from your other international tickets. This means you cannot check your baggage all the way through to Paro via a connecting flight. You will need to reclaim your baggage and recheck it at the Druk Air counter. Similarly, when you depart from Bhutan, you can only check baggage as far as you are travelling with Druk Air, not all the way through to your final destination.

It is useful to have a photocopy of the visa clearance, or at least the visa number, to expedite the visa process.

In Bhutan contact **Druk Air** Paro (☎ 08-271856; fax 271861; www.drukair.com.bt; Nemizampa, Paro) Thimphu (☎ 02-322215; fax 322775; Chang Lam Plaza, Chang Lam, Thimphu).

Overseas offices include:

Aeroglobal (☎ 852-2868 3231; fax 2845 5078; RM, 22-24, New Henry House, 10 Ice St, Hong Kong)
Danfè Travel Centre (☎ 01-4239988, airport office ☎ 4471712; Woodlands Hotel; Durbar Marg, Kathmandu)
Druk Air Corporation India (☎ 033-240 2419, airport office ☎ 511 9976; fax 247 0050; 51 Tivoli Court, 1A Ballygunge Circular Rd, Kolkata); Thailand (☎ 02-535

1960; fax 535 3661; Room 2327, Central Block, Bangkok International Airport, Bangkok)

Druk Air Corporation Ltd (☎ 011-5653207, 5652011, ext 2238; Indira Gandhi International Airport, Terminal Bldg, New Delhi, India)

Mams Aviation (☎ 02-986 2243; fax 882 8439; mams@bdmail.net; 33 Gulshan Ave Rd No 45, Gulshan-2, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh)

Oriole Travels & Tours (☎ 02-237 9201; fax 2379200; oriole@samart.co.th; 5th fl Skulthai Suriwong Tower, 141 Suriwong Rd, Bangkok 10500, Thailand)

Unique Air Travels (☎ 033-2474333; fax 2476167; G2, Circular Centre, 222 AJC Bose Rd, Kolkata 700017, India)

Yale Air Service (☎ 02-26523362; fax 2643 9614;

Hangang Bldg, Yangcheon-Gu, Seoul, Korea)

Tickets

Because there is no competition with other airlines for flights to Paro, Druk Air fares are expensive. Check the latest fares at www.drukair.com.bt. There are no discounts or student fares except for citizens of Bhutan. The Druk Air rules say that if fares are increased after the ticket is issued, they may collect the difference when you check in.

Thai International can issue tickets on Druk Air; the Bangkok offices know how to do this, but most of the overseas offices are not familiar with the procedures. Once your Bhutanese agent has confirmed the flight and the visa authority has been issued, allow another week for the reservation information to make its way to Thai International's computers. You'll probably still have to communicate several times with your agent in Thimphu to get Druk Air to send a confirmation message to Thai.

Many overseas agents that arrange groups to Bhutan have the tickets issued in Kathmandu, Bangkok or Delhi. A local representative waits at the Druk Air counter to deliver the tickets and check you in for your flight. If you have booked directly with a Bhutanese tour operator, you can send payment for the air fare directly to the agent in Thimphu as a separate bank transfer, not as part of the payment for the tour. The agent can then issue the Paro ticket and mail or courier it to you.

You will need to buy a ticket to and from the place where you will connect to Druk Air. Bangkok is the best place to connect if you are coming from North America, Australia or Asia. Delhi is the best place to connect if you are coming from Europe or the Middle East. A connection via Kathmandu will give you a taste of the Himalaya and of Tibetan

Buddhism before you fly to Bhutan (but you might find all the window seats taken by passengers who embarked in Delhi). Other connections via Kolkata or Dhaka are possible, but these are off the routes of direct flights for major airlines, and few discounted air fares are available to these places. The airport tax on departure from Paro is Nu 500, which is included in the price of the ticket.

Africa

There are plenty of flights between East Africa and Mumbai. From Mumbai you can make your way to Delhi or Kathmandu to connect to Paro with either Ethiopian Airlines, Kenya Airways, Air India or Pakistan International Airlines (PIA; via Karachi). **STA Travel** (www.statravel.co.za) and **Rennies Travel** (www.renniestravel.com) have offices throughout southern Africa.

Asia

Bangkok and Hong Kong are discount-ticket capitals of the region. Be wary of bucket shops and ask the advice of other travellers before buying a ticket. **STA Travel** (Bangkok ☎ 02-236 0262; www.statravel.co.th; Hong Kong ☎ 27361618; www.statravel.com.hk; Singapore ☎ 67377188; www.statravel.com.sg) has branches throughout Asia. In Japan try **No 1 Travel** (☎ 03-32056073; www.no1-travel.com).

Australia

Two well-known agencies for cheap fares are **STA Travel** (☎ 1300 7333 035; www.statravel.com.au) and **Flight Centre** (☎ 133133; www.flightcentre.com.au), both with offices throughout Australia. Quite a few agents specialise in discount air tickets, some advertise cheap air fares in the travel sections of the major weekend newspapers. For online bookings, try www.travel.com.au.

Canada

From Canada most flights to Delhi are via Europe but reasonable fares to Asia are also available from Vancouver. Canadian consolidators' air fares tend to be about 10% higher than those sold in the USA. **Travel CUTS** (☎ 800-667 2887; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency and has offices in all major cities.

Continental Europe

From Europe, travellers will need to get to Delhi where they can connect with flights up to Bhutan. Although London is the best for good fare deals, most major European cities have fairly competitive deals via the Middle East.

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

THE FLIGHT FROM KATHMANDU TO PARO

The Druk Air flight from Kathmandu to Paro provides the most dramatic view of Himalayan scenery of any scheduled flight. (Get a window seat on the left if you can.) After the plane climbs out of the Kathmandu valley a continual chain of peaks appears just off the left wing. The captain usually points out Everest (a black pyramid), Makalu (a grey chair-shaped peak) and Kanchenjunga (a huge massif), but if you have trekked in Nepal and are familiar with the mountains you can pick out many more. The elusive Shishapangma (8013m) is visible inside Tibet. Other easily recognisable peaks are Gauri Shankar (7185m), with its notch shape, Cho Oyu (8153m), Nuptse (7906m), with its long ridge, Lhotse (8501m) and Chhاملang (7319m). With a sharp eye, you can even spot Lukla airstrip and the town of Namche Bazaar at the foot of Khumbila (5761m) in Nepal.

When you pass Kanchenjunga, look for the dome-shaped peak on the western skyline. That is Jannu (7710m), which some French climbers have described as a 'peak of terror'; the Nepalis have renamed it Khumbakarna. Once past Kanchenjunga, the peaks are more distant. This is the Sikkim Himalaya; the major peaks, from west to east, are Chomoyummo (6829m), Pauhunri (7125m) and Shudu Tsenpa (7032m).

As the plane approaches Paro you may be able to spot the beautiful snow peak of Jhomolhari (7314m) and the grey ridge-shaped peak of Jichu Drakye (6989m). The plane then descends, often through clouds, into the wooded valleys of Bhutan.

The captain may announce that you are about to see the mountains closer than you have ever seen them before. He's not joking. Depending on the approach pattern that day, you may drop into the Paro valley and weave through the hills, with goembas and prayer flags on the hillsides above. If you are on the left side of the plane, look for Taktshang Goemba and Paro Dzong as you descend towards the airport, before using almost the entire 1830m of the runway to stop. On other occasions you may overfly the airport, then bank, skim over a few tree-covered ridges and the roofs of houses, and make a gut-wrenching plunge into the valley before turning for the final approach to the runway.

Airfare (Netherlands; ☎ 020 620 5121; www.airfare.nl)

Anyway (France; ☎ 0892 893 892; www.anyway.fr)

CTS Viaggi (Italy; ☎ 06 462 0431; www.cts.it)

Just Travel (Germany; ☎ 089 747 3330; www.justtravel.de)

New Zealand

STA Travel (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz) and **Flight Centre** (☎ 0508 782 872; www.flightcentre.co.nz) have many branches throughout the country.

UK

As for continental Europe the cheapest fares are usually with Middle Eastern or Eastern European airlines, though Thai International always seems to have competitive fares. Various excursion fares are available from London to both India and Thailand, but you can get better prices through London's many cheap-ticket specialists.

Discount air travel is big business in London. Advertisements for many travel agencies appear in the travel pages of the weekend broadsheet newspapers, in *Time Out*, the *Evening Standard* and in the free magazine *TNT*.

ebookers (☎ 0870 010 7000; www.ebookers.com)

Flight Centre (☎ 0870 890 8099; www.flightcentre.co.uk)

STA Travel (☎ 0870 160 0599; www.statravel.co.uk)

Trailfinders (www.trailfinders.co.uk)

USA

The best connections from the US west coast to Bhutan are via Bangkok. Discount travel agencies in the USA are known as consolidators (although you won't see a sign on the door saying 'Consolidator'). San Francisco is the ticket consolidator capital of America, although some good deals can be found in Los Angeles, New York and other big cities.

American Express Travel (www.itn.net)

Expedia (www.expedia.com)

STA Travel (☎ 800 781 4040; www.statravel.com)

Travelocity (www.travelocity.com)

LAND

Unless you are an Indian national, the Department of Tourism (DOT) rules require that you either enter or exit Bhutan on a Druk Air flight. This limits the overland option to travelling one direction by air and the other by land, perhaps visiting Darjeeling and Sikkim en route.

Border Crossings

The two border crossings from India into Bhutan that are permitted to foreigners are at Phuentsholing, on the border with the Indian state of West Bengal, and at Samdrup Jongkhar, on the border with the state of Assam. At the time of research, foreigners could only use the Phuentsholing border crossing for entering Bhutan. Foreigners could depart but not enter via Samdrup Jongkhar.

India

TO/FROM PHUENTSHOLING

If you are travelling to or from Bhutan by land, all roads lead through Siliguri, West Bengal, the major transport hub in northeast India. Heading into India, you can make road connections from Phuentsholing or Jaigaon (just across the border) to the train station in Siliguri (169km, six hours) or the airport in Bagdogra. From Siliguri there are convenient connections to Kolkata, Delhi or the Nepali border at Kakarbhitta. You can also travel on to the Indian hill stations of Kalimpong, Gangtok and Darjeeling. Bhutanese vehicles may travel freely in India and a Bhutanese tour operator can easily arrange a vehicle to any of these destinations. There are also taxis and shared hire cars available in both Phuentsholing and Siliguri.

The best places to stay in Jaigaon are these air-conditioned hotels:

Hotel Anand (☎ 03566-63783, 03566-263290, 263990; ashokagarwall@hotmail.com; M.G. Rd; s/d Rs 300/375-1000) You can get a double with air-con for Rs 1000.

Hotel Kasturi (☎ 03566-363035; fax 263254; N.S. Rd; s/d Rs 300/375-1000) Next to the immigration checkpoint.

Several Bhutanese transport companies operate a direct bus service twice a day between Siliguri and Phuentsholing; buses leave at 8am and 2pm and cost Rs 60 for the 3½-hour journey. In Siliguri the booking office is on Tenzing Norgay Rd (also known as Hill Cart Rd), opposite the Shree Punjab Hotel. You can sometimes find Bhutanese taxis (yellow-roofed minivans with numberplates beginning with 'BT') looking for a return fare; you might buy a seat for Rs 200, but usually you will have to charter the whole taxi for about Rs 750. Indian bus companies also operate services between Siliguri and Jaigaon on the Indian side of the Bhutanese border.

The gate between Phuentsholing and Jaigaon closes at 9pm for vehicles, but people can cross on foot until 10pm.

Foreigners

Don't forget to get your passport stamped when leaving India. The Indian immigration office, open 24 hours, is in a compound on the east side of the main road in the centre of Jaigaon, next door to the Hotel Kasturi and about 400m south of the Bhutan entrance gate. (There is a plan to relocate the office.) If your transport has already deposited you in Bhutan, you can simply walk back across the border to complete the paperwork.

To obtain a Bhutanese visa, foreigners need to present their passport, two photos and a US\$20 fee to the visa officer in the *drungkhag* (subdistrict) office near the east end of town. The visa is issued here, but the arrival details will be stamped in your passport when you pass the immigration checkpoint at Rinchending, 5km away.

Foreigners may cross back and forth across the border during the day but are required to leave by 10pm unless staying in a hotel – a useful facility in case you neglected to complete Indian departure formalities before you crossed into Bhutan.

Indian Nationals

At the time of research Indian nationals needed a total of five photos, to fill in two copies of a form and present two photographs and photocopies of an identification document such as a driving licence or voter card to the office of the **Indian embassy** (☎ 05-252635, 252992; India House, Zhung Lam; ☎ 9.30-11.30am & 3.30-5pm Mon-Fri), near the post office in Phuentsholing. You then receive a request form to be presented to the Rinchending immigration officer along with three photographs. On weekends and holidays when the office is closed, Indian nationals who have either a voter registration card or a passport may go directly to the entry station in Rinchending.

Indian nationals may wander freely into Phuentsholing during the day, but are required to leave by 10pm unless staying in a hotel.

TO/FROM DELHI & KOLKATA

The nearest main-line Indian train station to Phuentsholing is in New Jalpaiguri. From there it's a 12-hour rail journey to Kolkata and a 33-hour trip to Delhi. You can travel by road direct to New Jalpaiguri from Phuentsholing or drive to Siliguri where you can connect to a local train to New Jalpaiguri.

From Siliguri it's easy to arrange a share-taxi or bus to Darjeeling, 77km away, or to Gangtok in Sikkim, 114km away. If you are travelling to Sikkim, arrange a permit in Siliguri at the **Sikkim Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 0353 2512646; Tenzing Norgay Rd; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Sat).

TO/FROM SAMDRUP JONGKHAR

At the time of research foreign tourists were allowed to depart Bhutan at Samdrup Jongkhar, and Indian nationals may enter or leave via Samdrup Jongkhar. It is prudent to check with Bhutanese or Indian authorities on the current status of Assamese separatist groups before you decide to travel by land through Assam.

The primary reason you would want to exit this way is to avoid the long drive back over the mountains to Thimphu after visiting eastern Bhutan. The easiest connection from Samdrup Jongkhar is to overland to Guwahati in Assam and fly to Kolkata, Delhi, Bangkok or Bagdogra or get a train connection to numerous Indian destinations. Due to security concerns, all Bhutanese vehicles have to travel in a convoy as far as Rangiyi (there's no convoy on Thursday or Sunday), 49km from the border. (Indian vehicles face no such restrictions.) Four kilometres from the border there is a border post, open 24 hrs, where you must get a police registration/entry stamp. There is a train station at Rangiyi for connection to Guwahati. Alternatively, it is an 80km, 2½-hour drive from the Bhutanese border all the way to Guwahati. It is then a further 20km from Guwahati to the airport.

Another alternative is a 400km drive through the Indian duars to Siliguri. On this route you could visit Kaziranga National Park, famous for its rhino population, 233km east of Guwahati.

Nepal

Panitanki (aka Raniganj), in northern West Bengal, is opposite the eastern Nepal border town of Kakarbhitta. A long bridge separates the two towns across the Mechi River. Bhutanese tour operators can pick you up or drop you at Panitanki or you can arrange for them to take you to Bhadrapur or Biratnagar to catch a flight to Kathmandu.

Panitanki is only one hour (35km) from Siliguri (India). Buses run regularly on this route (IRs 20) and taxis are easy to arrange (IRs 400). A cycle-rickshaw across the border to Kakarbhitta costs Rs 20. Buses depart Kakarbhitta daily at 5pm for Kathmandu (17 hours, NRs 500), a long rough drive via

Narayanghat, Mugling and the Trisuli River valley. See Lonely Planet's *Nepal* for details of what to see and do along this route.

A better option is to take a one-hour bus or taxi ride from Kakarbhitta to Bhadrapur and take a domestic flight to Kathmandu. There is a larger airport at Biratnagar, a four-hour drive from the border. Several airlines have offices in both towns, but airlines come and go and schedules change frequently. **Jhapa Travel Agency** (☎ 977-23-562020) in Kakarbhitta will be able to book a flight.

TOURS

There are several travel agencies and adventure travel companies that specialise in Bhutan, but most operate their Bhutan trips only as part of a series of programs. In addition to removing the hassle of faxing Thimphu and transferring money, they will also arrange your tickets on Druk Air.

Most group tours to Bhutan fly to Paro together, often collecting their tickets at the check-in counter in Bangkok, Delhi or Kathmandu. The agent should also be able to either recommend a group flight or arrange air transportation, hopefully at a reasonable rate, on flights that they have prebooked to the connecting point for the flight on to Paro.

The following tour and adventure travel companies organise overland and cultural tours as well as treks in Bhutan. Their group treks are escorted by a leader, though some can also organise private trips.

Australia

Peregrine Adventures (☎ 1300 854 444; www.peregrine.net.au)

World Expeditions (☎ 1300 720 000; www.worldexpeditions.com.au)

Continental Europe

Explorer (France; ☎ 01-53 45 85 85; fax 42 60 80 00; www.explorator.fr)

Hauser Exkursionen (Germany; ☎ 089-235 0060; www.hauser-exkursionen.de)

Horizons Nouveaux (Switzerland; ☎ 027-771 7171; www.horizonsnouveaux.com)

UK

Abercombie & Kent (☎ 0845 0700 600; www.abercombiekent.co.uk)

Exodus (☎ 0870 240 5550; www.exodus.co.uk)

Explore Worldwide (☎ 01252-344161; www.explore.co.uk)

Himalayan Kingdoms (☎ 0845-3308579; www.himalayankingdoms.com)

World Expeditions (☎ 0800-074 4135; www.worldexpedition.co.uk)

USA & Canada

Above the Clouds (☎ 802-482 4848; www.aboveclouds.com)

Adventure Center (☎ 800-227 8747; www.adventure-center.com)

Asian Pacific Adventures (☎ 1800-825 1680; www.asianpacificadventures.com)

Bhutan Travel (☎ 800-950 9908; www.bhutantravel.com)

Far Fung Places (☎ 415-386 8306; www.farfungplaces.com)

Geographic Expeditions (☎ 1800-777 8183; www.geoex.com)

Journeys International (☎ 1800 255 8735; www.journeys-intl.com)

Mountain Travel Sobek (☎ 1888 687 6235; www.mtsobek.com)

Wilderness Travel (☎ 1800 368 2794; www.wildernesstravel.com)

Thailand

Oriole Travel & Tours (☎ 02-237 9201; oriole@samar.co.th)

Specialised Tours

Guided mountain-bike tours are arranged by **Bicycle Sambhava** (www.bicyclesambhava.com). Motorcycle trips can be arranged through **Himalayan Roadrunners** (www.ridehigh.com) and **Saffron Road Motorcycle Tours** (www.saffronroad.com).

The only overseas company specialising in river trips in Bhutan is **Needmore Adventures** (☎ 888-900 9091; www.excellent-adventures.net).

Photography enthusiasts should check out the expert-guided itineraries of **Rainbow Photo Tours** (☎ 1800 685 9992; www.rainbowphototours.com). The following companies specialise in tours for twitches (bird-watchers).

Sunbird (☎ 01767-262522; www.sunbirdtours.co.uk)

Wings (☎ 888-293 6443, 520-320 9868; www.wingsbirds.com)

Bhutan-Based Tour Operators

It is relatively easy to make your own arrangements if you choose to use a Bhutanese operator. When tourism was privatised the state-run Bhutan Tourism Corporation was disbanded. Many of the ex-employees used their expertise to set up their own operations, and there are now more than 200 licensed

tour companies. They range from one-person operations to large and professional organisations such as Etho Metho Tours and Treks and Bhutan Tourism Corporation Limited (BTCL), which have fleets of vehicles and, in some places, their own hotel facilities.

The following list includes a selection of the largest companies. For a complete list see the DOT website at www.tourism.gov.bt and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators website at www.abto.org.bt.

Bae-Yul Excursions (☎ 02-324335; fax 323728; www.baeyul.com.bt; PO Box 437, Thimphu)

Bara Lynka Tours and Travels (☎ 02-271 698; fax 272 447; baralynka@druknet.bt; www.baralynka.com; PO Box 1010, Thimphu)

Bhutan Footprints Travel (☎ 02-334960; fax 334961; www.tourbhantravel.com; PO Box 732, Thimphu)

Bhutan Kaze Tours and Treks (☎ 02-326623; fax 323178; wings@druknet.bt; PO Box 715, Thimphu)

Bhutan Mandala Tours and Treks (☎ 02-323676; fax 323675; www.bhutanmandala.com; PO Box 397, Thimphu)

Bhutan Tourism Corporation Limited (BTCL; ☎ 02-324045, 322647; fax 323292; www.kingdomofbhutan.com; PO Box 159, Thimphu)

Bhutan Travel Bureau (☎ 02-321749; fax 325100; www.btb.com.bt; PO Box 959, Thimphu)

Bhutan Travel Service (☎ 02-325785; fax 325786; www.bhutantravel.com.bt; PO Box 919, Thimphu)

Chhundu Travels and Tours (☎ 02-322592; fax 322645; www.chhundu.com.bt; PO Box 149, Thimphu)

Dechen Cultural Tours and Trekking Co. (☎ 02-321358; fax 324408; dechen@druknet.bt; PO Box 818, Thimphu)

Diethelm Travel Bhutan (☎ 02-324063; fax 323894; dwpenjor@druknet.bt; PO Box 666, Thimphu)

Dragon Trekkers and Tours (☎ 02-323599; fax 323314; dragon@druknet.bt; PO Box 452, Thimphu)

Etho Metho Tours and Treks (☎ 02-323162; fax 322884; www.ethometho.com; PO Box 360, Thimphu)

Gangri Tours and Trekking (☎ 02-323556; fax 323322; www.gangri.com; PO Box 607, Thimphu)

International Treks and Tours (☎ 02-326847; fax 323675; www.intrekasia.com/bhutan.htm)

Jamphel Tours and Travels (☎ /fax 02-321111; jamphel@druknet.bt; PO Box 289, Thimphu)

Jojo's Adventure Tours (☎ 1711 0305; fax 02-333940; www.jojos.com.bt; PO Box 816, Thimphu)

Lhomen Tours and Trekking (☎ 02-324148; fax 323243; www.lhomen.com.bt; PO Box 341, Thimphu)

Lingkor Tours and Treks (☎ 02-323417; fax 323402; www.lingkor.com; PO Box 202, Thimphu)

Lotus Adventures (☎ 02-322191; fax 325678; equbhu@druknet.bt; PO Box 706, Thimphu) Whitewater rafting specialist.

Masagang Tours (☎ 02-323206; fax 02-323718; masagang@druknet.bt; www.masagang.com) Tours based in the Ura Valley.

Namey Adventure (☎ 02-325616; fax 324297; namsey@druknet.bt; PO Box 549, Thimphu)

Passage to Himalayas (☎ 02-321726; fax 321727; lekid@druknet.net.bt; PO Box 1068, Thimphu)

Rainbow Tours and Treks (☎ 02-323270; fax 322960; rainbow@druknet.bt; PO Box 641, Thimphu)

Sakten Tours and Treks (☎ 02-323899; fax 323545; saktent@druknet.bt; PO Box 532, Thimphu)

Snow Leopard Trekking Co. (☎ 02-321822; fax 325684; www.snowleopardtreks.com; PO Box 953, Thimphu)

Snow White Treks and Tours (☎ 02-323028; fax 321696; www.snowwhitetours.com.bt; PO Box 112, Thimphu)

Tashi Tours and Travels (☎ 02-323027; fax 323666; bhutantashitours.com; PO Box 423, Thimphu)

Thoesam Tours and Trekking (☎ 02-365101; fax 365073; thoesam@druknet.bt; PO Box 629, Thimphu)

Thunder Dragon Treks (☎ 02-321999; fax 321963; www.thunderdragontreks.com; PO Box 303, Thimphu)

White Tara Tours and Treks (☎ 02-333224; fax 326942; wtara@druknet.net.bt; PO Box 467, Thimphu)

Windhorse Tours (☎ 02-326026; fax 326025; www.windhorsetours.com; PO Box 1021, Thimphu)

Yangphel Adventure Travel (☎ 02-323293; fax 322897; www.yangphel.com; PO Box 236, Thimphu) One of the largest, also specialising in fishing tours.

Yu Druk Tours and Treks (☎ 02-323461; fax 322116; www.yudruk.com; PO Box 140, Thimphu) Bicycling and trekking specialists.

Zhidey Bhutan Tours and Treks (☎ 02-328324; fax 327511; zhidey@druknet.bt; PO Box 841, Thimphu)

All operators in Bhutan are subject to government regulations that specify services, standards and rates. You are quite safe no matter which company you choose, though the large companies do have more clout to obtain reservations in hotels and on Druk Air.

In addition to Etho Metho and BTCL, the largest operators are Yangphel, International Treks and Tours, Rainbow and Gangri.

There are both advantages and disadvantages in dealing with the largest companies. One Bhutanese hotelier suggested that the following companies would be large enough to handle overseas queries, but still small enough that the owner would pay personal attention to your program: Bae-yul, Bhutan Kaze, Bhutan Mandala, Chhundu, Sakten, Tashi, Thunder Dragon, Windhorse, Yodsel and Yu Druk.

Chhundu is renowned for its high-quality personal service, and it's responsible for looking after many VIP clients. Other companies

known for their personal attention and quality service are Lhomen, Namsey, Yu Druk and Bhutan Travel Bureau. Bhutan Kaze and Bhutan Mandala specialise in service to Japanese clients.

If you are planning to go trekking, you might consider one of the companies that specialises in this area. The biggest trek operators are Yangphel, International, Yu Druk, Lhomen, Tashi and Namey.

GETTING AROUND

Because Bhutan has no domestic air service, doesn't yet possess any helicopters and does not have a centimetre of railway track, the only way to see the country is either by foot or by road.

There is one main road: the National Highway, a 3.5m-wide stretch of tarmac that winds its way up and down mountains, across clattering bridges, along the side of cliffs and over high mountain passes. Rivers, mudflows and rockfalls present continual hazards, especially when it rains. The road can easily become blocked due to snow or landslides and can take anywhere from an hour to several days to clear. Take plenty of reading material.

Unless you want to walk, the only way to travel between towns in the south of Bhutan is via India, because there are no roads. Currently this is impractical for foreigners since the only road entry point that foreigners are allowed to use is Phuentsholing.

Tour operators use Japanese-made buses, minivans and cars, depending on the size of the group. These vehicles can take you almost anywhere in the country, but for trips to central and eastern Bhutan during winter (December to February) or the monsoon (June to September) a 4WD vehicle is an advantage, and often a necessity.

If you are travelling on a tourist visa, the cost of all transport is included in the price of your trip and you'll have a vehicle available for both short- and long-distance travel. You'll only have to rely on public transport if you are an Indian national or if you are working with a project that does not provide you with a vehicle.

BICYCLE

Some travellers have ridden mountain bikes in Bhutan, and DOT (Department of Tourism) are promoting this kind of travel. Good

routes include the upper parts of the Paro and Thimphu valleys. For a wild ride, get dropped off at the top of the Cheli La, above Paro, and ride 35km nonstop downhill. For more information, including dedicated mountain biking trails, see p153 and p148.

BUS

Public buses are crowded and rattly, and Bhutan's winding roads make them doubly uncomfortable. The government's **Bhutan Post Express** (☎ 02-322381), **Dawa Transport** (☎ 02-324250) and plenty of other companies operate minibuses and so many passengers suffer from motion sickness that these have earned the nickname 'vomit comets'. Some private operators, including **Leksol Bus Service** (☎ 02-325232) and **Karma Transport** (☎ 02-332412), use more comfortable Toyota Coasters at about 50% more than the minibus fare. In eastern Bhutan you might arrive at the bus stop to discover that your bus is actually a truck with seats in the back!

There are three or four buses a day between Thimphu and the major centres of Phuentsholing, Paro and Punakha. Fares and schedules are all monitored by the Road Safety and Transport Authority.

Costs

Public buses are cheap. A minibus fare between Thimphu and Paro is Nu 40, Thimphu and Phuentsholing Nu 120, and Thimphu and Jakar Nu 202.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Since all transport is provided by tour operators, you normally do not have to concern yourself with driving. If for some reason you are arranging your own transport, you are still far better off using the services of a hired car and driver or a taxi. Driving in Bhutan is a harrowing experience. Roads are narrow and trucks roar around hairpin bends, appearing suddenly and forcing oncoming vehicles to the side. Because most roads are only about 3.5m wide, passing any oncoming vehicle involves one, or both, moving onto the verge.

If you don't already have one at your disposal, the best way to hire a car is through a tour company (see p263). It's unlikely that you'll find a motorcycle for rent; however, you can join an organised motorcycle tour; see p263.

Bring Your Own Vehicle

If you drive a vehicle into Bhutan, you can get a 14-day permit at the Phuentsholing border. You will need the help of a tour operator to handle the paperwork. If you are driving a vehicle that is registered overseas, you will need a carnet in order to get through India.

Indian visitors may travel throughout most of Bhutan in their own vehicle, but need a permit from the Road Safety and Transport Authority at the border. Traffic regulations are the same as in India and are strictly enforced.

Driving Licence

If you insist on driving in Bhutan, you should obtain a driving licence issued by the Road Safety and Transport Authority. Bhutanese licences are also valid throughout India.

An International Driving Permit is not valid in Bhutan. An Indian driving licence is valid in Bhutan, and it's possible for Indian nationals to drive in Bhutan; but unless you are an accomplished rally driver or are from a hill station such as Darjeeling and have experience in motoring in the mountains, it's safer with a professional driver.

Road Rules

Traffic keeps to the left and is much more orderly than in most other south Asian countries. Speeds are low in towns and on rural roads; you will be lucky to average more than 30km/h on the roads in the hills.

As is the case throughout Asia, it is important that the police establish who was at fault in any traffic accident. This means that the police must arrive and make the decision before any of the vehicles can be moved, even if the vehicles are blocking a narrow road. A relatively minor fender-bender can block the road for hours while everyone waits patiently for the police to arrive from the nearest town.

HITCHING

Most people pay for a ride, either in a bus or cab or back of a truck. But bus services are limited, especially in the east, and it's not unusual to see someone flagging down a vehicle asking for a ride. If you have paid for a vehicle, you will only need to hitch if that vehicle has broken down and you are stranded on a mountain road. Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the

world, and we don't recommend it, but if you do have to hitch because of a breakdown, Bhutan is about as safe a place as you could find.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Taxi

There are taxis in Phuentsholing and Thimphu. Taxis have meters, but drivers rarely use them. For long-distance trips they operate on a flat rate that is rarely open to negotiation.

You should expect to pay Nu 50 for a local trip within Thimphu, Nu 700 for a full day and Nu 1200 (Maruti) to Nu 2000 (Mahindra Jeep or Bolero) from Thimphu to Phuentsholing. If you are travelling between Thimphu and Phuentsholing, look for a taxi that is from the place to which you want to go (vehicles with BT-2 numberplates are from Phuentsholing and those with BT-1 numberplates are from Thimphu or Paro) – you may be able to negotiate a lower price.

Health

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The main health concerns in Bhutan are similar to those in other south Asian destinations: the relatively high risk of acquiring traveller's diarrhoea, a respiratory infection, or a more exotic tropical infection. If you go trekking, there are also risks associated with accidents and altitude sickness. The infectious diseases can interrupt your trip and make you feel miserable, but they are rarely fatal. Falling off trails, or having a rock fall on you as you trek, is rare but can happen.

The following advice is a general guide only and does not replace the advice of a doctor trained in travel medicine.

BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity. If you have a heart condition, bring a copy of your ECG taken just prior to travelling.

If you take any regular medication, bring double your needs in case of loss or theft. You can't rely on many medications being available from pharmacies in Bhutan.

INSURANCE

Even if you are fit and healthy, don't travel without health insurance – accidents do happen. Declare any existing medical conditions you have – the insurance company *will* check if your problem is pre-existing and will not cover you if it is undeclared. You may require extra cover for adventure activities such as rock climbing. If your health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting extra insurance – check Lonely Planet's website (lonelyplanet.com) for more information. If you're uninsured, emergency evacuation is expensive; bills of over US\$100,000 are not uncommon.

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. (In many countries doctors expect payment in cash.) You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country, where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

VACCINATIONS

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to give specific recommendations for you and your trip. The doctors will take into account factors such as past vaccination history, the length of your trip, activities you may be undertaking and underlying medical conditions, such as pregnancy.

Most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received.

Recommended Vaccinations

The World Health Organization recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to

Bhutan (as well as being up to date with measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations):

Adult diphtheria and tetanus Single booster recommended if none in the previous 10 years. Side effects include sore arm and fever.

Hepatitis A Provides almost 100% protection for up to a year, a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years' protection. Mild side effects such as headache and sore arm occur in 5% to 10% of people.

Hepatitis B Now considered routine for most travellers. Given as three shots over six months. A rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with Hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually headache and sore arm. Lifetime protection occurs in 95% of people.

Polio Bhutan's last case of polio was reported in 1986, but it has been reported more recently in nearby Nepal and India. Only one booster required as an adult for lifetime protection. Inactivated polio vaccine is safe during pregnancy.

Typhoid The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two to three years and comes as a single shot. Tablets are also available; however, the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side effects. Sore arm and fever may occur.

Varicella If you haven't had chickenpox, discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

These immunisations may be recommended for long-term travellers (more than one month) or those at special risk:

Japanese B Encephalitis Three injections in all. Booster recommended after two years. Sore arm and headache are the most common side effects. Rarely, an allergic reaction comprising hives and swelling can occur up to 10 days after any of the three doses.

Meningitis Single injection. There are two types of vaccination: the quadrivalent vaccine gives two to three years' protection; meningitis group C vaccine gives around 10 years' protection. Recommended for long-term backpackers aged under 25.

Rabies Three injections in all. A booster after one year will then provide 10 years' protection. Side effects are rare – occasionally headache and sore arm.

Tuberculosis A complex issue. Adult long-term travellers are usually recommended to have a TB skin test before and after travel, rather than vaccination. Only one vaccine given in a lifetime.

Required Vaccinations

The only vaccine required by international regulations is yellow fever. Proof of vaccination will only be required if you have visited a country in the yellow-fever zone within the six days prior to entering Bhutan. If you are travelling to Bhutan from Africa or South America you should check to see if you require proof of vaccination.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- Antifungal cream, eg Clotrimazole
- Antibacterial cream, eg Muciprocin
- Antibiotic for skin infections, eg Amoxicillin/Clavulanate or Cephalexin
- Antibiotics for diarrhoea include Norfloxacin or Ciprofloxacin; for bacterial diarrhoea Azithromycin; for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery Tinidazole
- Antihistamine – there are many options, eg Cetirizine for daytime and Promethazine for night
- Antiseptic, eg Betadine
- Antispasmodic for stomach cramps, eg Buscopa
- Contraceptives
- Decongestant, eg Pseudoephedrine
- DEET-based insect repellent
- Diarrhoea – consider an oral rehydration solution (eg Gastrolyte), diarrhoea 'stopper' (eg Loperamide) and anti-nausea medication (eg Prochlorperazine)
- First-aid items such as scissors, Elastoplasts, bandages, gauze, thermometer (but not mercury), sterile needles and syringes, safety pins and tweezers
- Ibuprofen or another anti-inflammatory
- Indigestion medication, eg Quick-Eze or Mylanta
- Iodine tablets (unless you are pregnant or have a thyroid problem) to purify water
- Laxative, eg Coloxyl
- Migraine sufferer – take your personal medicine
- Paracetamol
- Permethrin to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets
- Steroid cream for allergic/itchy rashes, eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone
- Sunscreen and hat
- Throat lozenges
- Thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment, eg Clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablet
- Ural or equivalent if you're prone to urine infections

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. For further information, **Lonely Planet** (lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** (WHO; www.who.int/ith/) publishes a superb book called *International*

Travel & Health, which is revised annually and is available free online. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** (www.mdtravelhealth.com), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC; www.cdc.gov) website also has good general information.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket-size book that is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information and what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood and *Travelling Well* by Dr Deborah Mills – check out the website www.travellingwell.com.au.

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. If a blood clot travels to the lungs it may cause chest pain and difficulty in breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN BHUTAN

AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

There are no private health clinics or physicians in Bhutan, but all district headquarters towns have a hospital, and will accept travellers in need of medical attention. The best facility is the Jigme Dorji Wangchuk National Referral Hospital in Thimphu. It has general physicians and several specialists, labs and operating rooms. Treatment is free, even for tourists. If you are seriously ill or injured you should consider evacuation to the excellent medical facilities in Bangkok. It is difficult to find reliable medical care in rural areas. Your embassy and insurance company are good contacts.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor (eg traveller's diarrhoea), you are carrying the appropriate medication and you cannot attend a recommended clinic. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility to receive attention. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

In most large towns there are shops that sell medicines. Most of the medical supplies mentioned in this section are available without a prescription in these medicine shops.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES Coughs, Colds & Chest Infections

Respiratory infections usually start as a virus and are exacerbated by environmental conditions such as urban pollution, or cold and altitude in the mountains. Commonly a secondary bacterial infection will intervene – marked by fever, chest pain and coughing up discoloured or blood-tinged sputum. If you have the symptoms of an infection seek medical advice or commence a general antibiotic.

Dengue Fever

This mosquito-borne disease is becoming increasingly problematic throughout the tropical world, especially in the cities. As there is

no vaccine available it can only be prevented by avoiding mosquito bites. The mosquito that carries dengue bites day and night, so use insect avoidance measures at all times. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache and body ache (dengue was previously known as 'breakbone fever'). Some people develop a rash and experience diarrhoea. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol – do not take aspirin as it increases the likelihood of haemorrhaging. See a doctor to be diagnosed and monitored.

Hepatitis A

A problem throughout the region, this food- and water-borne virus infects the liver, causing jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), nausea and lethargy. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A, you just need to allow time for the liver to heal. All travellers to Bhutan should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B

The only sexually transmitted disease that can be prevented by vaccination, hepatitis B is spread by body fluids, including in sexual contact. The long-term consequences can include liver cancer and cirrhosis.

Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is transmitted through contaminated food and water and has similar symptoms to hepatitis A, but is far less common. It is a severe problem in pregnant women and can result in the death of both mother and baby. There is currently no vaccine, and prevention is by following safe eating and drinking guidelines.

HIV

HIV is spread via contaminated body fluids. Avoid unsafe sex, unsterile needles (including in medical facilities) and procedures such as tattoos.

Influenza

Present year-round in the tropics, influenza (flu) symptoms include high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It can be very severe in people over the age of 65 or in those with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes; vaccination is recommended for these individuals. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol.

Japanese B Encephalitis

This viral disease is transmitted by mosquitoes and is rare in travellers. Like most mosquito-borne diseases it is becoming a more common problem in affected countries. Most cases occur in rural areas and vaccination is recommended for travellers spending more than one month outside cities. There is no treatment, and a third of infected people will die, while another third will suffer permanent brain damage.

Malaria

For such a serious and potentially deadly disease, there is an enormous amount of misinformation concerning malaria. You must get expert advice as to whether your trip actually puts you at risk. For most rural areas, the risk of contracting malaria far outweighs the risk of any tablet side effects. Before you travel, seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage for you.

Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito. The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, cough or chills may also occur. Diagnosis can only be made by taking a blood sample.

Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – mosquito avoidance and antimalaria medications. Most people who catch malaria are taking inadequate or no antimalarial medication.

Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites by taking these steps:

- Use a DEET-containing insect repellent on exposed skin. Wash this off at night, as long as you are sleeping under a mosquito net. Natural repellents such as citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.
- Sleep under a mosquito net impregnated with pyrethrin
- Choose accommodation with screens and fans (if not air-conditioned)
- Impregnate clothing with pyrethrin in high-risk areas
- Wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours
- Use mosquito coils
- Spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal

There are a variety of medications available. The effectiveness of the **Chloroquine and Paludrine**

combination is now limited in many parts of south Asia. Common side effects include nausea (40% of people) and mouth ulcers.

The daily tablet **Doxycycline** is a broad-spectrum antibiotic that has the added benefit of helping to prevent a variety of tropical diseases, including leptospirosis, tick-borne disease and typhus. The potential side effects include photosensitivity (a tendency to sunburn), thrush (in women), indigestion, heartburn, nausea and interference with the contraceptive pill. More serious side effects include ulceration of the oesophagus – you can help prevent this by taking your tablet with a meal and a large glass of water, and never lying down within half an hour of taking it. It must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Lariam (Mefloquine) has received much bad press, some of it justified, some not. This weekly tablet suits many people. Serious side effects are rare but include depression, anxiety, psychosis and having fits. Anyone with a history of depression, anxiety, another psychological disorder, or epilepsy should not take Lariam. It is considered safe in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. Tablets must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

The new drug **Malarone** is a combination of Atovaquone and Proguanil. Side effects are uncommon and mild, most commonly nausea and headache. It is the best tablet for those on short trips to high-risk areas. It must be taken for one week after leaving the risk area.

Rabies

Rabies is considered to be highly endemic in Bhutan. This uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog or monkey. You should seek medical advice immediately after any animal bite and commence post-exposure treatment. Having pre-travel vaccination means the post-bite treatment is greatly simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine based antiseptic. If you are not pre-vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible.

STDs

Sexually transmitted diseases most common in south Asia include herpes, warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after

a sexual encounter you develop any rash, lumps, discharge or pain when passing urine, seek immediate medical attention. If you have been sexually active during your travels, have an STD check on your return home.

Tuberculosis

While rare in travellers, medical and aid workers, and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions. Vaccination is usually given only to children under the age of five, but adults at risk are recommended pre- and post-travel tuberculosis testing. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

Typhoid

This serious bacterial infection is also spread via food and water. It gives a high and slowly progressive fever, headache and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. It is diagnosed by blood tests and treated with antibiotics. Vaccination is recommended for all travellers spending more than a week in Bhutan. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful with what you eat and drink.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Traveller's diarrhoea is by far the most common problem affecting travellers – between 30% and 50% of people will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip. In over 80% of cases, traveller's diarrhoea is caused by a bacteria (there are numerous potential culprits), and therefore responds promptly to treatment with antibiotics. Treatment with antibiotics will depend on your situation – how sick you are, how quickly you need to get better, where you are etc.

Traveller's diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel-actions within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting or feeling generally unwell.

Treatment requires staying well-hydrated; rehydration solutions like Gastrolyte are the best for this. Antibiotics such as Norfloxacin, Ciprofloxacin or Azithromycin will kill the bacteria quickly.

Loperamide is just a 'stopper' and doesn't get to the cause of the problem. It can be helpful, for example if you have to go on a long bus ride. Don't take Loperamide if you have

DRINKING WATER

- Never drink tap water
- Bottled water is generally safe – check the seal is intact at purchase
- Avoid ice
- Avoid fresh juices – they may have been watered down
- Boiling water is the most efficient method of purifying it
- The best chemical purifier is iodine. It should not be used by pregnant women or those with thyroid problems.
- Water filters should also filter out viruses. Ensure your filter has a chemical barrier such as iodine and a small pore size, eg less than four microns.

a fever, or blood in your stools. Seek medical attention quickly if you do not respond to an appropriate antibiotic.

Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is very rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed by poor quality labs. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs: Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut and then a second drug to kill the cysts. If it's left untreated, complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

Giardiasis

Giardia lamblia is a parasite that is relatively common in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardiasis, but work in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to this infection. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated but this can take months. The treatment of choice is Tinidazole, with Metronidazole being a second-line option.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting traveller's diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked

food, and avoiding shellfish and food that has been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.

High Altitude

If you are going to altitudes above 3000m you should get information on preventing, recognising and treating Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). AMS is a notoriously fickle affliction and can also affect trekkers and walkers accustomed to walking at high altitudes. AMS has been fatal at 3000m, although 3500m to 4500m is the usual range.

ACCLIMATISATION

With an increase in altitude, the human body needs time to develop physiological mechanisms to cope with the decreased oxygen. This process of acclimatisation is still not fully understood, but is known to involve modifications in breathing patterns and heart rate induced by the autonomic nervous system, and an increase in the blood's oxygen-carrying capabilities. These compensatory mechanisms usually take about one to three days to develop at a particular altitude. Once you are acclimatised to a given height you are unlikely to get AMS at that height, but you can still get ill when you travel higher. If the ascent is too high and too fast, these compensatory reactions may not kick into gear fast enough.

SYMPTOMS

Mild symptoms of AMS are very common in travellers visiting high altitudes, and usually develop during the first 24 hours at altitude. Most visitors to Tibet will suffer from some symptoms; these will generally disappear through acclimatisation in several hours to several days.

Symptoms tend to be worse at night and include headache, dizziness, lethargy, loss of appetite, nausea, breathlessness and irritability. Difficulty sleeping is another common symptom.

AMS may become more serious without warning and can be fatal. Symptoms are caused by the accumulation of fluid in the lungs and brain, and include breathlessness at rest, a dry irritative cough (which may progress to the production of pink, frothy sputum), severe headache, lack of coordina-

tion (typically leading to a 'drunken walk'), confusion, irrational behaviour, vomiting and eventually unconsciousness.

The symptoms of AMS, however mild, are a warning – be sure to take them seriously! Trekkers should keep an eye on each other as those experiencing symptoms, especially severe symptoms, may not be in a position to recognise them. One thing to note is that while the symptoms of mild AMS often precede those of severe AMS, this is not always the case. Severe AMS can strike with little or no warning.

PREVENTION

To prevent acute mountain sickness:

- Ascend slowly. Have frequent rest days, spending two to three nights at each rise of 1000m. If you reach a high altitude by trekking, acclimatisation takes place gradually and you are less likely to be affected than if you fly directly to high altitude.
- Trekkers should bear in mind the climber's adage 'Climb high, sleep low'. It is always wise to sleep at a lower altitude than the greatest height reached during the day. High day climbs followed by a descent back to lower altitudes for the night are good preparation for trekking at high altitude. Also, once above 3000m, care should be taken not to increase the sleeping altitude by more than 400m per day. If the terrain won't allow for less than 400m of elevation gain, be ready to take an extra day off before tackling the climb.
- Drink extra fluids. The mountain air is dry and cold, and moisture is lost as you breathe. Evaporation of sweat may occur unnoticed and result in dehydration.
- Eat light, high-carbohydrate meals for more energy.
- Avoid alcohol as it may increase the risk of dehydration, and don't smoke.
- Avoid sedatives.
- When trekking, take a day off to rest and acclimatise if feeling over-tired. If you or anyone else in your party is having a tough time, make allowances for unscheduled stops.
- Don't push yourself when climbing up to passes; rather, take plenty of breaks. You can usually get over the pass as easily tomorrow as you can today. Try to plan

your itinerary so that long ascents can be divided into two or more days. Given the complexity and unknown variables involved with AMS and acclimatisation, trekkers should always err on the side of caution and ascend mountains slowly.

TREATMENT

Treat mild symptoms by resting at the same altitude until recovery, usually a day or two. Take paracetamol or aspirin for headaches. If symptoms persist or become worse, however, *immediate descent* is necessary – even 500m can help.

The most effective treatment for severe AMS is to get down to a lower altitude as quickly as possible. In less severe cases the victim will be able to stagger down with some support; in other cases they may need to be carried down. Whatever the case, do not delay, as any delay could be fatal.

AMS victims may need to be flown out of Bhutan as quickly as possible – make sure you have adequate travel insurance.

The drugs acetazolamide (Diamox) and dexamethasone are recommended by some doctors for the prevention of AMS. However, you should be aware that their use is controversial. They can reduce the symptoms, but they may also mask warning signs; severe and fatal AMS has occurred in people taking these drugs. Drug treatments should never be used to avoid descent or to enable further ascent.

Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine. Lice inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person. They can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an antilice shampoo such as Permethrin. Pubic lice are usually contracted from sexual contact.

Ticks are contracted after walking in rural areas. Ticks are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash at the site of the bite or elsewhere, fever, or muscle aches you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Leeches are found in humid rainforest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can easily become infected. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.

Bee and wasp stings mainly cause problems for people who are allergic to them. Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others pain is the main problem – apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

Skin Problems

Fungal rashes are common in humid climates. There are two common fungal rashes that affect travellers. The first occurs in moist areas that get less air such as the groin, armpits and between the toes. It starts as a red patch that slowly spreads and is usually itchy. Treatment involves keeping the skin dry, avoiding chafing and using an antifungal cream such as Clotrimazole or Lamisil. *Tinea versicolor* is also common – this fungus causes small, light-coloured patches, most commonly on the back, chest and shoulders. Consult a doctor.

Cuts and scratches become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain and redness), see a doctor.

Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day sunburn can occur rapidly. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying in the sun during the hottest part of the day (10am to 2pm). If you become sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the discomfort. One per cent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Pregnant women should receive specialised advice before travelling. The ideal time to travel is in the second trimester (between 16 and 28 weeks), when the risk of pregnancy-related problems are at their lowest and pregnant women generally feel at their best. During the first trimester there is a risk of miscarriage and in the third trimester complications such as premature labour and high blood pressure are possible. It's wise to travel with a companion. Always carry a list of quality medical facilities available at your destination and ensure you continue your standard antenatal care at these facilities. Avoid rural travel in areas with poor transportation and medical facilities. Most of all, ensure travel insurance covers all pregnancy-related possibilities, including premature labour.

Malaria is a high-risk disease in pregnancy. WHO recommends that pregnant women do *not* travel to areas with Chloroquine-resistant malaria. None of the more effective antimalarial drugs is completely safe in pregnancy.

Traveller's diarrhoea can quickly lead to dehydration and result in inadequate blood flow to the placenta. Many of the drugs used to treat various diarrhoea bugs are not recommended in pregnancy. Azithromycin is considered safe.

Although not much is known about the possible adverse effects of altitude on a developing foetus, many authorities recommend not travelling above 4000m while pregnant.

In the urban areas of Bhutan, supplies of sanitary products are readily available. Birth-control options may be limited so bring adequate supplies of your own form of contraception. Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with antifungal creams and pessaries such as Clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of Fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.

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