

# Getting Started

Bhutan is an extraordinary destination; surrounded by myth and secreted within the mightiest mountain chain, it bumps shoulders with the global giants of China and India. Traditional culture is proudly cherished and natural heritage is equally treasured, and yet modernisation and development is equally conspicuous in this complex and little-known country.

Though it is certainly isolated and remote, Bhutan is not a difficult place to visit. There is no limit to the number of tourists who can visit and there are no restrictions on group size. You can easily organise a journey as a couple or as a solo traveller. The Royal Government of Bhutan requires that foreign visitors travel with a prepaid and preplanned itinerary through a Bhutanese tour company. You can simply buy a space on a group tour or arrange a custom-made program. With some background information and a helpful tour operator you can customise an itinerary that suits your interests, be they culture, wildlife, festivals, trekking, cycling, rafting etc. Generally there is a great deal of freedom as to where you can go and what you can do, though it's sometimes difficult to change your program once you have finalised the arrangements.

English is widely spoken and there are Western-style hotels and food throughout the country. Though as you move further from the capital, Thimphu, expect more simple facilities and less familiar food. The costs seem very steep at first, but factor in what is supplied – accommodation, food, transport, guides – and, of course, Bhutan's unrivalled uniqueness.

## WHEN TO GO

Climate, and therefore season, is certainly a consideration when planning your trip to Bhutan, especially if you are trekking. However, Bhutan's altitude range, from subtropical valleys to alpine peaks, and its busy festival calendar means you can pretty much visit Bhutan at any time of the year to explore its attractions and witness colourful festivals.

The ideal time for trekking and for travelling throughout the country is autumn, from late September to late November, when skies are generally clear and the high mountain peaks rise to a vivid blue sky. While the climate is best in autumn, in Bhutan an umbrella is usually never far from reach, and no matter when you go, there is likely to be rain periods. Autumn is

### TOP FIVE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Traditional and modern meld in unexpected ways in a conservative yet rapidly modernising Bhutan.

- Uncovering a fresco, spinning a prayer wheel or peering into a sacred alcove in one of Bhutan's lofty, isolated temples.
- Joining the clamour and crowds of a tsechu (p247) as the masked dancers perform extraordinary feats and playful *atsaras* (masked clowns) swing their whips and wooden phalluses.
- The banter and the boasting, the singing and the skills and the near-misses of an archery tournament (p113).
- Watching artists, young and old, create religious and traditional arts and crafts employing skills passed down from generation to generation (p104).
- The powerful whirr of hundreds of fraying prayer flags reciting in blustery winds at a lonely mountain pass (p199).

also the time of the popular Thimphu tsechu (dance festival) and heralds the arrival of the black-necked cranes to their wintering grounds in central and eastern Bhutan. Not surprisingly, therefore, international visitors also peak in autumn, indeed about half of the total annual tourist numbers arrive between September and November. Avoiding the busiest tourist seasons can save you money (see opposite) and hassle.

The winter is a good time for touring in western Bhutan, bird-watching (p243) in the south's subtropical jungles, and whitewater rafting (p244). The days are usually sunny, cool and pleasant, but it's quite cold once the sun sets and you will need to pack warm clothing. From December to February, there is often snow in the higher regions and occasional snow in Thimphu. The road from Thimphu to Bumthang and the east may be closed because of snow for several days at a time. It would be best not to plan to visit these regions at this time.

Spring, from March to May, is recognised as the second best time to visit Bhutan for touring and trekking. Though there are more clouds and rain than in the autumn, the magnificent rhododendrons, magnolias and other wildflowers are in bloom and birdlife is abundant. You can get occasional glimpses of the high peaks, but these are not the dramatic unobstructed views possible in autumn. Spring is also the time of the magnificent Paro tsechu.

Summer, from June to August, is the monsoon season. And what a monsoon! During these three months 500mm of rain falls in Thimphu and up to a metre falls in the eastern hills. The mountains are hidden, the valleys are shrouded in clouds, and roads disappear in heavy downpours and floods. Summer is still a great time to visit Paro, Thimphu and other parts of western Bhutan. In the mellow monsoon light, the vivid green rice paddies contrast with the dark hills and the stark white dzongs to produce picture-perfect vistas. And the markets are bursting with fresh fruits and vegetables.

A major factor in choosing a time to visit Bhutan, and one that may override considerations of weather patterns, is the festival schedule. These colourful events offer a first-hand glimpse of Bhutanese life and provide an opportunity to see the inside of the great dzongs. It's possible, and highly recommended, to work at least one festival into a tour or trek program. See the boxed text, p247, for details on the calendar. In recent years overcrowding has become an issue during the major tsechus at Thimphu and Paro, which coincide with the best seasons. At these times flights and accommodation are heavily booked and you may find you need to pay a premium for accommodation or settle for lower-standard accommodation. You stand a much better chance of getting flights, accommodation and probably a more intimate and rewarding festival experience if you schedule your trip around one of the other cultural events.

#### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A compact umbrella and/or rainjacket – for any region at any time of the year.
- Hat, sunscreen, lip balm and sunglasses (especially if trekking; see p199).
- Earplugs (Bhutanese dogs sleep all day and bark all night).
- Walking poles (even if you aren't trekking, you will find these knee savers useful for steep hikes up to dzongs and temples).
- Swimming costume for communal hot-stone baths and hot springs.
- A flashlight for unexpected power cuts and for viewing interiors of dark temples and monasteries.
- Motion sickness medication for the long and winding drives (see p267).

## COSTS & MONEY

Tourism in Bhutan is managed through partnership of government regulators and private travel agencies under a policy summed up by the mantra 'high value, low impact'. There is no restriction on visitor numbers; however, there is a minimum daily tariff fixed by the government. Also your visit must be arranged through an officially approved tour operator (see p263), either directly or through an overseas agent. By dealing through an overseas agent you will avoid complicated payment procedures and also have a home-based contact in case of queries or special needs. On the other hand, if you deal directly with a Bhutanese tour operator you will have more scope to individualise your itinerary, though you'll spend considerable time sending emails and faxes, and learn more than you want to about international bank transfers. For information on visas see p255.

The daily tariff for tourists visiting in a group of three people or more is US\$200 per day (US\$165 per day in the low season of July to August, whether you stay in hotels (a 'cultural tour') or go trekking.

To encourage trekkers to make longer treks, the Department of Tourism (DOT) allows a 10% discount on days 11 to 20 and 20% from day 21 on.

The daily tariff includes all of your accommodation, food, land transport within Bhutan, services of guides and porters, supply of pack animals on treks, and cultural programs as appropriate. It also includes a US\$65 tax, which is used by the government to fund infrastructure, education, health and other programs.

The tour rate applies uniformly irrespective of location or the type of accommodation asked for or provided (with the exception of several premium hotels; see below). This clause means that if things get busy you may get bumped from a better hotel to one of lesser quality, and you have no recourse.

Individual tourists and couples are subject to a surcharge, over and above the daily rate. The surcharge may also be applied if a member of a group arrives or departs on a separate flight from the rest of the party. The surcharge is US\$40 per night for one person and US\$30 per night per person for a group of two people. Visitors qualifying for any kind of discount still have to pay this small-group surcharge.

Most tour operators expect you to pay separately for all drinks, including liquor, beer, mineral water and bottled soft drinks. You'll also have to pay extra for laundry, riding horses, and cultural splurges such as a Bhutanese hot-stone bath. There are endless potential options that cost extra but provide a means to individualise your itinerary: expert guides, special permits, luxury vehicles, cultural shows and courses, special food and premium accommodation. The availability of these extras will depend on the tour operator and will involve investigating several operators and negotiating prices.

### Premium Hotels

A number of premium hotels have been established in Thimphu, Paro and in a few other locations. These four- to five-star hotels charge accommodation and dining rates in addition to the daily tariff. Details can be found in the relevant Sleeping sections in the destination chapters.

### Discounts & Special Categories

The following categories of visitors are eligible for discounts on the daily rate.

**Children** Up to the age of six, children are free. Kids from seven to 12 accompanied by parents or guardians receive a 50% discount on the daily rates.

**Diplomats** A 25% discount on the rates applies to diplomats from foreign embassies or missions accredited to Bhutan.

#### HOW MUCH?

Cup of espresso coffee  
Nu 25

Bowl of *ema datse* Nu 30

Half-hour of internet  
access Nu 30

Chocolate bar Nu 20

Prayer wheel Nu 300-500

#### LONELY PLANET INDEX

1L of petrol Nu 60

1L of bottled water Nu 15

Bottle of Red Panda beer  
Nu 80

Souvenir T-shirt Nu 350

Snack of *momos*  
(dumplings) Nu 25

See Climate Charts (p245)  
for more information

**Group Leaders** A discount of 50% on the rates is given to one person in a group of 11 to 15 people. A free trip is allowed for one member per group exceeding 15 people.

**Indian Nationals** Because of Bhutan's special relationship with India, Indian tourists are categorised differently from other international tourists. Indians do not require a visa and may pay local rates for food, transportation and accommodation. They may travel independently throughout most of Bhutan, though a special permit is required. DOT recommends that Indian visitors use the services of a Bhutanese tour operator to arrange such permits and to expedite hotel and transport bookings. The initial permit for Indian nationals is for 14 days, and they still need a travel permit to go beyond Paro and Thimphu. Indians may also wander freely into all the border towns of Bhutan, though they must leave by 10pm unless staying in a hotel.

**Students** Full-time students 29 years and younger, with valid identity cards from their academic institutions, are allowed a 25% discount, resulting in a rate of US\$150 per night (plus small-group surcharges, if applicable). You should deal directly with a Bhutanese tour operator rather than through a travel agency or tour company at home if you plan to utilise this facility.

**Travel Agents** Tour companies intending to put Bhutan into their programs may apply for a discounted familiarisation tour. It's unlikely that you can manage this arrangement unless you are already a serious player in the travel industry. DOT has an excellent network of connections worldwide and will check your bona fides beforehand. It also requires both a pretrip and a post-trip briefing.

**Volunteers & Project Employees** If you are working in Bhutan, you are not subject to the normal rules for tourists, and the agency employing you will arrange your visa. Soon after you arrive in Bhutan you will be enrolled in a cultural-orientation course for new volunteers. Volunteers are allowed two visitors a year; the visitors must be close relatives and are not subject to the tourist tariff.

### Payment Procedure

If you have arranged your trip directly with a tour operator in Bhutan and are not using an overseas agent, you must make payment directly to DOT in Bhutan. This is not a trivial process.

The most straightforward and efficient procedure is to make a US-dollar transfer to the account of the Bhutan National Bank at Citibank in New York. Transfers into this account are monitored by DOT and credited to the agent in Bhutan. Transfers should be made to **Citibank** (111 Wall St, 19th fl, New York City, NY 10043), account of **Bhutan National Bank** (ABA No 0210-0008-9, account No 36023474, Swift Code Citius 33, Chips Routing No 008). The name of the tour operator should be stated as the 'beneficiary'. If this procedure is not practical for you, contact the tour operator you have chosen to handle your trip for alternative, but more complicated, bank transfer methods.

Once you make the payment, fax a copy of the deposit details to the tour operator in Bhutan so that it can present this documentation to DOT to start the visa process.

In cases of last-minute bookings or other exceptional circumstances it is possible to pay in travellers cheques (but not cash) upon arrival in Bhutan, but this entails a visit to the DOT office to sign documents.

Note that you are paying an agency of the Bhutanese government, not the tour operator directly; therefore you have more protection against default on the part of the tour company.

### Cancellation Charges

Tour programs booked and subsequently cancelled are subject to cancellation charges. Travel insurance is an extremely worthwhile investment given that you must make full payment up front. The fee depends on how many days before the start of the tour program you cancel.

**More than 30 days** No charge

**Within 21 days** 10%

**Within 14 days** 15%

**Within seven days** 30%

**Fewer than seven days** 50%

**Without notice** 50%

**After arrival in Bhutan** 100%

### Cost of Delays

There is no daily tariff for days of delay in your arrival or departure due to weather conditions, Druk Air problems or road blocks. In cases of delayed departure, tour operators will simply charge the actual expenses for accommodation, food, transport and any other services required.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Not surprisingly, this little-visited, little-known, out-of-the-way kingdom hasn't generated swathes of literature from travelling wordsmiths. Historical accounts (reprinted in India and available in Thimphu) can be more entertaining than enlightening, sometimes revealing more about colonial attitudes of the writers than the Bhutanese subject. Yet they nevertheless provide an insight into traditional life, past politics and customs. More contemporary accounts reveal the life of 'everyday' Bhutan, usually through the more tolerant eye of an invited guest.

*So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas* by Barbara Crossette is an excellent account of Bhutan's history and culture. The author is a *New York Times* correspondent who has spent considerable time in Bhutan and other Himalayan regions. Published in 1995, the book discusses some of the modern development and political problems facing Bhutan in a geographical and historical context.

*Beyond the Sky and the Earth* by Jamie Zeppa tells the story of a Canadian teacher who fell in love with Bhutan during her teaching assignment in eastern Bhutan. Jamie offers many anecdotes and explanations of strange Bhutanese traditions as she describes her experiences, many of which you may recognise during your travels.

*Dreams of the Peaceful Dragon* by Katie Hickman is a traveller's account of a walk across Bhutan in the 1970s, before the road between Bumthang and Mongar was completed. It provides a good picture of trekking in Bhutan.

### TOP FIVE GREAT READS & ILLUSTRATED BOOKS

- *The Raven Crown* by Michael Aris is the definitive history of Bhutan's monarchy. The late Aris, who lived in Bhutan with his wife (Aung San Suu Kyi) from 1967 to 1972, remains the leading Western authority on Bhutan's history. The book is lavishly illustrated with rare photographs of the early days of Bhutan that help show what a unique civilisation existed in the early 20th century.
- *Treasures of the Thunder Dragon* by Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, Queen of Bhutan, is an appealing and informative personal account of the kingdom from a unique perspective. Part travelogue and part memoir, it introduces Bhutan, its history, culture, tradition, folklore and more.
- *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes* by Karma Ura is a historical novel. It is based on the life of Shingkar Lam, a retainer who served in the court of the second, third and fourth kings of Bhutan. It offers extraordinary insight into social conditions in the early days of the 20th century and the reforms and modernisations introduced by the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck.
- *The Circle of Karma* by Kunzang Choden tells the story of a young woman's journey across Bhutan to find her destiny and rewards the reader with rich detail of everyday life and ritual.
- *Bhutan, Kingdom of the Dragon* by Robert Dompnier is a superb coffee-table book by a French photographer who has travelled extensively throughout Bhutan.

### TOP FIVE MUST-SEE FILMS & DOCUMENTARIES

These may not be at your local video shop but are worth searching for.

- *Travellers & Magicians* (Khyentse Norbu) is a whimsical tale within a tale tackling the conflict of new and old, delightfully set along twisting roads and in mysterious dark forests, both prominent features of Bhutanese travel.
- *The Cup* (Khyentse Norbu) follows the antics of trainee Tibetan monks obsessed with seeing the finals of the football World Cup.
- *The Other Final* (Johan Kramer) is a nicely crafted record of what happens when the world's bottom team, Monseratt, meets second from bottom, Bhutan; of course football is the winner.
- *Words of my Perfect Teacher* (Lesley Ann Patten) is a documentary that follows renowned reincarnate film maker Khyentse Norbu around the globe as he blesses, teaches and inspires the faithful.
- *Joanna Lumley in the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon* (BBC) follows the Ab Fab star as she in turn follows the footsteps her grandfather, Lt Col JLR Weir, taken through Bhutan in 1931.

*The Blessings of Bhutan* by Russ and Blyth Carpenter is an informative and entertaining account of modern Bhutan based on the authors' intimate knowledge and carefully researched background. It's told with revealing interviews and engaging anecdotes.

*Joanna Lumley in the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon* is based on a TV program that followed Joanna Lumley as she traced the trek her grandfather, Lt Col JLR Weir, took through Bhutan in 1931. The book is illustrated, conversational and informative.

*A Baby in a Backpack to Bhutan* by Bunty Avieson is her detailed account of spending time in Bhutan with her film-producer partner and their newborn baby. It's a light read, relaying enlightening personal encounters while revealing national characteristics.

*Sikhim and Bhutan, Twenty-one Years on the North-east Frontier* by J Claude White describes with remarkably detailed observation White's 1905 expedition to Bhutan to present the insignia of Knight Commander of the Indian Empire to Sir Ugyen Wangchuck. The book is accessible, despite its vintage.

*Political Missions to Bootan* by Ashley Eden is a pompous Victorian account of the history of Bhutan. Eden disliked the people and their habits intensely, and after reading a few pages you'll have a better idea of why Eden was treated so badly by the *penlop* (governor) of Trongsa when he arrived in Punakha.

*Lands of the Thunderbolt* by the Earl of Ronaldshay is one of the most readable accounts of a British expedition to Bhutan. The earl's full name was Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, Marquis of Zetland. He was president of the Royal Geographic Society from 1922 to 1925.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

The World Wide Web is a rich resource for travellers. You can research your trip, hunt down bargain air fares, book hotels, check on weather conditions or chat with locals and other travellers about the best places to visit (or avoid).

**Bhutan Portal** ([www.bhutan.gov.bt](http://www.bhutan.gov.bt)) The official government site, with numerous links.

**Bhutan Studies** ([www.bhutanstudies.org.bt](http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt)) The official cultural website.

**Department of Tourism** ([www.tourism.gov.bt](http://www.tourism.gov.bt)) For the latest on travel regulations, fees and a list of approved Bhutanese tour operators.

**Druk Air** ([www.drukair.com.bt](http://www.drukair.com.bt)) Bhutan's national airline.

**Kuensel** ([www.kuenselonline.com](http://www.kuenselonline.com)) Bhutan's national newspaper.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) What better place to start exploring.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### FOUR DAYS

With just four days you should count on two full days in picturesque **Paro** (p122), visiting Paro Dzong and the National Museum. On the second day, hike up to the dramatic Tiger's Nest at **Taktshang Goemba** (p128) and visit lovely Kyichu Lhakhang. After lunch make the two- to three-hour drive to Thimphu, stopping at the charming **Tamchhog Lhakhang** (p131) en route. Alternatively, move the hike to your last day, when you should be better acclimatised.

On day three you could just about squeeze in a long day trip over the Dochu La to **Punakha** (p145) but you're better off budgeting an extra day for this. The Punakha Dzong is probably the most beautiful in the country. In October and November it's worth getting up before dawn to see the Himalayan views from the pass. In March, budget an hour to walk through the gorgeous rhododendron forests above the pass. On the way back to Thimphu pop into the nearby **Chimi Lhakhang** (p145), the chapel of the 'Divine Madman', Lama Drukpa Kunley.

Day four is in **Thimphu** (p97). Go to the weekend market and visit Cheri or Tango goembas in the upper **Thimphu valley** (p115). If handicrafts are your thing, hit the Textile Museum and National Institute of Zorig Chusum. Late in the afternoon drive back to Paro; most flights depart early in the morning.

**If you have limited time or money, you can get a good impression of Bhutan in just four days by concentrating on Thimphu and Paro. Try to arrange to be in Thimphu on a Saturday or Sunday to see the weekend market and avoid Paro on Monday, when the National Museum is closed.**



## SEVEN DAYS

**A week gives you more time to get a feel for Bhutanese culture and enables you to get off the beaten track in the Haa or Phobjikha valleys, while still seeing the major dzongs and monasteries of western Bhutan. It's worth spending the extra money for another day or two – after all, when are you next going to be in Bhutan?**

For a more comprehensive look at Bhutan, invest in a week and definitely add an overnight trip over the mountains to **Punakha** (p145) and nearby **Wangdue Phodrang** (p149), overnighting at either of these towns. This way you'll have time to make the 1½-hour return hike to the nearby **Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten** (p147), as well as visit Chimi Lhakhang and the dzong at Wangdue Phodrang.

To get off the beaten track in a short period of time add an overnight trip to the **Haa valley** (p133), en route between Paro and Thimphu. The road goes over the highest motorable pass in Bhutan, the Cheli La, and in October it's worth including a couple of hours hiking to get fine views from just above the pass. Arrive in Haa at lunchtime, and spend an afternoon and maybe the next morning exploring the Juneydrak Hermitage and **Chundu Lhakhang** (p134), before continuing on to **Thimphu** (p97).

Figure on two days in **Paro** (p122), including visits to Taktshang, Kyichu Lhakhang and Drukyl Dzong in the Paro valley, and a full day (or two) in Thimphu. See the previous itinerary for more on what to see in Paro and Thimphu.

If you don't visit Haa, you might be able to add on a day trip to the **Phobjikha valley** (p152), especially worthwhile in winter (October to March) when the valley's black-necked cranes are roosting.

At some point during your trip ask your guide to arrange that quintessential experience, a Bhutanese hot-stone bath, available in most tourist hotels (for a charge). If you're lucky you may also be able to catch a weekend archery tournament, most likely in Thimphu.



## TEN DAYS

A 10-day itinerary should allow you two or three days in **Bumthang** (p165), before you have to turn back to Paro. Follow the previous itineraries for the first four or five days.

A night in the **Phobjikha valley** (p152) will give you a chance to see Gangte Goemba and also view the rare and endangered black-necked cranes. If you like explore places on foot then budget an extra half-day's hiking at Phobjikha

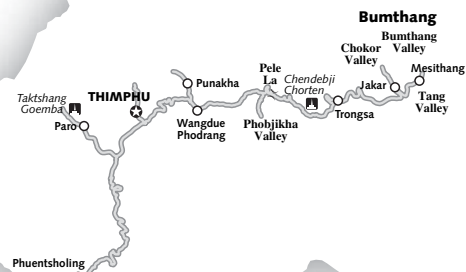
From Phobjikha it's a day's drive over the Pele La to the superb dzong at **Trongsa** (p163) and on to Jakar in Bumthang. Leave early, as there's lots to see en route, including the Nepali-style **Chendebji Chorten** (p161).

If you have two days in Bumthang spend one day doing a loop in the **Chokhor valley** (p171), taking in the Jampey Lhakhang, Kurjey Lhakhang and Tamshing Goemba. Day two here should be spent exploring the **Tang valley** (p177), visiting the Burning Lake at Membartsho and Ogyen Chholing Museum. If you have time, overnight in the Ogyen Chholing Guest House and hike back via Gamling.

The Bumthang valley is another good place for some **hiking** (see p170) so budget half a day to stretch your legs after a week's driving. From Jakar it's a two-day drive back to Paro, so sleep at **Wangdue Phodrang** (p149) and visit its impressive dzong.

If you intend to visit India in conjunction with Bhutan, instead of flying consider driving from Thimphu or Paro to **Phuentsholing** (p156), which will add a day to the itinerary. From here you are only a few hours from Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim, as well as the airport at Bagdogra, which has frequent flights to Delhi and Kolkata.

**A longer program of 10 days will allow you two full days in Bumthang with overnight stops in Paro, Thimphu and Wangdue Phodrang and short stops in Punakha and Trongsa as you drive through. Fourteen days will let you see the same places in more detail and at a much more relaxed pace. You could then even include the two-day Bumthang Cultural trek.**





## ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

### THE EAST

It takes at least two weeks to make a trip out to the little-visited far east. There's certainly a *looooot* of driving involved but then getting there is half the fun! With this itinerary you avoid the long drive back to Paro by exiting Bhutan at Samdrup Jongkhar. Follow the earlier itineraries as far as Bumthang, from where you can see the highlights of the east in five or six days. Expect to be driving for up to five hours a day while in eastern Bhutan.

From Bumthang, day one takes you on a dramatic drive over the **Thrumshing La** (p184) to **Mongar** (p185). Stay here two nights by making a scenic day trip up to remote **Lhuentse** (p187), pausing to visit the dzong and hike 45 minutes up to the traditional weaving village of **Khoma** (p188).

Day three takes you on to **Trashigang** (p190), with a two- or three-hour detour to **Drametse Goemba** (p189), Bhutan's most important Nyingma monastery.

Figure on two nights at Trashigang, with another great day excursion to **Trashi Yangtse** (p195), with stops en route at the pilgrimage site of **Gom Kora** (p193), the old Trashi Yangtse dzong and the Nepali-style Chorten Kora. March and April bring two important pilgrimage festivals to this region.

From Trashigang it's a six-hour winding drive down to the plains at steamy **Samdrup Jongkhar** (p198); stop to check out traditional weaving at Khaling's National Handloom Development Centre. From Samdrup Jongkhar, take a three-hour taxi ride to Guwahati then fly to Kolkata, Delhi or Bangkok, or take the overnight train to West Bengal for Darjeeling and the Nepal border.

This wide-ranging itinerary takes you from one end of Bhutan to the other, well away from the main tourist itineraries. It's a particularly great trip if you're interested in traditional weaving. You'll need to arrange an Indian visa before you arrive in Bhutan.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### FESTIVALS

Most people try to time their trip with one of Bhutan's colourful tsechu, or dance festivals. You can expect mask dancing, lots of colourful costumes, and superb photo opportunities, but also lots of tourists and busier than normal flights and hotels. See p247 for the dates of the major festivals.

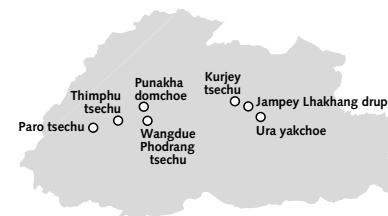
By far the most popular festival is the spring-time **Paro tsechu** (p122) in March or April. It is perhaps a little too popular with groups, and you'll need to make flight and hotel bookings months in advance.

A less-busy alternative is the **Ura yakchoe** (p179), though the western dates are notoriously changeable here so it's best to include a couple of days' buffer on either side of the predicted date. Camping is a good idea here.

The **Punakha domchoe** (p147) is one of Bhutan's most unusual festivals, in February or March, just after the important Losar new year festival.

The **Jampey Lhakhang drup** (p172) in October/November coincides with near perfect weather and so is again popular with groups. The **Thimphu** and **Wangdue Phodrang tsechus** also take place during great weather.

The **Kurje tsechu** (p173) in June/July isn't the best time of year to visit weather-wise (expect lots of rain), but sees few tourists and you can hit the nearby Nimalung tsechu at the same time.



### TREKKING

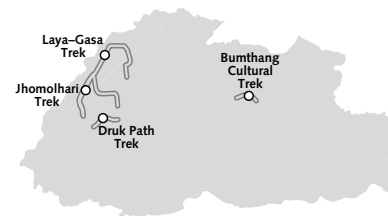
The best way to experience Bhutan is without doubt on foot, especially if you can combine a trek with a major tsechu and add on a visit to Paro and Thimphu. You really need at least a week if you want to trek in Bhutan. The best months are October and November (for mountain views) and March (for rhododendron blooms).

The six-day **Druk Path trek** (p212) from Paro to Thimphu is a short and relatively simple trek, though it does spend two nights at a high elevation.

The eight- or nine-day **Jhomolhari trek** (p216) offers some of the best high-mountain scenery in Bhutan, crossing a high (4800m) pass. An excellent alternative is to do only the first three days of this trek to Jhomolhari base camp, spend a day exploring, then return to Paro via the same route. This avoids the high passes but still provides spectacular mountain views and visits to highland villages and yak pastures.

Perhaps the best combination of scenery and culture is the 14-day **Laya-Gasa trek** (p222), which offers superb mountain views of Jhomolhari, the historically interesting regions of Lingzhi and Gasa, and the unique culture and people of Laya.

If you are limited for time and don't feel up to a high-altitude trek then the **Bumthang Cultural trek** (p230) can be done in just two days and takes you past several interesting monasteries and through gorgeous forest.



# Snapshot

Change is afoot in Bhutan. Despite centuries of self-imposed isolation, the Himalayan kingdom has opened the Pandora's Box of modernisation and there's no turning back now. Pepsi Cola built a bottling plant in 1997, 60 channels of satellite TV arrived in 1999 and there will soon be more mobile phones in the kingdom than land lines. Bhutanese can even get a Dzongkha font for their Microsoft Windows (though there are still no traffic lights in the country)!

Political change also looms large on the Himalayan horizon. In 2005 Bhutan's much-loved king announced that he would abdicate in 2008 in favour of the crown prince and set about drawing up the country's first ever constitution to prepare for democratic elections that same year. This gradual ceding of royal power in favour of a parliamentary democracy stands in stark contrast to that other Himalayan monarch, Nepal's King Gyanendra.

Yet Bhutan is very aware of the dangers of modernisation and the government continues to assume a very protective role in Bhutanese society. Bhutan was the world's first country to ban not only smoking in public places but also the very sale of tobacco. The wrestling channel and MTV are also banned, as are western-style advertising billboards and plastic bags.

Due to its small size and precarious geopolitical position, squeezed in between the giants of China and India (and with the annexing of Tibet and Sikkim firmly in mind), Bhutan has decided that the only way forward, the only way to ensure its very survival and sovereignty, is to protect its unique culture and environment. Issues of sustainable development, education and health care, and environmental and cultural preservation are therefore at the forefront of policy making, as are the tenets of Buddhism, which forms the base of Bhutan's legal code. Every development project is scrutinised and may be slowed or stopped if it affronts religious faith or adversely affects the environment. Bhutan's strict regulation of limited high-value, low-impact tourism is a perfect example of this. Bhutan is one of the few places on earth so far untouched by the reach of globalisation and where compassion is favoured over capitalism.

Still, despite the abundance of hydroelectric power, a large proportion of Bhutanese don't have access to electricity or running water and per-capita income remains one of the world's lowest. In 2004, 6000 Bhutanese troops flushed out militants from Bhutanese jungles bordering India, destroying 30 camps and incurring the wrath of Assamese separatist movements. The issue of the 110,000 refugees languishing in camps in Eastern Nepal is far from being resolved.

Bhutan remains a unique and special country. For better or worse, the next few years, and 2008 in particular, look set to bring profound changes to Bhutan. The challenge ahead for the government is to bring the benefits of the modern world to Bhutan without undermining the very things that Bhutanese cherish about their unique culture.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 634,982  
(2005 Census)

Life expectancy: 63

Area: 38,392 sq km –  
similar size to Switzerland

Number of tourists  
visiting Bhutan in 2005:  
13,600

Human Development  
Index ranking: 134 out of  
177 countries

Forest cover: 72.5%

Percentage of population  
involved in agriculture:  
69%

Percentage of Bhutan's  
land used for agriculture:  
7.8%

Tourism is the third  
largest provider of foreign  
exchange in Bhutan,  
earning it US\$18.5  
million in 2005

The export of  
hydroelectricity to India  
provides 32% of  
government revenue



# The Authors



## LINDSAY BROWN

**Coordinating author; Thimphu**

A former conservation biologist and publishing manager of Outdoor Activity guides at Lonely Planet, Lindsay has trekked, jeeped, ridden and stumbled across many a mountain pass and contributed to Lonely Planet's *South India*, *India*, *Nepal* and *Pakistan & the Karakoram Highway* guides, among others. He has still not seen nearly enough of the Himalaya or its peoples.

### Life On The Road

It started at an ungodly hour, when usually only the dogs of Thimphu are awake. This cold, dark morning the canine chorus found a human harmony as hundreds of bleary-eyed tourists and locals sought their allotted lifts, and countless car and bus headlights traced a pilgrimage to Paro. We were off to see the Guru Rinpoche *thondrol* unfurled at the Paro tsechu. To gaze upon the *thondrol* is to have one's sins expunged and to witness such an extraordinary festival is a dramatic highlight of visiting Bhutan. The traffic jam at Paro had to be seen to be believed and it was a relief to set out on foot up towards the dzong. Some strolled, some ran, at least three shortcuts were initiated, but there was no need to rush. The enormous *thondrol* had its own stage and setting separate to the dzong and thousands had already gathered to watch the dances, utter a prayer and attract a blessing.



## BRADLEY MAYHEW

**Western, Central and Eastern Bhutan**

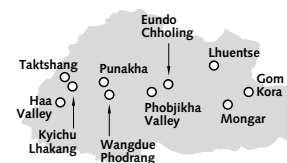
Ever drawn to Himalayan peaks and Tibetan Buddhist communities, Bradley has been travelling to Tibetan areas for over a decade. He coordinated the last two editions of Lonely Planet's *Nepal* and the last three editions of *Tibet*, and has written the Tibetan areas of LP's *China* and *South-west China* guides. British-born and nomadic at heart, Bradley currently lives under the big skies of Montana.

Bradley is also the co-author of Lonely Planet guides *Central Asia*, *Jordan*, *Shanghai* and *Yellowstone & Grand Teton National Parks* and has worked on Lonely Planet guides from *Morocco* to *Mongolia*. He has lectured on Central Asia at the Royal Geographic Society.

### My Favourite Trip

This six-week research trip took me right across Bhutan, from Phuentsholing in the southwest to Trashi Yangtse in the far east. Favourites are hard to pin down in such a remarkable country but I thought the little-visited Haa valley (p133) was great, as was hiking the scenic Phobjikha valley (p152). My nod for favourite dzongs goes to Punakha (p145) and Wangdue Phodrang (p149); the award for 'best drive' goes to Mongar to Lhuentse (p186); 'best discovery' goes to Eundo Chholing (p165). Of the over 100 temples and lhakhangs I got to see, I ache most to go back to Gom Kora (p193) and Kyichu Lhakhang (p127). Oh, and Taktshang (p128), of course!

My favourite place of all? That was a long hike through lush forests, *mani* walls and sudden chortens up to an achingly beautiful and utterly silent hermitage. Where exactly that is, I'm not telling...



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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Stan Armington**, who also authored Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*, has been organising and leading treks in Nepal since 1971. A graduate engineer, he has also worked for the US National Park service in the Yellowstone and Olympic parks as well as serving as a guide on Mt Hood in Oregon. Stan is a director of the American Himalayan Foundation, a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Explorers Club, and specialises in opening bars in Himalayan towns. He has travelled extensively in Bhutan and developed a project to train Bhutanese craftsmen in historic building conservation. He lives in Kathmandu, where he runs a trekking company and tries to keep up with all the changes to trekking routes in both Nepal and Bhutan.

**Richard W Whitecross** wrote The Culture and Buddhism in Bhutan chapters. He was raised in southern Scotland and, after encountering several lamas at a young age, developed a lifelong fascination with the Himalayas and, in particular, Bhutan. A former environmental lawyer turned anthropologist, Richard spent a year in a Buddhist monastery preparing for fieldwork. His doctoral thesis, *The Zhabdrung's Legacy: Law and Social Transformation in Contemporary Bhutan* (2002) is the first ethnographic account to focus on law and social change in Bhutan. Following his PhD he was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship and taught courses on political anthropology, ritual and religion, and intends to publish further on Bhutan.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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