

The Thimphu Festival 2020

8 Days | Starts/Ends: Paro



Take your place at the famed mask dance performances at the Thimphu Tshechu Festival in 2020, whilst discovering the best of Bhutan. Hike to Tiger's Nest Monastery, see the world's biggest Buddha Dordenma statue and explore the Punakha Valley before sitting back to watch the unique and colourful displays of traditional culture performed at the city's most popular event.

HIGHLIGHTS AND INCLUSIONS

Trip Highlights

- Thimphu Tshechu Festival - see the colourful masked dance performances and other cultural displays at the city's most popular event
- Paro - Enjoy a guided tour of the city, including the National Museum and Rinpung Dzong
- Punakha Valley - Hike up to Chimi Lhakhand Temple (the temple of Divine Madman) and camp next to scenic Mo Chu River
- Picturesque villages of Talo or Nobgang - where we explore the ancestral home of the Queen Mothers of Bhutan

- Dochula Pass - Himalayan peaks - Masagang, Tsendagang, Terigang, Jejegangphugang, Gangkar Punsum
- Thimphu - Explore Bhutan's capital city including, the Memorial Chorten, Kuenselphodrang, a handmade paper factory and Drubthob Nunnery
- Handicraft Emporium - Browse through beautiful hand-woven and crafted products in Thimphu
- Tiger's Nest Monastery - Hike up to this famous Buddhist monastery perched on a cliff face

What's Included

- 7 breakfasts, 7 lunches and 7 dinners
- 6 nights 3-4 star hotels and 1 night camping near the banks of scenic Mo Chu River
- Airport arrival and departure transfer on day 1 & day 8 (only)
- Guided sightseeing of Paro, Thimphu, Punakha and the Punakha Valley
- Traditional Bhutanese dinner at a farm house, giving you the opportunity to interact with a local family
- Escorted by a licensed English-speaking local tour guide
- All relevant transfers and transportation in private A/C vehicles
- Entrance fees to all included sightseeing
- All Bhutan government royalties and taxes

- Bhutan Visa fee and travel Permit (excludes visa admin fee of USD\$20 pp, payable upon arrival)

What's Not Included

- International flights, Bhutan visa administration fee payable upon arrival USD\$20
- Tipping - an entirely personal gesture

DETAILED ITINERARY

Day 1 : Paro

Wednesday 23 September 2020. Welcome to Bhutan! Upon arrival to Paro Airport you'll be met and transferred to our hotel. The remainder of today is free for you to independently explore.

A Welcome Meeting will take place this evening at 18:30, followed by dinner at your hotel. If the group is smaller than 4, or if not everyone has arrived off their flights yet, your guide will brief the group the following morning. **Overnight - Paro** (L, D)

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Day 2 : Punakha, Chimi Lhakhang Temple & Camp by the Mo Chu River



Paro – Punakha. It's an early start as we travel the road to Punakha, climbing up through pine, oak and rhododendron forest to reach Dochu La Pass (3050m). After a short break we continue onto the spectacular Punakha Valley, where we enjoy a scenic 1.5 - 2 hour walk up to Chimi Lhakhang Temple - dedicated to Lama Drukpa Kunley (also known as the Divine Mad Monk).

After, we visit the impressive Punakha Dzong an exemplary masterpiece of Bhutanese architecture built at the confluence of the Pho Chu and Mo Chu Rivers.

Later this afternoon we head to our campsite on the banks of the Mo Chu River, where there's free time to relax and explore the natural surrounds. In the early evening you can opt for a hot stone bath served with local drinks, followed by dinner.

If available, and best done in the summer months, there may be the possibility to independently arrange with a local company, rafting this afternoon.

Our accommodation tonight is set up 8 kilometres from the centre of Punakha on the banks of the Mo Chu River. We camp in two man walk in tents (twin/double sharing), which include thick mattresses, all bedding and towels. A toilet tent is built for the evenings stay, as is a shower tent (with hot water!) and there is also the option to try out a traditional hot stone bath. There is a central area with space to relax around a camp fire and the cook team will create traditional Bhutanese meals which will be served in the dining tent. Electricity is supplied in the dining and toilet areas – you will find a torch for this evenings

stay to be very useful. **Overnight - Punakha** (B, L, D)

Day 3 : Punakha Valley



Punakha Valley – Thimphu. After an early breakfast, we drive along the shores of the Mo Chu River and hike (approximately 2 - 2.5 hours) up through rice fields to the Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten, a stunning temple located on a hill with impressive views of the valley below. After exploring the area, we drive to the picturesque villages of Talo scattered along a ridge above the Punakha Valley. This afternoon, we stop for a picnic lunch before visiting Sangchen Dorji Lhendrup Nunnery, perched on a ridge with spectacular views of the Punakha and Wangdue Valleys. In addition to religious training, the nuns are also taught skills such as embroidery, tailoring and statue making. After our visit to the nunnery we drive to Thimphu.

Overnight - Thimphu (B, L, D)

Day 4 : Masked dances of the Thimphu Tshechu (Festival)



The Tshechu Festival of Thimphu is a 3 day religious event which marks the tenth day of the lunar calendar and honours the birthday of Guru Rimpoche Padmasambhava, an Indian Saint who spread Buddhism in the country in the 8th century. Tshechus are grand occasions where entire communities come together to witness religious mask dances,

receive blessings and socialise. It is said that anyone who attends a Tshechu and witnesses the colourful masked dances is profusely blessed. Every mask dance performed has a special meaning or a story behind it and many are based on stories of the life of the Guru.

Today, we drive to Tendrelthang at Tashichho Dzong and mingle with the residents of Thimphu and nearby districts of Paro, Punakha, whom are dressed in their best attire to witness the unique spectacle that is - the famed masked dances, and other colourful and exciting displays of traditional culture performed on this very special day.

We recommend purchasing locally a cushion to sit on to watch the events unfold. An umbrella is useful to have also, to shelter from the rain or sun for a more comfortable experience.

Overnight - Thimphu (B, L, D)

Day 5 : Memorial Chorten & Handicrafts



Thimphu is the political, social and spiritual heart of the nation and although this is Bhutan's most modern city, it has retained the unique character of a Bhutanese town. Today we discover the city's sites with visits to, the Memorial Chorten - a beautiful stupa built in the memory of Bhutan's third King, Kuenselphodrang (Buddha point) - to see the world's biggest Buddha Dordenma statue and enjoy the views of Thimphu Valley, a handmade paper factory where the age old tradition of paper making is still followed.

For those that appreciate local crafts, we'll be stopping at various workshops to see a wide assortment of beautifully hand-woven textiles, paper, jewellery and artwork.

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Overnight - Thimphu (B, L, D)

Day 6 : National Museum and Kichu Lhakhang



Thimphu - Paro. Today we drive to Paro with sightseeing en route. We'll stop at Chuzom, the confluence of Paro (Pachu) and Thimphu (Wangchu) rivers which provides incredible views of three different types of Stupas – Bhutanese, Tibetan and Nepalese.

We continue, to Tachogang Iron chain bridge and Lhakhang (Temple) which was built by Thangthong Gyalpo in the fifteenth century. The temple was likely constructed in 1420. While the Tibetan master was meditating here, he had a vision of an emanation of Avalokiteshvara and decided to build a temple, as well as an iron suspension bridge at this location. A new temple at Tachogang was built in the seventeenth century by the Fourth Druk Desi (local leader) Tenzin Rabgye as the original was destroyed after it served as the main seat for the Five Groups of Lamas, a coalition of local leaders who had opposed Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (a Buddhist teacher who unified Bhutan).

Arriving into Paro we visit the National Museum, housed within the old watch tower Ta Dzong and perched on of a hilltop, overlooking the city. We continue to the famed Rinphung Dzong, the backdrop for the Hollywood film, Little Buddha. After lunch, we tour Kichu Lhakhang - one of the oldest temples in the Kingdom built in the 7th century, and lastly Duntse Lhakhang Temple. **Overnight - Paro (B, L, D)**

Day 7 : Tiger's Nest Monastery



Tiger's Nest Monastery, officially Taktshang Pelphung Monastery is regarded as one of the most venerated and famous of Bhutan's monasteries. It is located on the face of a sheer 900m cliff above the floor of Paro Valley. Today, we embark on a scenic hike (approx. 4 -6 hours) to view this spectacular and unmissable sight. The monastery is only accessible by foot (you can ride a pony part of the way, but this must be arranged in advance by your guide). Once inside the Monastery, there are a temples to see and the monks that reside. After exploring the monastery we retrace our steps and return to Paro.

This evening we enjoy a traditional Bhutanese dinner at a farm house, giving you the opportunity to interact with a local family and learn about the local cuisine of Bhutan.

NOTE: At any point during this walk, you can return if you find it too difficult, though we would like to note that client feedback highlights today's trek as one of the most rewarding and worth continuing to reach the top.

Overnight - Paro (B, L, D)

Day 8 : Paro



Wednesday 30 September 2020. Today, our holiday sadly concludes after breakfast. Bidding farewell to your fellow travellers, a

departure transfer will take you to Paro airport to meet your onward flight.(B)

HOTELS

Highlighted below are some of the hotels which we frequently use on this tour, though we reserve the right to substitute these hotels to ones of a similar standard.

Please refer to your Tour Voucher for your confirmed arrival hotel and further arrival information.

Nak-Sel Boutique Hotel & Spa

The eco friendly and community based Naksel Boutique Hotel and Spa tastefully combines traditional Bhutanese design with the comforts of modern living. Guest rooms include queen size beds, hard wood flooring and delightful en suite facilities with under floor heating. The hotel is home to Olive restaurant which serves up a mouth watering array of Bhutanese, Indian, Asian and Western cuisine. The onsite bar - Chabchu is great for relaxing at in the evenings. For the adventurous try a glass of the local favourite, Ara, Bhutanese rice wine.



Tashi Namgay Resort

Set amidst 5 acres of lush foliage, overlooking the beautiful Paro River, Tashi Namgay is a picturesque and peaceful resort with an authentic Bhutanese ambience. The hotel offers 47 uniquely designed, spacious guest rooms, a modern gym, bar and spa where the traditional Bhutanese hot stone bath is not to be missed! Tashi Namgay is just 10 minutes drive from Paro Airport.



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Mo Chu River Camp

A short drive from Punakha, the Mo Chu River Premium Camp sit on the banks of the River Mo Chu. Our accommodation tonight is set up 8 kilometres from the centre of Punakha on the banks of the Mo Chu River. We camp in two man walk in tents (twin/double sharing), which include thick mattresses, all bedding and towels. A toilet tent is built for the evenings stay, as is a shower tent (with hot water!) and there is also the option to try out a traditional hot stone bath. There is a central area with space to relax around a camp fire and the cook team will create traditional Bhutanese meals which will be served in the dining tent.



Hotel Migmar

Opened in 2010, Hotel Migmar is designed in classic Bhutanese style. Guest rooms are very colourful with wooden flooring and free wi-fi access. The hotel also has an onsite restaurant serving up a range of Asian cuisines, including Bhutanese and Indian. Those wishing to really relax whilst visiting should take advantage of the steam bath and meditation rooms that are available to guests. Located in the southern suburbs of Thimphu in a quiet neighbourhood.



Ramada Valley Thimphu

Boasting an idyllic location on the banks of the Wang Chu River, Ramada Valley Thimphu is the perfect base for exploring Thimphu. Each spacious guestroom is tastefully decorated with elements of the local culture and features free WiFi and other modern amenities alongside large windows offering stunning views of the

surrounding landscape. The guestrooms are complemented by a range of facilities including a spa and sauna, fitness centre, bar and riverside restaurant. Dine indoors or al fresco and enjoy a range of local Bhutanese and international dishes.



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Bhutan Country Guide

Arriving to Bhutan

Upon arriving to Bhutan, you will need to declare the following personal items to customs officials: personal cameras & video recorders, laptops, mobiles, or any other electronic device. Upon departing the country, a check will be made to ascertain that these items have indeed left with you. If bringing in tobacco products to the country you will need to pay a tobacco tax upon arrival. Ensure that you have taken enough with you to last the duration of your visit as the sale of tobacco products in Bhutan is prohibited.

Shopping in Bhutan

The handicraft industry is much smaller in Bhutan than neighbouring countries as less tourists visit the destination but there are plenty of shops in Thimphu which sell a range of goods including wooden bowls, handmade paper, jewellery, masks, prayer wheels and thanckas. Bhutan is renowned for its brightly coloured and boldly designed stamps, so it's paradise for stamp collectors.

Bargaining is not acceptable in Bhutan and goods are offered at fixed prices. Bartering is seen as offensive so should not be tried.

Not like Home

Travelling to far-flung corners of the earth often involves encountering lifestyles and conditions that are very different from what you are used to back home. As

such it is important to come prepared for unusual situations, local inadequacies and unpredictable events as and when they occur. Foreign travel is definitely not suitable for people who expect or demand everything to go exactly as planned, as things can and do change in foreign countries.

The people, customs, creed and languages are different from one region to the next. Bhutan is a country of unparalleled contrasts, a destination where you'll be afforded plenty of unique encounters, and if you can travel with an open mind you will have a wonderful time here. In return, please remember to demonstrate sensitivity and respect for local customs.

Duty Free Allowances

Travellers are permitted to bring the following into Bhutan:

- 1L of alcoholic beverages
- Personal effects
- The sale of tobacco is banned in Bhutan. Tourists can import 200 cigarettes or three 50g tins of tobacco for personal consumption, but these are subject to 100% tax

Visa Conditions - Arrival & Departure

If travelling on any of our Bhutan GROUP tours your arrival to Bhutan must be on day 1 and departure on the final day of your tour. This is a condition of the Group Tourist Visa which we are applying for on your behalf. On our Group tours we do not offer pre tour or post tour accommodation. If it is your intent to include additional days to your holiday, you would not be able to join any of our group tours but instead we can arrange a private tour, tailored exclusively to your arrival and departure dates.

Currency

The currency in Bhutan is the Bhutanese Ngultrum, however, the Indian Rupee (INR) can be used as well.

Pound Sterling, US Dollars or other major currencies can be exchanged in Bhutan at the airports and in banks. Visa and AMEX are accepted by some bigger hotels and business

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establishments mostly confined to the larger towns such as Thimphu and Paro.

Traveller's Cheques are not recommended and ATMs don't often accept international cards, so we recommend taking your budgeted amount in cash and exchanging locally. Please also note that most banks are closed over festivals and public holidays.

Religion

Buddhism is Bhutan's official religion and is practiced by approximately 75% of the population. Most of the remaining practice Hinduism and freedom of religion is guaranteed by the King. Buddhism plays an important role in Bhutan.

Voltage, Time & WiFi

Bhutan is 6 hours ahead of Greenwich Meantime and does not observe Daylight Saving.

Standard voltage is 220 volts. Primary sockets generally require Indian round 3 pin plugs that are similar but not identical to European plugs, however, you will also find those which require the European or British variety. We recommend that you pack a universal travel adaptor. You will need a voltage converter and plug adaptor in order to use U.S. appliances.

Most hotels in Bhutan have a WiFi connection and there are some restaurants and cafes in the main cities that have WiFi. Expect the download speed to be slower and the connection less secure than what you might be used to at home.

Visa Requirements

Please be advised that visa requirements are subject to change. Please also ensure that your passport is valid for at least 6 months from your planned date of departure from Bhutan.

All nationalities require a visa for a visit to the Kingdom of Bhutan. Your visa for Bhutan will be arranged and procured by our office in India/Nepal. In order for us to arrange your visa for you, we require a scanned copy of your passport at least 4 weeks prior to your date of arrival in Bhutan. Once the visa is

approved, we will email you a copy of the visa approval letter, which you must carry with you. You will be required to present your visa approval letter in order to board the flight to Bhutan and upon arrival at Paro Airport, the visa will be stamped in your passport.

Health Requirements

You should seek medical advice before travelling to Bhutan from your local health practitioner and ensure that you receive all of the appropriate vaccinations. As a guide Diphtheria, Tetanus, Typhoid, Hepatitis A and Polio are strongly recommended. You may also be advised to take anti-Malarial medication.

WATER

As tap water is not safe to drink in Bhutan, only drink bottled mineral water which is readily available in hotels, shops and restaurants. You should also avoid salads which may be washed in unhygienic water, as well as ice in drinks.

Altitude Sickness

An altitude of over 3,000 meters is defined as high altitude and given parts of Bhutan are higher than this level, it is possible to experience differing degrees of symptoms which include headaches, nausea, dizziness, fatigue and shortness of breath. These symptoms will usually decrease in severity during acclimatization and mild cases of altitude sickness should not interfere with light activity. It is important not over exert yourself if travelling to altitude and drink plenty of fluids and eat carbohydrate food to keep the body properly hydrated. Please report any symptoms of Altitude Sickness immediately to your tour guide.

Preparing For Your Trip

If your tour includes hiking, it makes a lot of sense to spend some time getting some additional exercise, before coming on a holiday that includes some trekking. The fitter you are, after all, the more enjoyable you will find the experience and spend time enjoying the views instead of catching your breath. Though for most days, the included hiking is approximately 2 – 3 hours long (4 - 6 up to the Tiger's Nest Monastery), which for most

travellers would seem easy enough, many of these treks are through a variety of terrains which includes uneven steps, up and down hills and valleys etc. So to prepare, take a number of long walks in hilly country and wear in your new hiking boots prior to this holiday.

What to Pack

What to Pack

- Suitcase or frameless backpack/rucksack if preferred
- Small day bag for your camera, water, sunglasses, i-Pod etc.
- Please see the heading 'Etiquette' for recommendations on what/what not to wear
- Personal first aid kit
- Hiking boots and woollen socks too if partaking in any trekking
- Sunglasses, hat, umbrella, money belt
- DEET - based industrial strength mosquito/insect repellent
- High factor sunscreen and bathers/swim costume
- Anti-bacterial hand gel/wet wipes and flat pack toilet paper/tissues
- Universal adapter
- Two spare passport photos and a photocopy of your passport in case of loss or theft
- Spare camera batteries, especially if you possess a digital camera, which requires specialist high-power batteries
- A torch
- Your travel insurance policy details
- Warm clothing - raincoat, warm hat, socks, gloves etc as wet/dry and hot/cool climatic periods change invariably
- Pack as light as possible to leave room for the souvenirs!

Climate in Bhutan

With its location in the Himalayas and the variation in altitudes that this brings, Bhutan experiences a widely varied climate. Bhutan's climate is also influenced by the Indian monsoons that bring rain at certain parts of the year. The monsoons in Bhutan are from June - September bringing heavy rains and high humidity. Autumn is from October to November when it's generally sunny with some snow at higher elevations. Late November to early March is dry with pre-monsoon showers starting in May.

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The best time to visit Bhutan is during the spring (late February to early May) when the valleys come alive with flowers in bloom. Another good time to travel is throughout November till early December where the Himalayan peaks are most visible with the clear skies and the weather is dry.

Food in Bhutan

Bhutanese food is very simple but delicious and each region has its own specialities. Most meals consist of meat (yak, chicken, pork or beef) and vegetables, which are accompanied with rice, and chilies feature in almost all recipes. A popular dish is Ema Datshi which is simply made of cheese and chillies - it's tasty but very hot. When it comes to snacking, fried yak skin is a popular choice. Tibetan specialities such as momos (a type of dumpling) and noodles are also popular in Bhutan and western food is becoming more prevalent in cities.

There is a huge number of vegetarians in Bhutan so finding delicious, meat-free meals is easy. All kinds of plant life is included in Bhutanese cooking such as nettles, ferns, orchids and a huge variety of mushrooms. A common drink found across the country is yak butter tea – an acquired taste but certainly something worth trying. Sprite, Fanta and Coke are readily available, diet versions are hard not. Beer is also available with most meals.

Hot, hot, hot!

The biggest problem most travellers have with Bhutanese food is the liberal use of chilli in almost every single dish. For those with a sensitive palate, try and ask for food without chilli and if you have no luck there, stick to rice and momos.

Entrance Fees & Tipping in Bhutan

On our Bhutan group tours, entrance fees to all included sightseeing are included within the cost of your tour. Should you wish to visit sites not noted within our itinerary during your free time the cost (if any) would be payable at the entrance to the site.

While tipping is not compulsory in Bhutan, the majority of workers, especially those in the tourism industry such as guides, only have work for around half or quarter of the year and therefore tips are incredibly valuable for making up their income. USD\$15 per day for your tour guide and USD\$10 per day for the driver is a suitable amount to leave as a tip from a group of two. In restaurants it's standard to tip 10% on top of the final bill. Taxi fares can be rounded up and hotel porters should be tipped USD\$1 per bag.

Insurance

We will make every effort to ensure that your tour runs as smoothly as possible. However, we shall not be responsible for any changes and alterations in the itinerary due to unavoidable circumstances such as landslide, road blockage, flood, snow, political unrest, cancellation of flight, delayed arrival, sickness or accidents. Any extra cost incurring there of, shall be borne by yourself/upon consultation. It is therefore essential that you have comprehensive insurance to cover you for medical, personal accidents, cancellation.

Etiquette

Despite the inevitable ups and downs of travelling abroad, you will generally be shown great hospitality in Bhutan. In return, please demonstrate sensitivity and respect for the local customs. Bhutan is a conservative country; so care should be taken to dress respectfully in large cities and towns, for example when at markets or public places.

Here are some helpful tips:

- Temple Etiquette: Please take particular care when visiting religious places, such as temples and monasteries. Dress and behave appropriately - don't wear shorts or sleeveless tops and do not smoke or hold hands. Shoes and hats should be removed. Within temples no carvings, statues or deities should be touched. Photography is prohibited in certain sections of most sacred sites and please do not attempt to be photographed with Buddhist monks. If in doubt ask your local guide for further information.
- Don't try to sneak into temples, where your guide has advise you not to enter

- Never touch a carving or statue of a deity within a temple
- Do not touch locals on the head or point the soles of your feet at a person, religious shrine or image of a deity. This is very disrespectful
- Take care to dress conservatively and ensure that limbs are covered when entering any place of religion, dress modestly and respectfully. Hats, caps etc should be removed before entering the premise. Please refrain from smoking while on the premises and in public places
- Both ladies and gentlemen will need to dress conservatively and cover all shoulders and knees when visiting monasteries, dzongs and other religious site in Bhutan. Men and Women are not permitted to wear headgear or footwear at sacred sites in Bhutan - these must be removed prior to entry
- Bhutanese are conservative and mostly wear traditional dresses, ladies should avoid wearing clingy, tight or suggestive attire, and stick to cool, flowing cottons. T-shirts are fine!
- Beach attire is fine by a hotel pool, but ladies, avoid wearing bikini tops anywhere but by the pool
- Displays of intimacy are not considered suitable in public
- Ex-military style clothing should not be worn
- It is polite to ask permission before taking photos of people
- Use your right hand for giving, taking, eating or shaking hands as the left is considered to be unclean
- Don't be surprised if you are frequently the centre of attention when travelling around the country. Staring unabashedly is not a social taboo
- Do carry toilet paper with you (or adjust to the Bhutan habit of using water instead), but don't throw it down the toilet without first checking to see if there's a basket to put it in (narrow pipes clog easily)
- Don't be surprised to see men defecating or urinating in public when restrooms are not readily available. Women, in the same circumstance, tend to use cover of darkness and huddle in groups
- Photography is prohibited in certain sections of sacred sites. Do not attempt to be photographed with Buddhist bhikkus (monks) or to pose for photos with statues of Buddha or other deities or paintings

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- Do be open and friendly in conversations with locals - they can be quite talkative, asking strangers questions (about marital status, salary, etc.) that might be interpreted as overly personal in other cultures
- If you have scheduled your trip around a festival, you should bring formal clothing

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