

Bhutan

JEWEL OF THE HIMALAYAS

SAMPLE ITINERARY :: AUTHENTIC ASIA



Bhutan – It is one of the most beautiful and isolated places on earth and the last living Vajrayana Buddhist kingdom, where, during the seventh century, the teachings of the Buddha became the country’s state religion. Over the last twelve hundred years these timeless teachings of wisdom and compassion have infused every aspect of society.

Shocked by the disappearance of Tibet as an independent Buddhist state in the 1950s, Bhutan began emerging from its isolation, seeking a seat at the table of sovereign, modern nations. It is bravely setting out to do this in a manner that protects its unique Buddhist heritage and culture and its lush, unspoiled environment.

In Bhutan, the government’s official development policy first articulated by the former king, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuk is known as “Gross National Happiness”. Facing the daunting challenges of modernization and globalization, Bhutan balances economic development with other values: maintaining the integrity of spiritual and cultural traditions and good governance.

The results of the balance of values represented by “Gross National Happiness” are immediately evident to the visitor. Bhutan is a country where the vitality of traditional culture and the purity and beauty of the natural environment make this one of the most unique and appealing countries in the world.

Day 1 | Thimphu

Fly to Bhutan on Druk Air, the only airline with service into Bhutan. Authentic Asia will book the Druk Air flights which originate in either Bangkok, Singapore, Delhi, Calcutta, or Kathmandu.

Upon arrival in Paro, meet your guide and transfer to Thimphu, the permanent capital of Bhutan since 1955. It is the only capital in the world where there are no traffic lights, only three rotaries, and the police boxes are decorated with dragons. Upon arrival, check-in at the Taj Hotel.

The afternoon city tour starts at the Tibetan style Memorial Chorten, which houses a number of religious paintings and tantric statues. It is the focal point for the local worshippers in Thimphu who come to circumambulate the chorten throughout the day, speaking their mantras with their prayer wheels in hand. It is a great spot for “people watching” and is a gathering place for many of the older people who will often spend the whole day at the chorten, chatting with each other, turning the prayer wheels, and always smiling for a photograph!

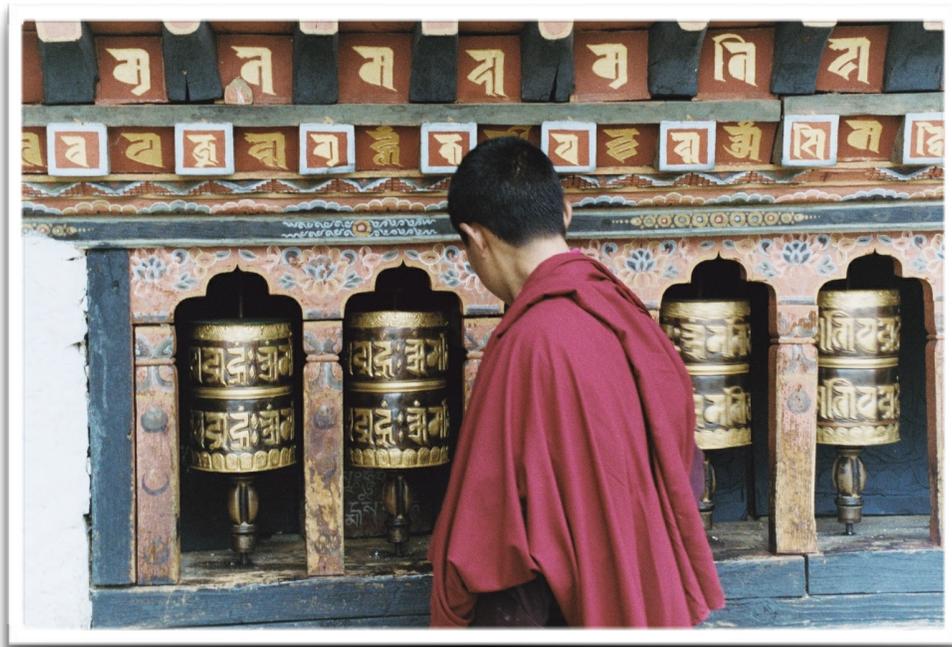
From here, continue on to visit the Painting School. Operated under the auspices of the Special Commission of Cultural Affairs, the school offers an eight year program which

provides instructions in many of Bhutan's traditional arts and crafts such as carving, textile weaving, thangka painting and more. You are welcome to visit the class rooms and chat with the students.

Accommodations: Taj Hotel

Day 2 | Thimphu

A morning excursion takes you to Cheri Monastery. The drive will take about 45 minutes and the hike up will take one hour at a leisurely pace. The views from the top are magnificent as the monastery is situated on the slopes of the mountains and overlooks the Thimphu Valley. You can sit and enjoy a cup of tea with the monks in one of the shrine rooms or listen to their mid-day chanting. Lunch will be served as a picnic at the bottom of the mountain next to the river, weather permitting.



Upon returning to Thimphu, stop by the Textile Museum which is operated under the auspices of one of the four queens. Not long after the opening of the National Textile Museum on June 12, 2001, Bhutanese textiles have reached new heights as one of the most visible traditional crafts and as a distinctly Bhutanese art form. The textile museum has opened its exhibition on six major themes - warp pattern weaves, weft pattern weaves, role of textiles in religion, achievements in textile arts, textiles from indigenous fibers, and the royal collection.

There will be time left today to stroll through the only main street of Thimphu where all the shops, the post office, and the UN Building are located. One place that should not be missed is the little paper making factory. Your guide will be happy to take you there. You can watch as the entire process of paper making, starting with tree bark and ending with colorful and beautifully designed paper. It is also a nice place for souvenir shopping.

If you happen to be in town during a weekend, you may want to visit the weekend market and watch an archery tournament. This takes place every Saturday and Sunday.

Accommodations: Taj Hotel

*“One’s destination is never a place, but a new way
of seeing things.”*

- Henry Miller

Day 3 | Punakha

Today we depart Thimphu and head up to Dochula Pass. On a clear day you can see the entire Himalayan Range from the top of the pass, which is covered with thousands of colorful prayer flags and 108 small memorial chortens. It is a truly magical scene!

From the pass we continue on to the town of Punakha where the climate is much different than the rest of Bhutan. It is almost tropical year round due to its low altitude, which makes it possible to harvest rice twice a year. Upon arrival we will check-in at the Zangdo Pelri Hotel.

Afternoon sightseeing in Punakha will include a visit to the Paro Dzong, which is considered to be the most beautiful dzong in the country. Dzong architecture is a distinctive type of fortress architecture found in the former and present Buddhist kingdoms of the Himalayas, most notably Bhutan. The architecture is massive in style with towering exterior walls surrounding a complex of courtyards, temples, administrative offices, and monk housing. Dzongs serve as the religious, military, administrative, and social centers of their district. They are often the site of a religious festival. The rooms inside the dzong are typically allocated half to administrative function (such as the office of the Penlop, or governor), and half to religious function, primarily the housing of monks. This division between administrative and religious functions reflects the idealized duality of power between the religious and administrative branches of government.

End the day with a late afternoon walk through a small village and the surrounding rice paddies to the Temple of the Divine Madman also known as Drukpa Kuenley. The temple stands as a symbol of fertility and hundreds of couples will bring their young children here to be blessed. The gentle hike takes you through a local village to the top of the hill. From here you will have wonderful views of the entire Punakha Valley and the confluence of the two rivers.

Accommodations: Zangdo Pelri Hotel

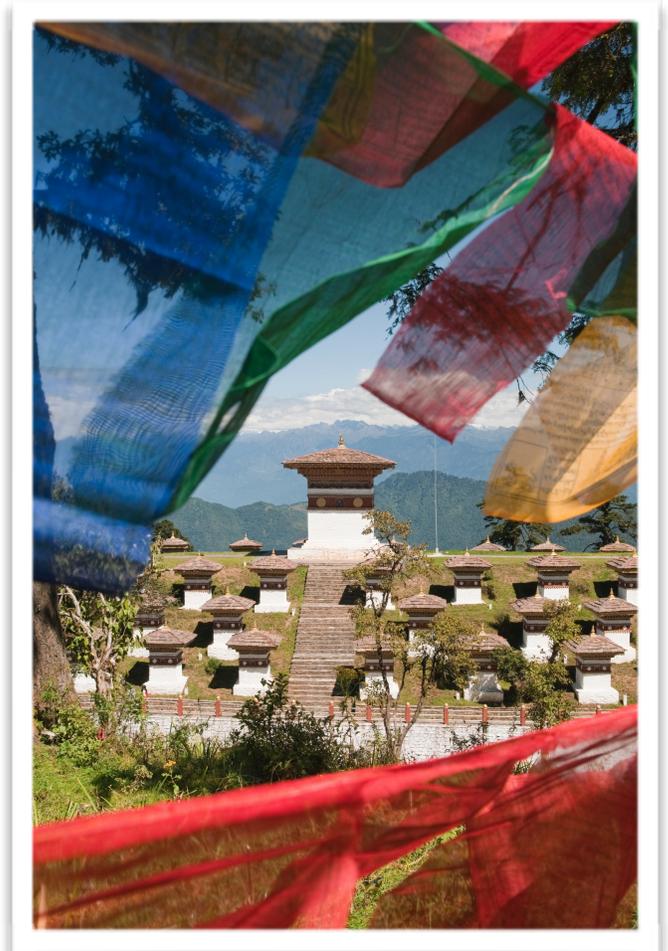
Day 4 | Trongsa

Today will be a long day of driving but it will allow you to really see the countryside and get a feeling for rural Bhutan. The driving time will be 7 to 8 hours with stops along the way. You will be crossing two more mountain passes and will stop for a picnic lunch at the famous Chendibji Chorten which, in the old days, was a mule halt for those traversing the country from East to West. The chorten itself is modeled after Swayambunath in Kathmandu.

The little town of Trongsa is set up high in the mountains, with a feel of a medieval village. Trongsa's location in the geographic center of the kingdom has enabled a Penlop to effectively control the entire East and West of the country from there. Ta Dzong, or the watch tower which once guarded the Dzong from internal rebellion, stands impressively above the Dzong and provides visitors with more insight into the historical significance of Trongsa in Bhutan's history.

Accommodations in Trongsa are very simple but come with Western bathrooms, hot water, electricity, heat, and a good dinner! The view from the hotel is unforgettable and breathtaking. Step onto your balcony in the morning and you will see the mist rising from the valley below while the sun breaks through the clouds and dips the entire landscape into a brilliant verdant green.

Accommodations: Sherubling Lodge



Day 5 | Jakar, Bumthang Valley

After breakfast depart for Bumthang Valley, the cultural and historic heart of the kingdom. Bumthang is the general name given to the complex of four valleys- Chumey, Choeker, Tang, and Ura. Today it is a district with administrative headquarters at Jakar. Here, the valleys are wide and open, and the mountains have relatively gentle slopes, which give the surroundings a feeling of spaciousness that is unequaled in any other part of Bhutan.

Bumthang was introduced to Buddhism by Guru Rinpoche in the 8th century and was the home of the famous saints of the Nyingmapa school such as Longchen Rabjampa, Dorje Lingpa and Pema Lingpa. After remaining more or less independent for centuries, Bumthang was conquered by the Drukpas in the middle of the 17th century.

“Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it or we find it not.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The drive will take about 2 hours. Upon arrival, check in at the Bumthang Mountain Lodge owned by Mr. Karma and his wife. This is a traditional Bhutanese family enterprise where Mrs. Karma cooks the best food in the valley! Mr. Karma is known as one of the best archers in the country.

In the afternoon, set out to explore some of the country’s most sacred temples where local people gather, make their offerings, and turn the prayer wheels.

Kurjey Lhakhang, Jambey Lhakang, and Tamshing Goemba are three of the most important temples. Leisurely walks through meadows and villages connect the temples and make for a pleasant afternoon of hiking and sightseeing. Most likely you will be able to witness one of many chanting ceremonies taking place in the monasteries.

Accommodations: Mountain Lodge

Day 6 | Jakar, Bumthang Valley

The morning starts with a trip to Membartsho or “Fire Lake”. The surroundings of the lake are covered with prayer flags, and small clay offerings called tse tsa are left behind

by the local worshippers. It is said that secret treasures and scriptures were once buried in the ground of the lake.

From here drive to a large nunnery which is operated under the auspices of Gangten Tulku, one of Bhutan's most senior lamas. Today you may join the nuns for a simple vegetarian lunch. Most of the nuns will speak English and you will have a chance to interact with them and learn more about their lives.

In the afternoon at around 4 p.m. we will take a short drive to a small monastery to witness the monks' debating ceremony. This is a lively event that takes place in the courtyard of the monastery. It is a daily practice during which the monks loudly debate amongst each other over questions surrounding the Buddhist doctrine. Watching the hand and body movements, an integral part of the debate ritual, is fascinating.

Accommodations: Mountain Lodge

Day 7 | Jakar, Bumthang Valley

After breakfast, drive further East to the small village of Ura. In this tiny village of about 30 houses time has stood still. Here, visit the local village school and meet with the headmaster.

You will be able to return to Jakar for a late lunch and some free time this afternoon.

NOTE: For those travelers who would like to include some hiking experience, we can offer an optional trip to Kunzandrak Monastery. This monastery is located completely off the beaten tourist path. Mr. Karma (who speaks English fluently) will accompany those who would like to participate in the excursion as the trail to the monastery leads through Mr. Karma's land and he is the main patron of the monastery. Once there, the views are breathtaking and the treasures inside this living monastery are ancient and invaluable.

Accommodations: Mountain Lodge

Day 8 | Paro

Take a morning flight back to Paro.

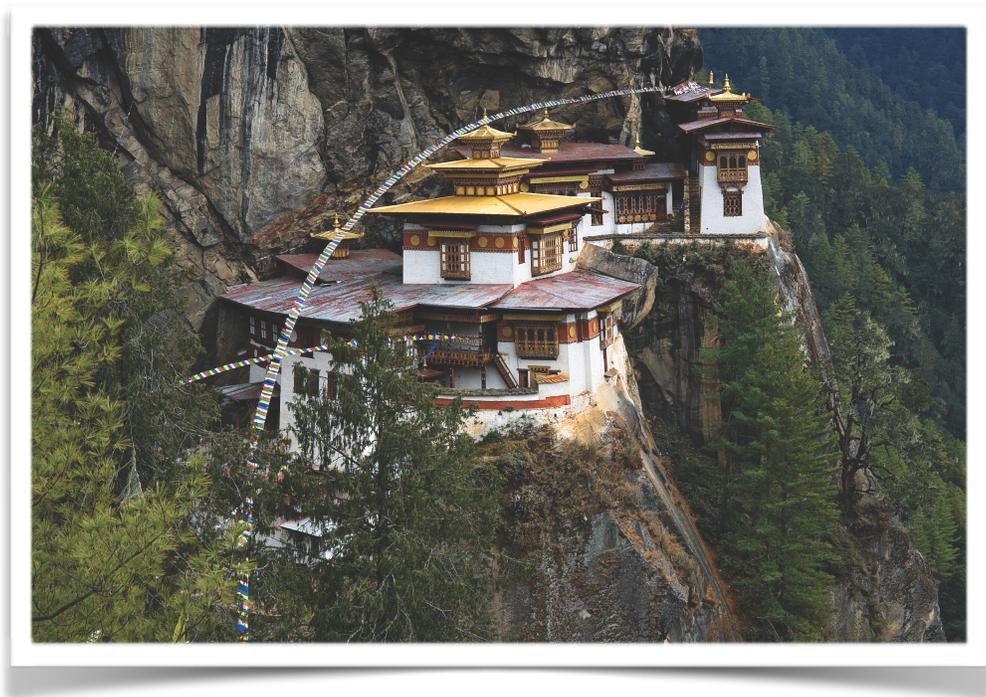
After settling in at the hotel, visit the Paro National Museum, housed in the Paro Dzong's ancient watchtower. The museum contains a wonderful gallery of thangkas, which offer a good insight into the complexity of Bhutanese iconography.

From here a short walk takes you down to the Paro Dzong, housing both the administrative and monastic body of Paro district.

Next stop will be the ancient temple of Avalokiteshvara at Kyichu, which is now being restored under the auspices of Bhutan's Queen Mother. It is one of the oldest temples in Bhutan dating back to the 8th century. The temple is located amidst beautiful countryside surrounded by rice paddies and fields dotted with traditional Bhutanese houses.

Accommodations in Paro will be at the Uma Resort which is set high atop the valley and offers wonderful 360-degree views of the surroundings.

Accommodations: Uma Resort



Day 9 | Paro

Today will mark one of the highlights of the trip...an excursion to the spectacularly located "Taktsang" also known as Tiger's Nest, and one of the 13 most venerated pilgrimage sites of the Himalayan world. It clings to sheer cliffs 3,000 feet above the valley and it gets its name from the story of its origin which states that, in the 8th century, Guru Rinpoche, who first introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, arrived to Taktsang on the back of a tigress. A pilgrimage to Taktsang is the dream of a lifetime for the devout. The path of enlightenment is lonely and narrow for the actual monks at

Taktsang who take turns meditating alone in a cliff side retreat for three years, three months, three weeks, and three days.

It will take you about one and a half hours to reach the monastery walking at a good pace. For those travelers who do not feel that they can make the walk it is possible to ascend on horse back.

A delicious vegetarian lunch is served in the little tea house on the way back down. Return to Paro in the afternoon for some free time to stroll through the town.

For dinner tonight, head to Ms. Sonam Trophel's restaurant in Paro. It is a must! She makes the best home cooked food in Bhutan, including her famous tomato soup and ginger chicken! The little restaurant is charming with only 8 tables. Bring your own wine to celebrate the end of your journey!

Accommodations: Uma Resort

Day 10 - Departure

You will be transferred to the airport for your departure flight.

End services.

The above is a sample itinerary which covers the highlights and also takes you off the beaten path. We would be happy to discuss your individual travel preferences and amend the itinerary accordingly.

Pricing is dependent on your choice of accommodations, time of the year that you will be traveling, the final itinerary, and the number of people in your group.

Should you wish to discuss your individual travel plans to Bhutan please do feel free to reach to us via e-mail at info@authenticasia.net or by phone at 1. 888.586.9958.



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