

Walking Matilda

A unique journey from the Mystical East to Western Bhutan
Featuring springtime flowers and the Yakchoe Festival

02 May – 16 May 2017

Escorted by Peter Kellett



Overview

This unique journey spans the length of Bhutan, from the relatively unvisited east of the country where life is lived at a rural subsistence level; over vast and rugged mountain ranges to Central Bhutan where the flatter landscape allows for cropping and small industry and on over the mist shrouded, eerie Black Mountains to the spectacular Phobjikha and Punakha valleys finally arriving in the west of Bhutan, influenced but not much changed by first world contact. This is a country of extreme reverence to Buddhism and the monarchy, where the Bhutanese way of life is fiercely protected, a peaceful but not wealthy land of spectacular beauty and undoubted spiritual attraction.

Itinerary

Day 1: Tuesday 02 May Kolkata - Arrival (INDIA)

Thai International and Singapore Airlines: Departures available from Adelaide / Perth / Brisbane / Sydney & Melbourne

On arrival, just before or after midnight and after clearing customs and immigration you will be met and transferred to the Swissotel Kolkata for an overnight stay. A driver will be waiting with a sign for groups and Individuals.

Overnight at the Swissotel Kolkata Airport

Ideally situated, the Swissotel Kolkata is a 5 star Deluxe hotel located in new town Rajarhat, just 3km from the Airport. It has shops, restaurants and a bar. The hotel has 147 contemporary guestrooms, a fitness centre, spa treatment rooms and a rooftop outdoor pool.

Day 2: Wednesday 03 May Kolkata / Guwahati - Samdrup Jongkhar (BHUTAN)

Meet your tour leader this morning at breakfast at 07.30am. You will leave straight after breakfast for the airport. You will need to check-in 2 hours before your flight. You must have your E Ticket and passport at the ready otherwise you may not be allowed to enter the Terminal.

Jet Airways (codeshare with India Jetlite)

9W 7048 Kolkata / Guwahati Departs: 10.35 Arrives: 11.50

Your Bhutanese, English speaking guide and the driver will be on hand to meet you as you exit the terminal building. The drive from Guwahati to Samdrup Jongkhar (the Eastern entry point to Bhutan) is 100kms and takes approximately 3 hours. Accommodation is limited in this frontier town, a meeting of vastly different cultures and customs.

Dinner and overnight at T.L.T Lodge

Eastern Bhutan is less developed than the western half of the country, the driving days are longer and the hotels are not of the same standard as those further to the Western (more visited) part of the country. They are clean and offer basic comforts such as hot water and private bathrooms. To compensate, the scenery is very dramatic and the villagers are very welcoming. This is the heartland of the Bhutanese textile tradition.

Day 3: Thursday 04 May

Samdrup Jongkhar – Trashigang

Today is a long drive from the border to Trashigang, taking about 6.5 hours and covering 180kms. The road has only been in existence since 1965. It peters out beyond Trashigang into dense forest abundant with teak, bamboo and tropical ferns. En route, pass through Deothang, the site of a famous 19th century battle fought during Duar Wars in which the Bhutanese Army led by Jigme Namgyel defeated the British Army.

The only higher educational institution in this part of the country is Sherbutse College in Kanglung, which was founded in 1978 and is affiliated with the University of Delhi. A number of foreign teachers from Canada and elsewhere are based here and Jamie Zeppa's 'Beyond the Earth and Sky' an enlightening book, written about life in the 1990's describes the joys and challenges faced by newcomers to Bhutan.

She also touches upon the clash of cultures in this region, not much experienced elsewhere in Bhutan as there is a refugee population from Nepal and Northern India who are Hindu. Bhutan operates a strict dress code, requiring its citizens to wear national dress during the day which can be exchanged for western or other dress in the evening. Buddhism is the only nationally recognised practice.

Continuing northwards, Trashigang is the largest and most populated valley in Eastern Bhutan, at an altitude of 1136m. Sharchop, the main language of the region is not spoken in Western Bhutan. After check in at the hotel, visit Trashigang Dzong which was built in the 17 century, spectacularly sited overlooking the river below.



Dinner and overnight at Kelling Lodge or similar

Day 4: Friday 05 May

Trashigang – Ranjung (Radhi) – Mongar



Another early start today, heading for the valley of Ranjung and stopping for a picnic lunch en route. The road descends from Trashigang to the banks of Gamri Chhu, taking around 3 hours and passing through many villages, terraced fields and past many chortens (stupas). A Tibetan Style Chorten, marks the final half hour before reaching Rangjung. An elaborate Chorten is situated in the centre of town. Visit the Ranjung Woesel Choling Monastery for monks, before a further half hour drive to the valley of Radhi (1630m), renowned throughout Bhutan for its weaving. Hike up to Tzangkhar village as most women weave in their own homes and specialise in fabrics made from Bura (raw silk). You will have the opportunity to wander in the village and visit their farm houses to see them work and

learn some Bhutanese weaving techniques. Many of the Kira (traditional female attire) take up to 6 months to produce and are often passed down through the generations of one family. Later in the afternoon you continue your drive to Mongar (1600m).

Dinner and overnight at Druk Zhongar or similar, 2 nights

Day 5: Saturday 06 May Mongar – Khoma – Mongar

Today there is an excursion to Lhuntse, another isolated district in Bhutan. It is a 2.5 hour drive from Mongar to Sumpa Zam (suspension bridge). An hour's walk from the bridge brings you to the main road of Lhuentse and then to Khoma village, the best known weaving village in the country. This region is famed for its weavers and special textiles with intricate designs unique to the area. This area is also well known for bamboo basket-ware made by the men. As is the custom weaving is done in private homes. As there is no hotel accommodation in Lhuntse we drive back to Mongar for another night

Dinner and overnight at Druk Zhongar

Day 6: Sunday 07 May Mongar – Ura – Ura Yakchoe

Set off for another long day of driving to the centre of Bhutan (The Bumthang Valley), where the landscape flattens and forests give way to crops. It is too cold here to grow rice, so potatoes, wheat and fruit trees abound. The journey from Mongar to Bumthang takes 7 hours to drive a mere 193 kms. Before reaching our destination, some of the most stunning scenery unfolds. The first hour of the drive descends through dense forests of chirpine into Limithang with its fields of corn and potatoes and fruit trees. From Limithang the road ascends through forests of rhododendrons (flowering April - June). The drive leaves



behind the isolated and rugged east with plenty of time to reflect on the sense of magic that pervades life in this truly isolated part of Bhutan. Then traverse the Thrimshingla National Park at 3,750m to perhaps glimpse the famous West Bengal Tiger, which has been migrating into the park from India. We will either camp or homestay in the enchanting Ura village, unique in Bhutan with its cluster of houses and cobblestone streets. The Ura Yakchoe is held annually in April / May to honour the revered Yak. Two hours beyond is Jakar, the main town of the Bumthang area.

Dinner and overnight at Ura – Home-stay or camp (to be confirmed)

Day 7: Monday 08 May Ura Valley – Yakchoe

The Ura valley in Bumthang is known for the famous dance known as the Ura Yakchoe. The dance is performed during a festival that is held every May. During the festival a sacred and important relic is put on display so that the people can receive blessings from it. According to legend an old woman sitting outside her house was visited by a lama asking for a drink of water. When she came out with the water, the lama had vanished leaving behind only a sack. Out of curiosity, she checked the bag and found the statue that is now displayed annually. This relic has been passed on from generation to generation and is still owned by the descendants of the woman.

Today is a day to visit the festival; to experience the colour and vibrancy of the dancing and to mingle among people from all walks of life who come in their finery to witnesses the dances, meet with friends and relatives and partake of the sideshow festivities such as archery, quoits and gambling Bhutanese style. The male dancers have bright costumes with elaborate masks or headdresses and lyrical folk Songs performed by the local women dressed in the most beautiful and precious kiras. Dances are mostly performed in honour of Guru Rimpoche, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan during the 8th century, though there are many other well known stories also told through the dance medium which the audience already know well. NB: Your guide will arrange the programme to suit the festival activities. Depart in the late afternoon for the Jakar Valley and more comfortable lodgings from which to do the remainder of our Bumthang Valley sightseeing.

Later in the afternoon, drive to Jakar (approx 2 hours)

Dinner and overnight at Rinchenling Lodge or similar

Day 8: Tuesday 09 May

Bumthang Valley Sightseeing

Recuperation day! A morning at leisure (yes you can get your washing done!) In the afternoon we visit Tamshing Monastery (one of the oldest monastic schools built by Terton Pema Lingpa) and Kurjey Lhakhang (where the Guru Rinpoche subdued a local demon and left his body imprint on a rock). Also visit Jambay Lhakhang (one of the oldest temples in Bhutan built in 7th century) and Jakar Dzong (seat of the district administration) and perhaps the nunnery. There may be time to visit some of the small industries in the valley – cheese and cider making in particular.

Dinner and overnight at Rinchenling Lodge or similar

Day 9: Wednesday 10 May

Bumthang – Trongsa – Gangtey

After breakfast, leave the Bumthang valley behind, stopping briefly at the weaver's co-operative – a joint Australian / Bhutanese Merino wool project where you can see ladies working on hand looms. The co-operative makes rugs and jackets from a mixture of yak and merino wools Crossing over Yotongla pass at 3,400m you reach Trongsa where the impressive **Trongsa Dzong**, ancestral home of the ruling dynasty spans the narrow valley and acts as a natural barrier between Western and Central Bhutan. For hundreds of years the Dzong commanded the passage between West and East Bhutan and everyone has to pass through the Dzong to pay their taxes before proceeding. Ta Dzong, an ancient watchtower, perched above the main Dzong, has an interesting display of Mongol armour.

The journey continues to Chendebji, the site of a Nepalese style chorten. After lunch, continue the drive to Gangtey via the Pelela Pass (3,300m) often swirling with eerie mists." The Central Road", across the Black Mountains, was completed 30 years ago, and it brought about great changes for the people in Central Bhutan. This pass is traditionally considered the boundary between West and East Bhutan. If the weather is clear the Himalayan ranges can be seen, particularly the peak of Jhomulhari (7,314 m). The turn off to Gangtey into the Phobjikha Valley, brings with it an immediate change in the vegetation – from trees dripping with lichen trails, to meadows of dwarf bamboo. It takes at least half an hour to descend to the bottom of this beautiful glacial valley. Here there are no electricity poles, in order to preserve the habitat of the migratory cranes which winter in the valley, having travelled from China. The Black Necked Cranes are deeply revered and it is one of the most important conservation areas in Bhutan. Generators and solar power supply the valley, so there are limited hours of electricity operation. If you are NOT here in November - March, the Cranes will be NOT be in residence.

Dinner and overnight at the Dewachen Lodge or similar

Day 10: Thursday 11 May

Phobjikha Valley (Gangtey)



Phobjikha is considered to be one of the most beautiful valleys in the Himalayas. After breakfast, starting at the Crane Observation Centre, walk around the valley being careful not to disturb the birds (if in residence). The road leads to the base of the monastery trail and climbs gradually through a forest of pine and daphne up to the Monastery, home to the 'Pemalingpa' sect of Buddhism, the oldest in Bhutan. The Monastery has recently completed a major renovation programme and many of its monks live in the attached village with their families. The Monastery was reconsecrated a few years ago by the new King. The views down onto the other side of the valley are breathtaking. There are two schools in the valley and we often take the

opportunity to drop in and take gifts of books and writing materials.

Dinner and overnight at the Dewachen Lodge or similar

Day 11: Friday 12 May

Gangtey – Wangdue – Punakha

Leaving the valley we make our way to the valley of Punakha travelling via Wangdue, one of the major towns and headquarters of Western Bhutan, even though this is just a village of a few streets and a market square. Partake of a cup of traditional Yak tea in the village. On arrival, after lunch we will visit Punakha Dzong, the winter home of the Je Khenpo and the Monk Body, sitting at the confluence of the Mo (Female) Chu and Pho (Male) Chu. Time permitting visit the magnificently decorated Khamsum Yuelley Chorten which is an energetic walk through rice fields and up the inevitable hill.

Dinner and overnight at Meri Puensum Lodge

Day 12: Saturday 13 May

Punakha – Thimphu



If yesterday's sightseeing was not completed we may take the opportunity to do that this morning.

We will retrace our steps and enter the valley of Lobesa. A 15 minute walk through the rice terraces and villages leads to the temple (Chime Lhakang) of "Divine Mad Man", one of Bhutan's most revered and eccentric saints. Chime Lhakang, built in the 15th Century is at the top of a small hill overlooking hillock overlooking the Puna tsangchu river belt. This site is visited by Bhutanese women who are infertile visit the temple in order to see a 'cure'. The saint is often depicted wielding a phallus and this image is also painted on local house to ward off evil spirits.

After the visit continue to Thimphu via the Docchula pass where we will stop for tea or lunch depending on the time. 108 Memorial Chortens now dot this area. On a clear day there is a view of the whole Himalayan range.

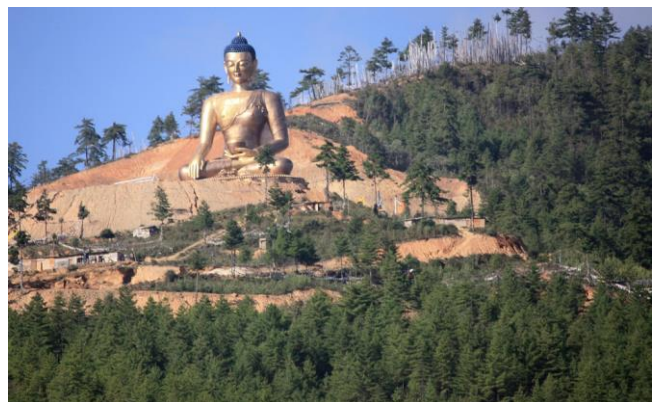
We continue to Thimphu and check-in to our hotel. Later In the afternoon you may wish to visit the weekly outdoor produce market, where everyone goes to buy fruit and vegetables, rice, grains, chillies, yak cheese and seasonal foods such as asparagus, field mushrooms and wild ferns. The crowded stalls offer many colourful local items such as yak-tail dusters, butter tea cups, turquoise and silver jewellery from Nepal and Tibet, antiques and musical instruments. The Handicrafts Emporium (Government sponsored) also has which has all types of good quality Bhutanese handmade products for sale. This is also one of the only places which will accept credit cards (American Express or Visa Card). Heavy surcharges generally apply to the use of credit cards.

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Druk or Jomolhari (or similar), 2 nights

Day 13: Sunday 14 May

Thimphu

Today is a day to see the sights of Thimphu which include the Dordenma Buddha, the Textile Museum, The Folk Heritage Museum, The National painting School and the Chorten dedicated to Jigme Wangchuk, the 3rd King of Bhutan. Admire the exterior of the National library and visit the Post office (to buy beautiful stamps) – optional. The markets are also open today, so a visit can be scheduled early to catch the best photo opportunities. An afternoon hike to Droeley Goempa can be arranged for those who would like a half day walk. Alternatively you can spend the remainder of the afternoon shopping, browsing and relaxing in Thimphu where there are many shops and galleries.



Dinner at a local restaurant.

Day 14: Monday 15 May

Thimphu / Paro



Make an early start for Paro after a hearty breakfast. The drive to Paro is now only 1 hour, so we continue the winding road to Drukgyal Dzong, the ruined fortress, which once defended this valley from successive Tibetan invasions. Continue the drive to Ramthangkha, where the road terminates and which is also the starting point for the hike up to the Taktshang monastery (Tiger's nest). The hike up to the teahouse (midway point) through forests of flowering

Rhododendron will take around two hours of at an average pace and is located above 2,950 meters (9,678 feet) above sea level. At the teahouse there is a stunning view of the monastery, where Guru Padmasambhava landed on the back of a tigress in the 8th century bringing Buddhism to Bhutan.

NB: the first part of the walk can be done on ponies wish you wish (extra cost). Continue the hike up to the monastery which contains thirteen holy places. Taktshang is one of the most venerated pilgrim sites of the Himalayan World. The monastic complex clings to the rock towering 900 meters above the valley (over 2,600 feet). A special permit is required for the visit and it is a very uplifting experience.

Afterwards retrace your route to the teahouse for lunch. After lunch, walk back down to the road to meet the vehicle and visit the ruined Drukgyel Dzong. The small hike is rewarded with a great view of Jomalhari in the distance. Often there is archery to be seen in the small village nearby and some of the best examples of painted houses are to be found here as well. Time permitting we can visit the small but beautiful Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples in Bhutan. The National Museum sited near a 12th Century watchtower is also worth a visit. Alternatively visit the hotel spa or partake of a traditional hot stone bath.



Dinner and overnight: Metta Resort and Spa

Day 15: Tuesday 16 May

Depart Paro

In the morning your Bhutanese escorts will bid you farewell at Paro airport. Fly Bangkok to connect to Thai International or Singapore airlines (via Singapore).

KB 500	Paro / Bangkok	Depart: 07.50	Arrive: 16.10 (via Kolkata)
TG 475	Bangkok / Sydney	Depart: 19.20	Arrive: 07.00 (Wednesday 17 May)
TG 473	Bangkok / Brisbane	Depart: 23.59	Arrive: 11.50
OR			
SQ 979	Bangkok / Singapore	Depart: 18.30	Arrive: 21.55
SQ 279	Singapore / Adelaide	Depart: 23.10	Arrive: 07.30

- **Flights are examples**

END OF ARRANGEMENTS

Tour cost:

Twin Share: USD 5,645

Single Supplement: USD 500

Based on a minimum of 6 participants. This tour may be offered as a locally escorted departure if minimum numbers are not achieved.

Bhutan Package Inclusions:

- Druk Airfare Paro / Bangkok + Jet Airways Kolkata / Guwahati
- Accommodation Bhutan in A Class hotels and lodges
- All meals in Bhutan
- Local English speaking guide and driver in Bhutan
- Air conditioned vehicle with bottled water on board
- All sightseeing and entrance fees
- Visa fee and Tourist Development fee
- Bottled water in the vehicles

Exclusions:

- International airfares
- Tips to drivers and guides – suggested USD 200 pp
- Items of a personal nature
- Beverages
- Travel insurance (compulsory)
- Indian visa fee / application (online application)

NB: Itinerary and accommodation arrangements are subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances and beyond the control of Travel on Q and local Bhutanese operators. Hotels and lodges will be of an equivalent standard if changed.

Walking Matilda returns the right



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