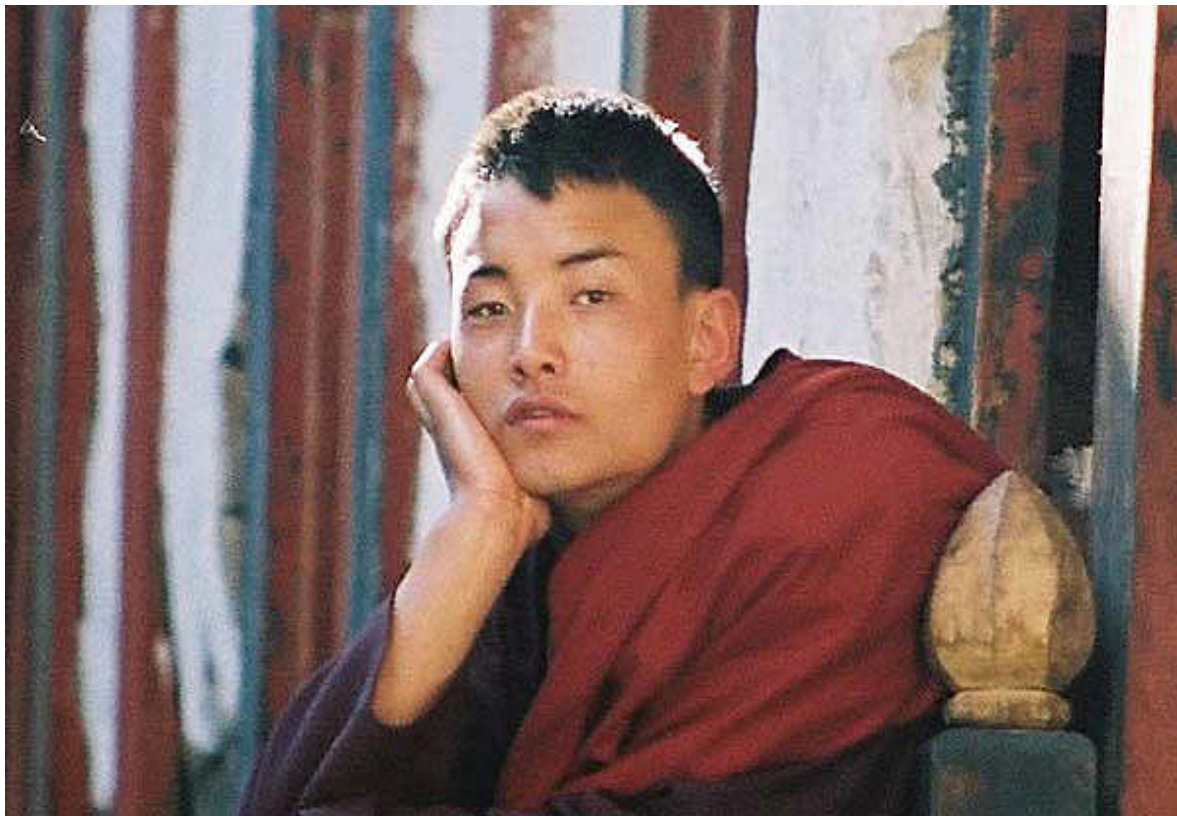


# TRAVEL ON

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## 'INSPIRATIONAL BHUTAN'

**(Springtime walking and the Paro Festival)**



**28 MARCH - 12 APRIL 2015 - WALKING MATILDA**

**13 NIGHTS IN BHUTAN**

**Saturday 28 March: Sydney / Singapore on Singapore Airlines**

**SQ 232 Sydney / Singapore Departs: 12.10 Arrives: 17.20**

On arrival you will be transferred to your hotel. Meet with your tour leader, Peter Kellett this evening.

**Overnight: Crowne Plaza Hotel (Airport)**

**Dinner on your own account**

**Day 1: Sunday 29 March****Singapore – Paro – Paro Festival (Tshechu)****Druk Air - KB 501 - Departs: 06.30 am    Arrive: 10.40 via Kolkotta**

Check-in by 05.00 am for the **Druk Air** flight to Paro. Ask for seats on the left hand side of the aircraft for the best view of the Himalayas. A spectacular descent through mountainous valleys brings you into the Kingdom of Bhutan where the impressive airport terminal is your first glimpse of what's ahead. After completing the airport formalities, you will be met outside the terminal building by your driver and English speaking guide who will be your hosts in Bhutan.

After hotel check-in and time permitting, and subject to the Festival schedule, you may wish to walk to the Festival grounds as the Tshechu will be in progress. There are dances throughout the day and a local market for antiques, silverware, artifacts and textiles. You may even wish to consult a traditional soothsayer.

**Overnight: Metta Resort and Spa: Dinner at a local restaurant****Day 2: Monday 30 March****Paro sightseeing**

After a casual breakfast, visit the Kyichu Lhakang, built in 659 by King Songsten Gampo of Tibet. The Lhakang holds down the left foot of an ogress whose body covers the whole of Bhutan and Tibet. Nowadays the Lhakang is a haven for elderly Bhutanese who spend their days meditating, praying and spinning their prayer wheels. We then visit the National Museum, housed in a 16th century watchtower above the Dzong. After lunch drive past the exterior of the Ugyen Pelri Palace, residence of the former Queen Mother. It is beautiful example of Bhutanese architecture. Alternatively we may visit a local Bhutanese family and partake of butter tea.

**Overnight: Metta Resort and Spa: Dinner at the hotel****Day 3: Tuesday 31 March****Paro – Haa – CAMP – 3 day / 2 night walk**

After breakfast, we head off to the Haa Valley via the Chele-La Pass. This is the highest road pass in Bhutan at 3,810 m and offers superb views over large areas of the Himalayas. There is then a 26 km descent to Haa which was closed to the outside world until 2002 as it was on the ancient route to Tibet. There is a military camp for the Indian Army stationed here. In the afternoon visit Lhakhang Karpo (temple of the white dove), a monastery believed to have been built in the 8th century by the Tibetan King, Songtsen Goenpo, after he sent two doves (one black and one white) to find a sacred place to build a monastery.

The first night's camp will be at the beginning of the trek in a village called Yangtong. Your campsite crew will have set up in anticipation of your arrival. There are 2 person tents with a groundsheet, sleeping mat and camp pillow, a cook tent and a loo tent. All gear is carried in canvas duffel bags by ponies. Please ensure that you put your gear in a waterproof zip up cabin bag. You only need to take the bare minimum and a sleeping bag as these are not provided.

**Overnight: Camp**

NB: The rest of your luggage is stored at the hotel.

#### **Day 4: Wednesday 01 April Haa – Khadey Gom – CAMP**

**Hike Day 1.** *Distance: 8 km. Total altitude gain: 500m; Duration: 4-5 hours; Campsite elevation: 3,235 m: Level of difficulty: Easy to moderate.*

The trek starts today. After breakfast, there is a short sharp climb (150m) to Goemba village, to a temple dedicated to the Buddhist saint Guru Rinpoche. The trail continues on through the village of Talung. After passing through some lovely countryside for an hour and a half or so, you will reach tonight's campsite, Khadey Gom, where a rock with two eyes and a distorted mouth is a feature. This rock is believed to be created by of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist saint Thangthong Gyalpo who, on his quest for iron ore in Bhutan, fought a demon, subduing it by slashing its mouth and turning it into a rock.

**Overnight: Camp**

#### **Day 5: Thursday 02 April Khadey Gom – Dongney Tsho - CAMP**

**Hike Day 2.** *Distance: 8 km; Total altitude loss: 35m; Duration: 5-6 hours; Campsite elevation: 3,200m: level of difficulty: easy to moderate*

A gradual hike of about an hour through the pines is followed by another 2 hour climb to the Saga-La Pass, which, as is common at the heads of passes in Bhutan, is marked by prayer flags and mini stupas. Views here are fabulous in all directions. East is the Paro valley with Drugyel Dzong where the trek ends and the sacred Taktshang (Tiger's Nest Monastery - see Day 7). To the north and west lie snow covered mountains on the Tibetan border, particularly the sacred Mt. Jomolhari (7,315m) and Jo Drake (6,794m).

**Overnight: Camp**

#### **Day 6: Friday 03 April Dongney Tsho – Drugyel Dzong (Paro)**

**Hike Day 3.** *Distance: 7 km; Total altitude loss: 620 m; Duration: 3 hours; Level of difficulty: Easy to moderate*

The first part of today's hike is a steep downhill trail for about 1.5 hours, through thick vegetation and much birdsong, until you reach a bridge (Genchu Zam). We then walk through Chodeyphu, a beautiful small village set at the base of the mountain, Lom Bjara. Another hour or so from this village brings us to the road, where the walk ends. Our bus and driver meet us and we return to our hotel in Paro where our luggage and hot showers await!

**Overnight: Metta Resort: Dinner at the resort or in town.**

#### **Day 7: Saturday 04 April Unfurling of the Tongdrel / Paro-Thimphu**

You will be woken at a seriously early hour (approx 2am) to depart for the festival grounds to witness the unfurling of the Tongdrel, an enormous and intricately embroidered banner which is slowly lowered from the top of the building facing the courtyard, to the accompaniment of clashing cymbals, horns and chanting (the culmination of the festival). This is preceded by a ceremony in which sacred objects are taken by monks from the Dzong to the festival courtyard. The rest of the monk body then follows in procession.

Don't be surprised if you see young monks yawning and desperately trying to stay awake while others are enthusiastically chanting. The whole scene is illuminated with butter lamps. Locals press forward to touch the Tongdrel, give alms and receive a blessing from the head monk. Be brave and join the press to receive a blessing!

The Tongdrel cannot be exposed to direct sunlight and is rolled up again before mid morning. This is an amazing and moving experience not to be missed! **Return to the hotel around 6.00am for a mini sleep.**

NB: Be sure to wear your warmest clothing (hat, coat and gloves!)

### **Day 7 continued: Thimphu**

After a late breakfast, depart for Thimphu, a lovely drive of about 1.5 hours along the valley floor. Immaculately tended rice terraces and traditional Bhutanese homes with their colourful woodwork and whitewashed walls decorated with Buddhist motifs cling to the hillsides. You will see spring flowers among the forested slopes. On arrival in Thimphu visit the National Heritage Museum, the Textile Museum and the Memorial Chorten to Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third King of Bhutan. Lunch will be at a local restaurant before hotel check-in and further sightseeing or independent exploration and shopping.

**Overnight: Hotel Bhutan Suites. Dinner at the Hotel or a local restaurant**

### **Day 8: Sunday 05 April Thimphu and Tangbo Monastery**

In the morning visit Sangaygang, for a glorious view over the valley and Thimphu Dzong. Return to Thimphu via the Molithang Preserve for a quick look at the Takin, the national animal of Bhutan, a rare and strange creature looking like a cross between a cow and a yak. Also visit the Zilukha Nunnery, one of the few in Bhutan.

#### **Afternoon excursion – Optional**

Drive out of Thimphu to a neighboring valley. The hike up to the Tangbo Monastery (a sharp little muscle stretcher of about 1 hour) offers wonderful views of the distant snow covered mountains. Return to Thimphu in the late afternoon.

**Overnight: Hotel Bhutan Suites. Dinner at the *Royal Bhutan Golf Club***

### **Day 9: Monday 06 April Thimphu – Punakha**

Today, we set off early for a stunning day's driving up and over the Docchu-La Pass east of Thimphu, at 3,140m, where on a clear day you can see the whole Himalayan range. After morning tea, continue the journey through forested mountains and on to the turn off to the Punakha Valley. The terrain is wild, mountainous and ever changing. En route, we stop to take a short hike of about 30 minutes to the temple of the Divine Madman. Then turn off the main road to enter the beautiful Punakha valley.

On arrival, check into our guesthouse hotel with commanding views over the valley. After lunch, visit the magnificent Punakha Dzong built at the confluence of the Mo Chhu and Po Chuu rivers. This is perhaps the most architecturally impressive of the Dzongs that we will see. Dzongs perform the dual role of home to the monk body and are also the administrative centre of the region, so you will see many well dressed lay people coming and going. All men who enter the Dzong precinct must wear a ceremonial scarf over their gho and the colour of the scarf worn denotes a man's rank.

We then cross the bridge spanning the river further up the valley and **hike** (or drive) to a highly decorated temple, The Khamsum Yuelley Chorten; a modern temple in the traditional style, built by the Queen mother and well worth the visit for its beautiful paintings and fantastic view down the valley and over the Dzong.

**Overnight: Hotel Meri Puensum: Dinner at the guesthouse.**

**Day 10: Tuesday 07 April****Punakha – Phobjikha**

Our first stop today will be Wangdue Phodrang where there will be a local fruit and vegetable market in progress with local delicacies such as wild fern and asparagus. Wangdue also has a very impressive village prayer wheel. Continue through the Black Mountains to the Phobjikha Valley through a series of spectacular switchbacks climbing to a height of 3,300m. The scenery changes dramatically on entering this high glacial valley, from vast lichen covered forests to pastures of dwarf bamboo. A wide marshland valley opens up before us as we descend to the valley floor, home to the migratory Black Necked Crane, which winters in the valley between October and March, so you may just be lucky to see a few remaining stragglers. To preserve the birds' habitat, there are no electricity wires in the valley, all homes operating on solar power.

**Overnight: Thekchen Phodrang Lodge or similar. Dinner at the Lodge**

**Day 11: Wednesday 08 April****Phobjikha**

Today it's time for a walk around the valley, skirting the marshlands, and visiting the local villages. This is a mainly flat walk and its length can be altered to suit (2-3 hours). There are two small local schools, one at either end of the valley and the children are always delighted to see you. If you have any spare books, crayons, koala bears, etc, they will find grateful recipients here. After lunch, visit the recently restored Gangtey Gumpa, one of the oldest monasteries in Bhutan, then retrace your steps out of the valley back to Wangdue, arriving late afternoon at the evocative *Kyichu Resort* vegetarian resort on the banks of the fast flowing Dan Chhu River.

**Overnight: Kyichu Resort – Dinner at the Lodge**

**Day 12: Thursday 09 April****Wangdue – Thimphu - Paro**

After breakfast continue back towards Thimphu (2-3 hours), stopping at the Botanical Gardens. We then hike from Lampelri to Dochola for 2 hours through the deep forest of rhododendrons, fir, spruce, oak, magnolia before finally reaching the Dochola cafeteria where we will have lunch. Afterwards, drive to Thimphu to visit the Changangkha Lhakhang. This is the last place to purchase books and good quality antiques, Thankas and other artifacts. A good government run emporium accepts credit cards. Most other stores do not accept cards and some will only accept cards with a high surcharge. It is best to have enough USD or Euros for all your purchases. 500 USD should be enough. In the late afternoon we continue to Paro in readiness for Tiger's Nest tomorrow.

**Overnight: Metta Resort and Spa: Dinner at the hotel**

**Day 13: Friday 10 April****Paro – Tiger's Nest walk**

After breakfast, we will hike up to Taktstang (Tiger's Nest Monastery) the most photographed monastery in Bhutan, perched 900m above the valley floor. It is so named because Bhutan's most famous saint, Guru Rimpoche flew here on the back of a tigress from Pakistan and is credited with bringing Buddhism to Bhutan. The first half of the walk can be done on pony back but otherwise the walk itself takes about 2 hours each way at an easy pace. A teahouse marks the halfway point, which is the lunch stop on the return journey and offers fabulous views of this man made wonder which seems to hang in mid air. The footprint of the Guru can be seen in the small rock cave where he meditated for 3 months. This is a strenuous uphill climb and you may experience some shortness of breath at the top, so adequate water supplies, a hat and sunscreen are essential.

On the way back into Paro, we will also visit the Drukgyel ruined Dzong and the village of painted houses, nestled at the base of the Dzong. There may be an opportunity to witness or participate in some archery – the National sport of Bhutan.

Treat yourselves to a spa, massage or hot stone bath at the hotel.

**Overnight: Metta Resort and Spa: Farewell Dinner at a local restaurant.**

**Day 14: Saturday 11 April**

**Depart Bhutan**

After an early breakfast depart for the airport (about 15 mins) to check in for the homeward flight. Here you will bid goodbye to your guide and driver and the Kingdom of Bhutan.

**DRUK AIR**

**KB 500**

**Paro / Singapore**

**Departs: 07.10**

**Arrives: 15.30**

You can book day use rooms at the Singapore Transit hotel if you wish. There is also a lounge entry pass that can be purchased.

**Singapore Airlines**

**SQ 279**

**Singapore / Sydney**

**Departs: 20.15**

**Arrives: 05.55 (12 April)**

## **END OF ARRANGEMENTS**

**NOTE:** The itinerary and hotels are subject to change at the discretion of the operator, due to local conditions. Druk Air Schedules are also subject to change.

### **INCLUSIONS:**

- Singapore Airlines economy class airfare and taxes included
- Airfares Singapore / Paro / Singapore inclusive of tax
- 1 night Singapore hotel accommodation and return transfers

### **In Bhutan:**

- Fully escorted locally by English speaking guide+ Australian tour escort(s)
- Local transport and driver
- 13 nights in "A" class hotels and lodges wherever possible, subject to availability
- All camping equipment except for a sleeping bag (needed for the Saga-La Trek)
- Visa issue and processing
- All meals, and snacks en route including bottled water in the mini-coach
- All entrance fees, permits and Tourist Development Tax

### **NOT INCLUDED:**

- Alcoholic beverages (except on special dinners)
- Tips to local guides, drivers and porters (suggested amount \$10 - \$15 USD per day)
- Items of a personal nature purchased locally
- Internet and phone charges
- **SLEEPING BAG (see above)**
- Travel insurance (compulsory)

### **BOOKING NOTES:**

- A completed booking form and a non refundable deposit of \$500 are required
- Travel insurance is compulsory
- Participants must be walk fit, able to walk 5-6 hours per day
- Any pre-existing conditions must be declared