

Threads of Bhutan

A textile journey from east to west

11 October - 26 October 2016

Escorted by Christina Sumner OAM



TRAVEL ON 

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Tour Snapshot



The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is no ordinary destination for travellers, and nor is this an ordinary itinerary. Shaped by a desire to see and understand Bhutan through the medium of its outstanding and distinctive textile traditions, we approach this small and mountainous country from the east via Assam. From Samdrup Jongkhar, a road trip takes us to Trashigang and the villages of rarely-visited Eastern Bhutan, where the finest of the weavers live and work.

Making our way westwards through valleys and forests, over the passes and past great white-painted dzongs, we reach the Bumthang region in Central Bhutan, where we witness one of the annual religious festivals. Commitment by the Bhutanese to the preservation of their living culture is paramount, not least through these spectacular festivals of dance and prayer which everyone attends, all wearing their finest colourful traditional dress.

On the way to Western Bhutan and the capital Thimphu, we visit the Phobjikha Valley, a wildlife preserve, and the superb Punakha Dzong. In Thimphu, we attend a special all-day workshop at the Royal Textile Academy and see its superb collections before travelling on to Western Bhutan. We reach Paro and we visit the not-to-be-missed and spectacularly situated Taktshang Monastery, the Tiger's Nest.

Here in Buddhist Bhutan, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness is taken seriously and joyously to heart. Ensuring the continuity of its 13 traditional arts and crafts, including *thagzo*, or weaving, is essential to this aim.

Tour Escort

The tour is escorted by Christina Sumner OAM, textile specialist and formerly principal curator at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney where she worked with the decorative arts and design collections for 28 years. Christina's research interests span the traditional textiles and cultures of India and the Himalayan region, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. She has curated numerous exhibitions and written and lectured widely about the arts of the Asian region.

Christina has a background as a weaver and teacher, and has tertiary qualifications in history and archaeology. She has travelled widely, including two visits to Bhutan, and her passion for travelling comes a very close second to her lifelong love of textiles.

Day to Day Itinerary

Day 1: Tuesday 11 October Australia/Kolkata

SINGAPORE AIRLINES: (suggested flights – not included in the tour cost)

SQ 232	Sydney / Singapore	Departs: 12.15	Arrives: 17.40
Connect to:			
SQ 516	Singapore / Kolkata	Departs: 21.00	Arrives: 22.35

On arrival in Kolkata, after clearing customs and immigration, we will be met and transferred to the Swissotel Kolkata for an overnight stay. A driver will be waiting with a sign for our group.

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

Overnight at the Swissotel Kolkata Airport

Day 2: Wednesday 12 October Kolkata/Guwahati - Samdrup Jongkhar

In the morning, we return to the airport in time to check in 2 hours before our flight to Guwahati. We must have our e-tickets and passports ready to show at the door to gain entry to the terminal.

JET AIRWAYS (codeshare with India Jetlite)

9W 619	12 Oct	Kolkata / Guwahati	Departs: 10.15	Arrives: 11.20
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Our English-speaking Bhutanese guide and our driver will be there to meet us as we exit the terminal. The drive from Guwahati to Samdrup Jongkhar, the eastern entry point to Bhutan, is about 100kms and takes about 3 hours. Accommodation is limited in this frontier town, a fascinating meeting place for vastly different cultures and customs.

Eastern Bhutan is less developed than the western half of the country, driving days are longer and the hotels are not of quite the same standard as those further west, the most visited part of the country. Nevertheless they are clean and offer all the basic comforts we are used to such as private bathrooms and hot water. To compensate, the scenery is very dramatic and beautiful and the villagers offer a warm welcome. The main language of the region is Sharchop, which is not spoken in Western Bhutan. This is the heartland of the unique Bhutanese textile traditions.

Day 3: Thursday 13 October Samdrup Jongkhar - Trashigang

Today we embark on the 180km drive from the border to Trashigang, which will take about six and a half hours. The road has only been in existence since 1965 and peters out beyond Trashigang into dense forest abundant with teak, bamboo and tropical ferns. En route, we pass through Deothang, the site of a famous 19th century battle during Duar Wars, in which the Bhutanese army led by Jigme Namgyel defeated the British.

In Kanglung, also south of Trashigang, is Sherubtse College, the only higher educational institution in remote Eastern Bhutan. Foreign teachers from Canada and elsewhere are based here and one of them, Jamie Zeppa, wrote a book describing her life in Bhutan in the 1990s, Beyond the Earth and Sky. Zeppa also mentions the clash of cultures with the refugee population from Nepal and Northern India. Buddhism is the only nationally recognized religious practice and, as Hindus, they don't want to abide by the strict dress code which requires Bhutanese citizens to wear national dress during the day.

Later we stop off briefly to visit the National Handloom Development Project which contracts weaving out to around 400 villagers, who sell their finished products there or at Handcraft Emporia in major town such as Thimphu and Bumthang. They take orders from a stock of samples and also have interesting samples of the natural dyestuffs used such as madder, lac and rhododendron. In Eastern Bhutan's temperate climate, wild dye plants grow in abundance.

Continuing northwards we reach Trashigang, the largest and most densely populated valley in Eastern Bhutan, at an altitude of 1136m. After we check into our hotel, we visit Trashigang Dzong which was built in the 17th century and is spectacularly sited overlooking the river below.

Day 4: Friday 14 October

Trashigang - Ranjung (Radi) - Mongar

Another early start today for the 3-hour drive to Ranjung (1120m), and on to Radi and Tzangkhar, to visit some of Bhutan's most celebrated weavers. The road descends from Trashigang to the banks of the Gamri Chhu, passing through villages and past terraced fields and many *chortens* (stupas),



with a Tibetan style *chorten* marking the final half hour before we reach Ranjung. An elaborate chorten is situated in the centre of the town. Time permitting we may visit the comparatively new Ranjung Woesel Choling Monastery before continuing on to Radi (1630 m), which is renowned throughout Bhutan for its fine weaving.

From Radi, we walk up to Tzangkhar village where we will be able to look around and visit the farm houses where we will see the women at their looms. We may also learn some Bhutanese weaving techniques. Later in the afternoon we drive back towards Trashing and to Mongar (1600m) where we'll stay for two nights.

For centuries, weaving was central to the economy of Eastern Bhutan. A brisk trade with Central Bhutan saw their wool fabrics exchanged for the dyestuffs and wild silk (bura) textiles of the east and, until the 1950s, some taxes were paid in lengths of cotton and wild silk cloth. The weavers of Eastern Bhutan are renowned for their plain weaves, as well as their supplementary weft and supplementary warp patterned fabrics. Most Bhutanese weavers learn their craft as young girls and the women weave their raw silk fabrics in their own homes. Many kira, the decorative traditional dress worn by women, take up to six months to weave; the finest are treasured and handed down through the generations of one family.

Day 5: Saturday 15 October

Mongar - Khoma - Mongar

Today we visit Lhuentse, a remote area to the north of Mongar. We drive for two and a half hours to the Sumpa Zam suspension bridge, and from there we walk to Lhuentse and then on to Khoma, the best known traditional weaving village in Bhutan. Lhuentse boasts the spectacular 17th century Rinchentse Phodrang Dzong, one of the most scenic in Bhutan, and is renowned both as the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family and for its textiles. Khoma village is justly famous for the exceptional skills of its weavers and the special textiles they produce with their unique and intricate designs. Today, the *kushutharas* (white ground *kiras* with exquisitely bright silk patterns) of the Lhuentse area are the most prized textiles in Bhutan. The area is also known for the colourful bamboo basket-ware made by men. As there is no hotel in Lhuentse, we return to Mongar.

Day 6: Sunday 16 October

Mongar - Ura - Jakar

After breakfast, we leave Eastern Bhutan and set out for the drive to the Bumthang Valley in Central Bhutan, where the landscape flattens out and forests give way to crops. As it is too cold here to grow rice, potatoes, wheat and fruit trees flourish.

The 193km journey from Mongar to Bumthang passes through some of the most stunning scenery in Bhutan and takes about seven hours. During the first hour we descend through dense chir pine forests into Limithang with its fields of corn and potatoes and fruit trees, after which the road climbs through rhododendron forests. As we leave behind isolated and rugged Eastern Bhutan, we can reflect on the sense of magic that pervades life in this truly isolated area.

We traverse the Thrumshing La National Park at 3750m, hoping we may catch a glimpse of the famous West Bengal Tiger which has migrated into the park from India. If there's time, we'll visit enchanting Ura village, unique in Bhutan with its cluster of houses and cobblestone streets. The Ura Yakchoe festival is held annually in April-May to honour the highly revered yak. Two hours beyond Ura is Jakar, the main town of the Bumthang region where our lodge, the Rinchenling, which grows its own vegetables and offers traditional 'hot stone baths' to soothe stiff limbs.

Day 7: Monday 17 October

Bumthang Valley - Prakhar Duccheod



Today we attend one of Bhutan's spectacular temple festivals, the Prakhar Duccheod, which takes place in the Prakhar Lhakhang in nearby Chummi. We experience for ourselves the colour and vibrancy of the dancing and are free to mingle among people from all walks of life. The Bhutanese come to festivals in their finest *kiras* and *ghos* (the robes worn by men) to witness the dances, meet with friends and relatives and engage with sideshow festivities such as archery, quoits and gambling Bhutanese style. The dancers wear very colourful costumes with elaborate masks or headdresses, while lyrical folk songs are performed by the local women dressed in the most beautiful and *kiras*. Dances are mostly performed to honour Guru Rinpoche, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan during the 8th century, although there are many other familiar stories also told through the dance medium. Our guide will arrange sightseeing around the festival activities to ensure the best experience for us.

Day 8: Tuesday 18 October

Jambay Lhakang Festival

Recuperation day! We have a morning at leisure and yes you can get your washing done! In the afternoon we visit Tamshing Monastery, one of Bhutan's oldest monastic schools built by Terton Pema Lingpa, and Kurjey Lhakhang, where Guru Rinpoche subdued a local demon and miraculously left his body imprint on a rock. We may also visit Jambay Lhakhang and Jakar Dzong, seat of the district administration.

In the evening we stroll through Chumey Bazaar and across the Chumey Bridge to visit Nyingkhe Ningpo Lhakhang where we can watch the small monks playing and studying in the courtyard.

Late evening, at around 11pm, we walk back to the Jambay Lhakhang courtyard (10 minutes from our lodge) to see the Naked Dance. This sacred dance is performed by lay monks who dance naked round a big bonfire, and is followed by the Tercham (blessing) Dance. According to local belief, the antics of the naked dancers help keep the devil spellbound, while attendance cleanses Buddhists of their sins and brings them merit.

Day 9: Wednesday 19 October

Bumthang - Trongsa - Gangtey

After breakfast we leave the Bumthang Valley behind, stopping briefly at the weaver's co-operative - a joint Australian / Bhutanese merino wool project where rugs and jackets are woven by the women from a mixture of yak and merino wools. Crossing over Yotong La pass at 3400m we reach Trongsa, where the impressive Trongsa Dzong, ancestral home of the ruling dynasty, spans the narrow valley and acts as a natural barrier between Central and Western Bhutan.



For hundreds of years this great 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.

Our journey continues to Chendebji, the site of a Nepalese style *chorten*. After lunch, we continue the drive to Gangtey via the Pele La Pass (3300m)

which is traditionally considered the boundary between West and East Bhutan and is often swirling with eerie mists. The Central Road across the Black Mountains was completed 30 years ago and brought great changes for the people in Central Bhutan. If the weather is clear we'll see the Himalayas, including the great peak of Jhomulhari (7314m).

The turn off to Gangtey and 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 Black Necked Cranes which travel from China to winter in the valley. The cranes are deeply revered and the valley is one of the most important conservation areas in Bhutan. Generators and solar power supply the area, so there are limited hours of electricity operation. As we are there in November, the Cranes will be sadly not be in residence.

Day 10: Thursday 20 October**Phobjikha Valley (Gangtey)**

After breakfast we go for a walk around the beautiful Phobjikha Valley. The path climbs gradually through a forest of pine and daphne up to a monastery, which is home to the Pema Lingpa sect of Buddhism, the oldest in Bhutan. The monastery has just completed a major program of renovations and was re-consecrated last year by the new King. Many of the monks live in the attached village with their families and the views down to the other side of the valley are breathtaking. There are two schools in the valley and we may take the opportunity to drop in with gifts of books and writing materials.

Day 11: Friday 21 October**Gangtey - Wangdue - Punakha**

Leaving the valley we travel onwards to the valley of Punakha, passing through Wangdue, one of the major towns in Western Bhutan, although this is in fact not much more than a village with a few streets and a market square. Starting at the entrance of the Dzong, we walk through a small stand of cactus where a stairway leads to the bottom of the valley. Crossing over the bridge, we rejoin our vehicle and continue to Punakha following the river up the valley floor.

After lunch we drive to visit the magnificent Punakha Dzong, the old capital of Bhutan and the winter seat of Je Khenpo and the Monk Body, sitting at the confluence of the Mo (Female) Chu and Pho (Male) Chu. Time permitting we also visit the magnificently decorated Khamsum Yuelley Chorten which involves an energetic walk through rice fields and up the inevitable hill.

Day 12: Saturday 22 October**Punakha - Thimphu**

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

We retrace our steps and enter the valley of Lobesa. A 15-minute walk through the rice terraces and villages leads us to Chime Lhakang, the Temple of the Divine Mad Man, one of Bhutan's most revered and eccentric saints. Chime Lhakhang was built in the 15th century and sits on top of a small hillock overlooking the Puna Tsangchu river belt. Bhutanese women who are troubled by infertility often visit the temple to seek a cure. The saint is generally depicted wielding a phallus and this image is often also painted on local houses to ward off evil spirits.

After the visit we continue on to Thimphu, capital of Bhutan, via Dochu La pass (3140m) where we stop for tea or lunch, depending on the time. There are 108 memorial chortens at Dochu La with hundreds of prayer flags strung between the trees on the hillside. On a clear day there is a view of the whole Himalayan range.

Upon reaching Thimphu there may be time to visit the weekly outdoor produce market, to see the local people buying and selling their local produce, rice, grains, chillies and yak cheese, as well as seasonal foods such as asparagus, field mushrooms and wild ferns.

The crowded stalls of the market offer colourful local items such as yak-tail dusters, butter tea cups, turquoise and silver jewellery from Nepal and Tibet, antiques and musical instruments. Another good place to shop is the Handicrafts Emporium, which is government sponsored and has a wide range 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), although heavy surcharges generally apply.

Day 13: Sunday 23 October**Thimphu**

Today we explore the sights of Thimphu, including the Textile Museum, the Folk Heritage Museum, the National Painting School and the chorten dedicated to Jigme Wangchuk, the third king of Bhutan. We'll stop to admire the exterior of the National Library and we may also pay a visit to the Post Office to buy some of Bhutan's very beautiful stamps. The markets are also open today and a visit can be scheduled early to catch the best photo opportunities.

In the afternoon a hike to Droeley Gompa can be arranged for those who would like the exercise of a half day walk. Alternatively we can spend the remainder of the afternoon shopping, browsing and relaxing in Thimphu where there are many shops and galleries.

Day 14: Monday 24 October**Thimphu**

Today we are attending a specially arranged all day workshop conducted by the Royal Textile Academy and hosted by the Textile Museum curator Karma Deki Tshering. Details of the programme will be made available closer to the time.

Day 15: Tuesday 25 October**Thimphu - Paro**

After an early breakfast we set out to drive from Thimphu to Paro, which takes about an hour. We continue on along the winding road to Drukgyel Dzong, the ruined fortress, which once defended this valley from successive Tibetan invasions, and to Ramthangkha, where the road terminates. This is the starting point for the hike up to Taktshang monastery, the spectacular Tiger's Nest at 2950m above sea level. It takes around two hours at average pace to walk up to the teahouse at the midway point. There is a stunning view from there of the monastery where, in the 8th century, Guru Padmasambhava is said to have landed, on the back of a tigress, and thus brought Buddhism to Bhutan. NB: the first part of the walk can be done on ponies, at extra cost.

We continue up the pathway to Taktshang which contains thirteen holy places and is one of the most venerated pilgrim sites of the Himalayan world. The monastic complex clings to the rock, towering 900m above the valley. A special permit is required for the visit which is a very uplifting experience.

We retrace our steps to the teahouse for lunch, after which we walk back down to the road to meet our bus which takes us to visit the ruined Drukgyel Dzong. This involves a short hike and we are rewarded with a great view of Jomalhari in the distance. Archery can often be seen in the 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 and beautiful Kyichu Lhakhang, thought to have been built in the 7th century and one of the oldest temples in Bhutan. The National Museum sited above Paro in a 12th century watch tower and is also worth a visit. Or we can head back to our hotel and indulge ourselves in the spa or a wonderful traditional Bhutanese hot stone bath.

Day 16: Wednesday 26 October Depart Thimphu

In the morning our Bhutanese escorts bid us farewell at Paro airport.

KB 500 **Paro / Singapore** **Depart: 07.55 Arrive: 16.05 (via Kolkata)**

Connect to: Suggested Airline

SQ 221 **Singapore / Sydney** **Depart: 20.40 Arrive: 07.35 (Thursday 26 Oct)**

END OF ARRANGEMENTS



Land Cost per person*

Twin Share: USD 6,540

Single Supplement: USD 990

Approximate cost of the international flights economy class on Singapore Airlines is \$1200 inclusive of tax.

NB: Itinerary and accommodation are subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances and beyond the control of Travel on Q.

*Tour cost will be based on the exchange rate on the date of payment.

Bhutan Package Inclusions:

- Druk Airfare Paro / Singapore + Jet Airways Kolkata / Guwahati
- Accommodation in Bhutan in A Class hotels and lodges and 2 nights at Uma properties in Punakha and Paro (subject to availability)
- All meals in Bhutan
- Professional Bhutanese textile expert and escort Christina Sumner
- 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
- Royal Textile Academy costs
- All tips to guides and drivers
- Donation to the Queen Mother's Charity – RENEW (for the education of girls in Bhutan)

