

# KINGDOM IN THE SKY

## 12 NIGHTS IN BHUTAN WITH THE SAMTEGANG TREK

(incorporating the Paro Tshechu)

### **Day 1: 26 March 2013 - Bangkok / Paro - Paro Tshechu**

Check-in by 4.00am 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. Flight generally departs around 6 am arriving at approx 10 am.

A spectacular descent through mountainous valleys brings you into the Kingdom of Bhutan. 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 leaving your luggage at your hotel and taking some welcome tea, 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. After lunch, make your way to the Paro Dzong where the festival will be in progress. Join the throng of local people streaming into the grounds, dressed in their finest clothes and armed with picnic supplies and thermos flasks. A carnival atmosphere pervades as everyone politely jostles for the best view of the dancers. The dances continue all afternoon and recount well known mythological stories. The dancers wear intricate and colourful costumes and elaborate headdresses or fantastical masks, keeping up their athletic leaping for what seems like an age. During the breaks, spectators are entertained by the Bhutanese version of clowns one of whom often brandishes a large wooden phallus. This symbol is seen all over Bhutan, painted on houses and hanging from the eaves. It performs the dual role of fertility a symbol and the warding off of evil spirits.

**Overnight: Olathang Hotel.** Dinner at the hotel as you will probably be very tired after the very early morning wake up!

### **Day 2: 27 March - Paro Tshechu Unfurling of The Tongdrel - Thimphu**

You will be woken at 2.00am and after some tea 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. This is preceded by a ceremony in which sacred objects are taken by the monks from the Dzong to the festival courtyard. The remainder of the monks then follow in procession behind. Don't be surprised if you see some the little monks yawning and desperately trying to stay awake while others are enthusiastically chanting. The whole scene is illuminated with butter lamps and the local people press forward to touch the Tongdrel, give alms and receive a blessing from the head monk. The Tongdrel cannot be exposed to direct sunlight and is rolled up again before the sun gets too high. This is an amazing and moving experience and not to be missed!

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

**Overnight: Olathang Hotel. Dinner at a local restaurant.**

After 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.

Depending on the season, chillies (Autumn) may be drying on the rooftops or in the fields or you will see flowers (Spring) among the forested slopes. On arrival in Thimphu, begin your sightseeing programme, which includes 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. Check into your hotel later in the afternoon.

**Overnight: Hotel Druk or Jomolhari - Dinner at the hotel.**

### **Day 3: 28 March Thimphu**

After breakfast, visit the Sangayang view point, located high above the city, a forest of prayer flags overlooking the entire Thimphu Valley. Then head out of the valley, stopping to view the magnificent Dzong, seat of local Government and home also to the monastic community. A hike up to the Tangbo Monastery (a steep walk of about 1 hour) offers wonderful views of the distant snow covered mountains. After returning to Thimphu the remainder of the afternoon is free to browse the galleries and shops or you may visit the local market with your guide.

**Overnight: Hotel Druk or Jomolhari – Dinner at a local restaurant**

### **Day 4: 29 March Thimphu - Punakha**

Heading west we reach the pass at Docchu-La at 3140m, where on a clear day you can see the whole Himalayan range. After morning tea, continue your journey through forested mountains and on to the turn off to the Punakha Valley. The terrain is wild, mountainous and ever changing. Check into the 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 impressive architecturally of the Dzongs that you 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 scarf worn denotes a man's rank.

**Overnight Peri Menseum or Zangto Pelri: Dinner at the guesthouse.**

### **Day 5: 30 March -Punakha Valley Limukha**

#### **Trek Day 1**

After breakfast a short drive brings you to a suspension bridge (the longest suspension bridge in Bhutan). Anyone who is afraid of heights can take the transport into the valley of Shengana. The suspension bridges crosses over the Pho Chhu and then the trail leads through the village of Shengana. The walk begins with a gradual climb through a chir pine forest to the village of Limukha passing through Dompala village en route. Camp near Limukha village at an altitude of 1,800m. Distance: 12 kms, walking - 4 hours. **Dinner and overnight at Camp.**

### **Day 6: 31 March - Limukha - Chungsakha**

#### **Trek Day 2**

The trail leads downhill through rhododendron and oak forests. The walk includes a visit to Chimi Lhakang, built in 1499 by the 14th Drukpa Heirach over the site of a small Chorten. The Chorten was erected by the Divine Madman, (Lama Drukpa Kunley), one of Bhutan's revered and eccentric saints.

This pilgrimage site is often visited by infertile women seeking a cure. The flying phalluses that you see hanging from the eaves of the local houses are reputedly also his. These perform the dual role of warding off evil spirits and being a fertility symbol. This walk offers superb views over the valley at its summit. Altitude: 1,530m, Distance: 14 kms, walking 5-6 hours. Camp near the village of Chungsakha. **Dinner and overnight at Camp.**

#### **Day 7: 01 April - Chungsakha Samtengang**

After breakfast the trail leads downhill to another suspension bridge, crossing over the Bay chhu (river), then gradually uphill again through the terraced rice paddies to Seygang Monastery which dates back to the 11th century. From here the trail leads into the valley of Nishokha and then to Samtengang village. Camp overnight by the lakeside. Altitude: 1,335m, Distance: 13 kms - walking 5 hours. **Dinner and overnight at camp.**

#### **Day 8: 02 April - Samtengang Chhuzomsa Gangtey**

After breakfast, a short walk will bring you out to the road where your vehicle is waiting. The way eastward leads over the black mountains and into the Phobjikha valley. The scenery changes dramatically on entering this high glacial valley, from vast lichen covered forests to pastures of dwarf bamboo and a wide marshland valley opens up before you as you descend to the valley floor. The valley is home to the migratory Black Necked Crane, which winters in the valley between October and March. In order to preserve the birds habitat, there is no electricity in the valley, all homes operating on solar power. Your accommodation tonight may be a traditional Bhutanese Guesthouse with wood burning stoves in each bedroom. Alternatively, it may be in the newer guesthouse. As rooms are limited and demand is high accommodation is subject to change.

The remainder of the afternoon is at leisure to relax. As the cranes will not be in residence, you may wish to visit the Black Neck Crane Centre, which gives an insight into the importance of this valley to these endangered birds.

#### **Overnight: Dewachen Lodge or Gaikaling Lodge**

#### **Day 9: 03 April - Gangtey valley hike**

Take 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 (3 - 4 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, videos or DVDs that are surplus to requirements, they will find grateful recipients here. After lunch, there is an optional visit to the Gangtey Gompa, one of the oldest monasteries in Bhutan. Overnight: Dewachen Lodge. Dinner at the lodge.

#### **Day 10: 04 April - Gangtey Thimphu Haa Valley**

Make an early start for Thimphu stopping briefly in the village of Wangdue for morning tea in a typical local teahouse. There may be a local fruit and vegetable market in progress where you will see local delicacies such as wild fern and asparagus. Perhaps not so enticing is the air dried meat also on display. Wangdue also has a very impressive village prayer wheel. Retracing the route over the Docchu-la pass, arrive into Thimphu for lunch. After lunch, time permitting there is an optional hike to Wangditse Geomba (2-3 hours). This walk starts at the Telecom tower at Sangaygang, ascends to a ridge overlooking Thimphu for great views and glimpses of the King's Palace.

The trail continues up until it reaches Chhokhortse Goemba. From here, walk back out to the road and return to Thimphu with the vehicle. Otherwise you may choose to remain in Thimphu to make any last minute purchases for textiles, artefacts or picture books (generally unavailable outside Bhutan).

**Overnight: Hotel Jomolhari or Druk. Dinner in a local restaurant.**

**Day 11: 05 April - Haa Valley Paro**

Today, we take the long way home. The alternative road to Paro passes through the beautiful Haa Valley. Haa is made up of five counties and was closed to outside world until 2002 as it was on the ancient route to Tibet. There is a military camp for Indian Army stationed here.

This mysterious valley is home to several local deities and is known for its strange events. There are two interesting temples (the Black Temple - Lhakan Nakpo and the White Temple) erected in the 7th century at a sacred site known as Miri Punsum, or the Three Brother Hills. A third temple, the Haa Gonpa, was built further up the valley at the site where a lame pigeon, actually a bodhisattva in a disguised form, was found by a farmer, drawn to the spot by a mysterious fire seen on successive nights and the eerie sounds of musical instruments. Another local deity, Chungdue was reputedly responsible for a myriad of natural disasters occurring in the valley - meteor strikes, cyclones, wildfires and earthquakes. This deity was eventually subdued by Guru Padmasambhava, who arrived in the 8th century, bringing a relative calm to the area. After a picnic lunch (without incident) and a quick look at Wangchuk Dzong (built in 1915) we resume our drive over the Clele-la pass (3,810m), which offers a stunning view of the Himalayan range.

**Overnight: Olathang hotel or similar. Dinner at the Hotel**

**Day 12: 06 April -Paro**

A full day hike to the most photographed monastery in Bhutan Taktshang or Tiger's Nest, so named because Bhutan's most famous Saint, Guru Rimpoche flew here on the back of Tigress from Pakistan and so bringing Buddhism to Bhutan. The first half of the walk can be done on pony back but the walk itself takes about 2 hours each way allowing for stops. A teahouse at the half way point offers fabulous views of this man made wonder which seems to hang in mid air perched 900m above the valley floor. The footprint of the saint can be seen in the small rock cave where he meditated for three months. A fitting final day of your visit to this wonderful and mystical country!

**Overnight: Olathang Hotel: Farewell dinner at a local restaurant**

**Day 13: 07 April – Paro / Bangkok**

An early departure for the flight to Bangkok. Your guide will bid you goodbye at the airport.

**COST EX BANGKOK: Inclusive of Druk Airfares – per person**

Twin share:	USD 4325
Group (min 3 people):	USD 4050
Single supplement:	USD 535

INCLUSIONS: REFER TO BOOKING CONDITIONS