

THE MYSTICAL EAST

14 NIGHTS IN BHUTAN – EAST TO WEST

(Incorporating the The Jambay Lhakang Drup)

November - Australia - Bangkok

Depart Australia on the airline of your choice (Thai or Qantas recommended)
An overnight stop is recommended at the Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel.
There is a complimentary shuttle that operates to and from the airport.
Overnight: Novotel Suvarnabhumi (suggested)

Day 1: Bangkok / Kolkata / Guwahati / Samdrup Jongkhar

Check-in for the Jet Airways flight to Kolkata 2 hours prior to departure on Level 4
9W 65 Depart Bangkok: 09.20 Arrive Kolkata: 10.20 Connect to:
9W 619 Depart Kolkata: 13.20 Arrive: Guwahati: 15.35

The drive from Guwahati to Samdrup Jongkhar (the Eastern entry point to Bhutan) takes 3 hours and covers 101 kms and lies at an altitude of 610 metres above sea level. Accommodation is limited in this frontier town, a meeting of vastly different cultures and customs.

Dinner and overnight at T.L.T hotel.

Eastern Bhutan is less developed than Western and the driving days are longer and the hotels are not of the same as those further to the western (more visited) part of the country. However the scenery is dramatic and the villagers are very welcoming.

Day 2: 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 to the University of Delhi. A number of foreign teachers from Canada and elsewhere are based here and Jamie Zeppas Beyond the Earth and Sky an enlightening book, written about life in the 1990s 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. 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 to the hotel, visit Trashigang Dzong which was built in the 17th century overlooking the river below.

Dinner and overnight at Kelling Lodge.

Day 3: Trashigang / Ranjung (Radhi) / Mongar

Another early start heading for the valley of Ranjung, 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 marks the centre of town. Visit the Ranjung Woesel Choling Monastery for monks, before a further half hour drive to valley of Radhi (1630m), renowned throughout Bhutan for its weaving. Hike up to Tzangkhar village as the most women weave in their own homes and specialise in fabrics made from Bura (raw silk). We will have the opportunity to explore and visit their farm houses to see them work and learn some Bhutanese weaving techniques. Later in the afternoon drive to Mongar (1600m). Many of the Kira take up to 6 months to produce and are often passed down through the generations of one family.

Dinner and overnight at Druk Shongar**Day 4: 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 hours walk from the bridge brings us 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 basketware. As is the custom the weaving is all done in private farmhouses. As there is no hotel accommodation in Lhuntse we drive back to Mongar for an overnight. Dinner and overnight at Druk Zhongar.

Day 5: Mongar /Bumthang

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 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. Traverse the Thrimshingla National Park at 3,750m where you may glimpse the famous West Bengal Tiger, which has been migrating into the park from India. Later, pass through enchanting Ura village, unique in Bhutan with its duster of houses and cobblestone streets. The Ura Yakchoe Festival is held here annually in April in honour of the revered Yak. Another two hours and our destination is reached. Our lodge offers traditional hot stone baths to soothe stiff limbs. The lodge also grows its own vegetables.

Dinner and overnight at Rinchenling Lodge , 3 nights

Day 6: Bumthang sightseeing and Jambay Lhakang Drup

Recuperation day !. A morning at leisure (yes you can get your washing done!)

In the afternoon 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). We also visit Jambay Lhakhang (one of the oldest temples in Bhutan built in 7th century) and Jakar Dzong (seat of the district administration). The evening ends with a walk through Chumey bazaar and a walk across the Chumey bridge to visit Nyingkhe Ningpo Lhakhang where you will see the small monks playing and studying in the courtyard. (We may not see it all today).

** Around mid night (11pm) take a walk to the Jambay Lhakhang courtyard (10 minutes walk from your lodge) to witness the Naked Dance. The dance is performed naked round a big Bonfire and is followed later by the tercham (blessing dance). According to local belief, attendance cleanses buddhists of their sins and brings them merit. The dances, originating in the 8th century are performed by monks and laymen.

Dinner and overnight at Rinchenling Lodge

Day 7: Jambay Lhakang , Thangbi

Today is a day to visit the festival grounds; 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 witness 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 Rinpoche, 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. This is a time of joy and celebration for the local people and provides an excellent insight for non Bhutanese into the daily life of Bhutanese people and an opportunity to immerse yourself with the local community. Later in the afternoon, take a walk into the valley of Thangbi via the suspension bridge.

Dinner and overnight at Rinchenling Lodge. Dinner at another Lodge

Day 8: Bumthang /Trongsa (Phobjikha Valley)

After breakfast, leave the Bumthang valley behind, stopping briefly at the weavers 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 we arrive at 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 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.

Dinner and overnight at hotel Dewachen, 2 nights

Day 9: Phobjikha Valley

Phobjikha is considered to be one of the most beautiful valleys in the Himalayas. An early rise is recommended to catch the birds at their most active. The cranes can be seen a few metres walk from the Lodge in the marshy ground. After breakfast, starting at the Crane Observation Centre, we walk around the valley being careful not to disturb the birds. The road leads to the base of the monastery trail climbs gradually through a forest of pine and Daphne up to the Monastery, home to Pemalingpa sect of Buddhism, the oldest in Bhutan. The Monastery has been undergoing renovation for many years and many of its monks live in the attached village with their families. 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 hotel Dewachen

Day 10: Gangtey / Wangdue/ Punakha

Leave the valley and 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. Starting at the entrance of the Dzong, walk through a small stand of cactus where a well maintained stairway leads to the bottom of the valley. Crossing over the bridge, rejoin our vehicle and continue to Punakha following the river up the valley floor. Our rustic lodge has magnificent views down the valley After lunch drive to visit Punakha Dzong, the old capital of Bhutan and the winter seat of the Je Khenpo and the Monk Body, remarkably located at the confluence of the Mo (Female) Chu and Pho (Male) Chu. Dinner and overnight at hotel Meri Puensum.

Day 11: Punakha - Thimphu

In the morning 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 Lhakhang, 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 Docchu-la pass where we will stop for lunch. On a clear day there is a view of the whole Himalayan range.

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 teacups, turquoise and silver jewellery from Nepal and Tibet, antiques and musical instruments.

Dinner at a local restaurant. Hotel Druk or Jomolhari, 2 nights

Day 12: Thimphu

A day to see the sights of Thimphu. which include the Textile Museum, The Folk Heritage Museum, The National painting School and the Chorten dedicated to Jigme Wangchuk, the 3rd King of Bhutan. National library (exterior) and the Post office (to buy beautiful stamps) may also be of interest. An afternoon hike to Droeley Gompa for those who would like a half day walk. Alternatively spend the remainder of the afternoon shopping, browsing and relaxing in Thimphu

Dinner at a local restaurant. Hotel Druk or Jomolhari

Day 13: Thimphu / Paro

After breakfast drive to Paro, 1.5 hours away, a pretty drive along the valley floor on a recently upgraded road. The Temple of Tachogang Monastery perched on a gentle slope above the town accessed by an ancient suspension bridge. Lunch served at a restaurant in Paro town. Later, visit the Paro Rimpung Dzong, built in 17th century to defend the valley against Tibetan invaders. The dzong is now used as an administration centre and school for monks. If time permits you may also visit the Kyichu Lhakang or this may be done tomorrow.

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Olathang or similar , 2 nights

Day 14: Paro - Taktsang Monastery

After a hearty breakfast, take 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 Taktsang monastery (Tigers nest). The hike up to the teahouse (midway point) 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. If you wish, continue the hike up to the monastery which contains thirteen holy places. Taktsang 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 we then walk back to the road point and then visit the small but beautiful Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples in Bhutan.

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Olathang

Day 15: Paro/ Bangkok

After breakfast, your guide will take you to the airport and bid you a fond farewell.

Druk Air KB 120 Departs: 08.40 Arrives: Kolkotta: 09.10 Connect to:

Jet Airways 9W 66 Departs: 11.55 Arrives: Bangkok: 16.15

Connect to: Thai or Qantas to Australia

COSTS EX BANGKOK: Inclusive of Druk Air and Jet Airways flights – per person

Twin Share USD 4585

Group (3 or more): USD 4285

Single supplement: USD 590

NB: Flight times are indicative only

INCLUSIONS: REFER TO BOOKING CONDITIONS