

BHUTAN, LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

November 10 – 21, 2010

This will be my third tour to Bhutan and it offers a blend of the best of the first two. The Kingdom of Bhutan in the heart of the Himalayas is situated between Tibet to the north, Nepal to the west and India to the south and east. In order to protect its unique cultural heritage, Bhutan admits only a small number of tourists each year. We will explore Western and Central Bhutan, driving over high passes and through dense pine forests, visiting remote valleys, monasteries and museums. Late September to late November is considered to be the best time of the year to visit Bhutan, as it is mild and clear, offering magnificent views of the Himalayas. Bright sunshine keeps the days warm while the temperatures start falling toward freezing at night. We will witness harvest time in Bhutan along with the brilliant fall colours of changing foliage. We will see Bhutan's imposing architecture, beautiful artwork and have the opportunity to observe the role of religion in Bhutan. Bhutan is the only country in the world devoted to the Tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism and the influence of the red-robed lama is visible everywhere.

This trip is the perfect opportunity for the adventurous and flexible traveler. Bhutan continues to be one of the top world destinations and it is definitely not to be missed. We will have 10 days and 9 nights to explore this amazing country.

ITINERARY

Wednesday Nov. 10: Kathmandu

Arrival in Kathmandu. After clearing customs and immigration you will be met by Razzu Tuladhar of Samsara Journeys and transferred to the Nirvana Garden Hotel.

Rest of the day free.

Overnight at the Nirvana Garden Hotel.

Thursday, Nov. 11: Kathmandu-Paro-Thimpu

After breakfast, transfer to the airport for our Kathmandu-Paro flight on Druk Air. The flight should offer us spectacular mountain and landscape views. On arrival and after visa formalities we will be received by Bhutanese members and depart for Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan. Depending on our time of arrival we hope to do some sightseeing.

Overnight Thimpu.

Friday, Nov. 12: Thimpu to Punakha to Wangdiphodrang

Following breakfast at the hotel we will visit the Memorial Chorten built in the memory of the late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk as well as the 15th century Changangkha

Monastery, the National Library, the Royal Goldsmith Workshop and Handicraft Centers. After a visit to the Motithang Park above Thimpu to see the rare Takins, national animal of Bhutan we will have some free time in the Saturday market of Thimpu. Our three to four drive from Thimpu to Wangdiphodrang, will take us across the Dochlu Pass at 3100 meters. Depending on weather, we may see spectacular views of the high peaks of the Eastern Himalayan ranges including the highest mountain in Bhutan, Mt. Gangar Punsum at 7520 meters. The descent from the pass, dropping to the lower and warmer valley of Lobesa will take us through a temperate type of leafy forest of rhododendron and magnolia then to a semi-tropical zone where orange and banana trees and cactus grow. Enroute we will visit the Punakha Dzong which served as an old capital of Bhutan. Situated at the confluence of the Pho and Mo rivers (literally the father and mother rivers), this remarkable fortress was built in 1637.

Overnight at the Wangdi Kichu Resort

Saturday, Nov. 13: Punakha to Tongsa

Following breakfast at the hotel we will proceed over the Black Mountains to Tongsa. Travelling over two more high passes we will pass through dense forest, more rhododendrons and magnolia as well as high-altitude dwarf bamboo, the favourite food of yaks which we should see enroute today. As we approach Tongsa with its spectacular landscape we will see the Tongsa Dzong, one of Bhutan's finest architectural treasures. All of Eastern Bhutan was controlled from this fortress during the mid 17th century. With any luck we will see a species of cherry tree that flowers in the autumn so that the whole gorge is dotted with pink trees. Tongsa means "new village" and it was founded in the 16th century, relatively recent for Bhutan.

Overnight at the Yankhel Resort.

Sunday, Nov 14: Tongsa to Bumthang

Our relatively short drive to Bumthang from Tongsa will offer magnificent views of the Himalayas and beautiful landscape through scattered hamlets and forests of rhododendrons and pine.

Bumthang, at an altitude of 2600 meters/8530 feet is comprised of four smaller valleys. The deeply spiritual region of Bumthang is shrouded in religious legend. Here tales of Guru Padmasambhava and his reincarnation known as a tertön (a discoverer of religious treasures) still linger in most nooks and crannies. Bumthang is also known for its woolen material which can be seen hung outside of houses for sale. We will visit the Jakar Dzong, the 7th century Jambay Llakhang, the Kurjey Monastery and Tamshing and Kunchosum Monasteries.

Overnight at River Lodge.

Monday, Nov 15: Bumthang

Today we will visit the Mebartsho which means "burning or flaming lake," one of the great pilgrimage sites of Bhutan. This is where Pema Lingpa found the treasures hidden

by Guru Rinpoche and thus became a terdon. Although it is called a lake, it is actually a gorge through which a river rushes. This is where Pema Lingpa found the treasures hidden by Guru Rinpoche and thus became a terdon. Images of him and his sons have been carved in the rock. Although it is called a lake, it is actually a gorge which the river rushes through. On the way back we will wander along a scenic area across the river from the town to visit the Swiss Farm where apple juice, cider and cheese are made. Afternoon free to wander around Bhumthang town. Bhutan is famous for its stamps and the small but friendly post office is the perfect place to send postcards from and there are a couple of gift shops, selling traditional arts and crafts.

Overnight at River Lodge.

Tuesday, Nov 16: Bumthang – Gangtey Valley

Following breakfast we will start out early for our drive to the Gangtey Gumpa Valley also known as Phobjikha Valley, one of Bhutan's few glacial valleys at an altitude of 2800 meters. The only Nyingmapa monastery in Western Bhutan is located here. This beautiful valley is also home to the rare Black Necked Cranes migrating from the Tibetan plateau to escape the harsh winter. Currently there are 200 to 300 cranes residing in this valley and the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) is taking every measure to ensure the safety of the Cranes. While the cranes reside in the winter valley for 4/5 months the village folks are not allowed to make loud noises or fish in the river that runs through the valley.

Overnight Dewachen Hotel

Wednesday, Nov 17: Gangtey - Wangdiphodrang

Today we drive to Wangdiphodrang. Before checking into our resort we will stroll around the Wangdiphodrang Dzong which is perched on a spur at the confluence of two rivers. Depending on time we may also visit the local market area. The Wangdi Kichu Resort is peacefully located in a lovely setting. It is situated on a rushing river with forests on the other side. The stone buildings which house the rooms, each with its own balcony have beautiful views of the river and gardens.

Overnight Wangdi Kichu Resort

Thursday, Nov 18: Wangdiphodrang – Paro

Today we will drive 3 to 4 hours to Paro. Enroute we view the Wangdiphodrang Dzong from outside and stroll around the local market area. Our drive to Paro will take us through Lobesa where we will take a short walk through farmhouses and fields to Chime Lhakhang. This monastery was built in the 15th century and dedicated to the famous Lam Drukpa Kunley or "divine mad man." He is one of the most important saints in Bhutan and the temple is a pilgrimage site for women unable to bear children. We will have lunch at Thimpu and drive to Paro visiting the oldest building in Bhutan, the Simtokha Dzong. It now serves as a Buddhist university.

Overnight Kichu Resort.

Friday, Nov 19: Paro

Following an early breakfast we will hike to the viewpoint of the Taksang Monastery. This is a beautiful walk, through pine, oak and rhododendron forests, ending at a tea house where we will have spectacular views of the monastery which clings to a huge granite cliff 800 meters above the Paro Valley. It is believed that the great saint Padmasambhava came in the 7th century on a flying tigress and meditated in a cave here. The demons who were trying to stop the spread of Buddhism were subdued and the valley was converted to Buddhism. Towards the end of the 17th century the monastery was built on the spot where the saint meditated and it is a pilgrimage site that every Buddhist hopes to visit in his lifetime. Following our return to the resort, we will have lunch then visit the ruined fortress of Drugzel Dzong, which still attracts visitors due to the strategic location of the fort, which defended the Paro Valley from the Tibetan invasion from the north in the early 17th century,. In clear weather, Mt. Chomolhari (7320 meters) can be seen towering over the Dzong. We will proceed through the beautiful valley to the ancient watchtower, known locally as Ta Dzong. In the 1960's the Third King, Jigme Dorje Wangchuk conceived the idea of restoring the Ta Dzong as a place to house the National Museum. The seven storey museum highlights various aspects of Bhutanese culture and history dating back to the 7th century. A short walk downhill take us to the Rinpung Dzong which serves as the administrative center and school for monks. We will then walk further down crossing a beautiful old traditional foot bridge into Paro Town and stroll around the market before driving back to the hotel.

Overnight Kichu Resort

Saturday, Nov 20: Paro - Kathmandu

Transfer to the airport for our flight to Kathmandu. On arrival to Kathmandu we will transfer to the Nirvana Garden Hotel. Rest of the day free.

A farewell dinner.

Overnight Nirvana Garden Hotel.

Sunday, Nov 21: Departure

Following breakfast, departure for airport for flights home.

COST (Approximate) *

Adult sharing (per person) US\$2725
Adult single US\$3225

*Costs are subject to changes made by the airlines, hotels, government fees and permits.

COST INCLUDES

Economy airfare Kathmandu/Paro/Kathmandu
All transfers in Kathmandu
2 nights at the Nirvana Garden Hotel with breakfast in Kathmandu
Farewell dinner at the Nirvana Garden Hotel
Accommodation at hotels/resorts with full board while in Bhutan
All sightseeing tours, excursions, surface transportation in a private coach with an English speaking tour guide in Bhutan
All tips for porters, drivers, guides and waiters at included meals.
All portorage, taxes, and tolls,
Bhutan Visa fees + Entrance Fees + Tourism Fees

NOT INCLUDED IN COST

International Flights other than Druk Air to and from Bhutan
Nepal Visa and Exit tax
Meals not specified in itinerary
Personal items such as laundry, drinks at meals, excess baggage, housekeeping tips

DEPOSIT

The deposit is \$500 per person and you will not be confirmed on the tour until the deposit has been paid.

FINAL PAYMENT

Final payment is due July 1. Because Bhutan will no longer let us block book without names and this is the high season, the sooner we know who is going, the better for booking. This also helps us confirm the best accommodation.

CANCELLATION

There will be a cancellation fee of US\$100 if you cancel before the final payment is due. Any cancellations after July 1 will result in payment of any charges the travel agent imposes. Also cancellations after that date could result in higher costs for all group members. You will not pay any cancellation fee if we have to cancel.

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