

# BHUTAN

## LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

The Complete Travel Guide • 2026 Edition

ALT

**7,554m**

Highest Peak

FLY

**Paro (PBH)**

Only Int'l Airport

SDF

**\$100/night**

Dev. Fee p.p.

GO!

**Mar-May / Sep-Nov**

Best Season

VISA

**\$40 + SDF**

Entry Cost

### Welcome to the Last Shangri-La

Nestled deep in the eastern Himalayas, the Kingdom of Bhutan is unlike anywhere else on Earth. This Buddhist kingdom measures its prosperity not in GDP, but in Gross National Happiness — a philosophy that permeates every monastery, every dzong, and every mountain trail. With pristine forests covering 71% of its land, ancient fortresses rising from river confluences, and festivals that have remained unchanged for centuries, Bhutan rewards travellers with an authenticity the modern world has almost entirely lost.

◆ Capital: Thimphu

◆ Population: ~800,000

◆ Currency: Ngultrum (BTN) ◆ Language: Dzongkha

◆ Religion: Vajrayana Buddhism



## VISA & ENTRY

### ✈️ Visa Requirements 2026

- All nationalities except India, Bangladesh & Maldives require a pre-approved visa
- Apply online via Bhutan's Dept of Immigration or through a licensed tour operator
- Visa fee: USD \$40 (one-time, non-refundable)

### 🌱 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FEE (SDF)

- Passport must be valid 6+ months beyond

### \$ Sustainable Development Fee

International adults:	<b>USD \$100 / night</b>
Children 6–12 yrs:	<b>USD \$50 / night</b>
Children under 5:	<b>Exempt</b>
Indian nationals:	<b>INR 1,200 / night (~USD \$15)</b>
Valid until:	<b>31 August 2027 (50% discount era)</b>
New 2026:	<b>+5% GST on tour services (not SDF)</b>

\* SDF does not include accommodation, meals or guide fees

## OVERLAND ENTRY

Enter via Phuentsholing (south border, West Bengal, India). Nearest airport: Bagdogra (~4 hrs). Also possible via Gelephu and Samdrup Jongkhar. All land entries require pre-arranged permits.

## FLIGHTS TO PARO (PBH)

### ✈️ Paro International Airport

- Altitude: 2,235m — one of the world's highest airports
- Only ~30 certified pilots globally can land here
- 2 airlines: Druk Air (national) & Bhutan Airlines

**DIRECT FLIGHTS ONLY** (no connecting flights) — 5,400m peaks

From	Airline	Freq.
Bangkok (BKK)	Druk Air	<b>3x/week</b>
Delhi (DEL)	Druk Air / Bhutan Airlines	<b>Daily</b>
Kathmandu (KTM)	Druk Air / Bhutan Airlines	<b>Daily</b>
Kolkata (CCU)	Druk Air / Bhutan Airlines	<b>Daily</b>
Singapore (SIN)	Druk Air	<b>Seasonal</b>
Kuala Lumpur (KUL)	Druk Air	<b>Select days</b>
Mumbai (BOM)	Druk Air	<b>Select days</b>
Dhaka (DAC)	Druk Air	<b>Select days</b>

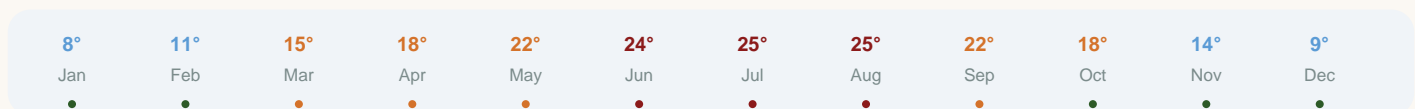
## TYPICAL JOURNEY TIMES TO PARO

- **Australia (Sydney):** ~12–15 hrs via Bangkok/Singapore
- **UK (London):** ~14–16 hrs via Delhi/Doha
- **USA (New York):** ~18–22 hrs via Delhi/Bangkok
- **Europe:** ~12–14 hrs via Delhi/Istanbul

★ **PRO TIP:** Most travellers connect through Bangkok, Delhi, or Kathmandu. Book Bhutan legs with Druk Air directly at [gettravelled.com.au](http://gettravelled.com.au)

## BEST SEASONS AT A GLANCE

SPRING Mar – May	SUMMER / MONSOON Jun – Aug	AUTUMN Sep – Nov	WINTER Dec – Feb
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear skies &amp; mild temps 15–25°C</li> <li>Paro Tshechu festival (April)</li> <li>Rhododendrons in bloom (46+ species!)</li> <li>Best for trekking &amp; sightseeing</li> <li>Peak season — book well ahead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lush green landscapes</li> <li>Heavy rain but dramatic scenery</li> <li>Fewer tourists, lower costs</li> <li>Some treks closed — check routes</li> <li>Bumthang valleys stay drier</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crystal-clear Himalayan views</li> <li>Thimphu Tshechu (Sept/Oct 2026)</li> <li>Ideal for photography &amp; trekking</li> <li>Colorful harvest landscapes</li> <li>#1 recommended season overall</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Snow on high passes (chains needed)</li> <li>Fewest tourists, quiet monasteries</li> <li>Punakha Tshechu (Feb/Mar)</li> <li>Cold 5–12°C in valleys</li> <li>Black-Necked Crane Festival (Nov)</li> </ul>



## 2026 FESTIVAL CALENDAR

<p><b>FEB 27–MAR 1</b></p> <p><b>Punakha Drubchen &amp; Tshechu</b></p> <p>● <i>Punakha Dzong</i></p> <p>Reenactment of Bhutan's 17th-century battle victory. Stunning riverside setting. Sacred</p>	<p><b>APR 2026</b></p> <p><b>Paro Tshechu</b></p> <p>● <i>Paro Rinpung Dzong</i></p> <p>Bhutan's most famous festival. Huge sacred thangka (Thongdroel) unfurled at dawn.</p>
<p><b>SEP 21–23</b></p> <p><b>Thimphu Tshechu</b></p> <p>● <i>Tashichho Dzong, Thimphu</i></p> <p>The capital's biggest annual celebration. Five days of masked dances, religious</p>	<p><b>SEP 24–26</b></p> <p><b>Gangtey Tshechu</b></p> <p>● <i>Gangtey Goenpa, Phobjikha</i></p> <p>Held in the beautiful Phobjikha Valley, the 'Switzerland of Bhutan'. Timed perfectly</p>
<p><b>OCT 18–21</b></p> <p><b>Jambay Lhakhang Drup</b></p> <p>● <i>Bumthang</i></p> <p>Mystical fire ceremony (Mewang) and rare naked dance after dark. One of Bhutan's</p>	<p><b>NOV</b></p> <p><b>Black-Necked Crane Festival</b></p> <p>● <i>Phobjikha Valley</i></p> <p>Celebrate the arrival of migrating Black-Necked Cranes from Tibet. Local</p>

## PARO VALLEY

Tiger's Nest & Ancient Dzongs

### MUST-SEE:

- Paro Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) — hike 4–6 hrs to the iconic cliff-top monastery
- Paro Rinpung Dzong — fortress monastery guarding the valley entrance
- National Museum of Bhutan — housed in a 17th-century watchtower

★ Start Tiger's Nest hike by 7am to beat the heat and crowds. The hike is a steep climb.

- Kyichu Lhakhang — one of

## BUMTHANG

The Spiritual Heart of Bhutan

### MUST-SEE:

- Jakar Dzong — 'Castle of the White Bird', Bumthang's central fortress
- Kurjey Lhakhang — complex of 3 temples where Guru Rinpoche meditated
- Jambay Lhakhang — 7th-century temple, one of Bhutan's oldest
- Membartsho (Burning Lake) —

★ Bumthang Valley stays relatively dry during monsoon season — one of the best times to visit.

- Swiss Farm cheese & Red Panda beer — Bumthang's unique local products!

## THIMPHU

Capital City & Cultural Hub

### MUST-SEE:

- Tashichho Dzong — seat of the Bhutanese government & royal palace complex
- Buddha Dordenma statue — giant golden Buddha overlooking the valley (51.5m tall)
- Motithang Takin Preserve — Bhutan's national animal in its natural habitat

★ Thimphu is the world's only capital without traffic lights. Policemen direct traffic above the city.

- Weekend market (Centenary

## PHOBJIKHA VALLEY

Black-Necked Cranes & Wild Nature

### MUST-SEE:

- Gangtey Goenpa — hilltop monastery overlooking the entire glacial valley
- Black-Necked Crane Information Centre — seasonal (Oct–Feb, crane migration)
- Gangtey Nature Trail — beautiful half-day walk through wetlands and forest

★ Visit Oct–Feb to see 400+ endangered Black-Necked Cranes in their natural habitat.

- Phobjikha Valley viewpoint — sweeping views of Bhutan's broadest valley

## PUNAKHA

Palace of Great Happiness

### MUST-SEE:

- Punakha Dzong — 17th-century fortress at confluence of two rivers (breathtaking)
- Chimi Lhakhang (Fertility Temple) — 25-min walk through rice paddy fields
- Punakha Suspension Bridge — longest pedestrian bridge in Bhutan (180m)

★ Punakha's lower altitude (1,200m) makes it Bhutan's warmest valley — perfect for valley views.

- Mo Chhu river rafting — fun grade 2–3 whitewater adventure

## TREKKING

### Tiger's Nest Hike

4–6 hrs

The quintessential Bhutan experience. 900m ascent through forest to the iconic cliff-top monastery at 3,120m. Moderate

### Druk Path Trek

5 days

Classic route from Paro to Thimphu via high-altitude lakes. Passes ancient dzongs and pine forests. One of Bhutan's most

### Snowman Trek

25 days

One of the world's most challenging treks. Remote northern Bhutan, crossing 11 passes above 5,000m. Only for experienced

### Dagala Thousand Lakes

4–5 days

Glacial lake-studded plateau near Thimphu. Excellent birdwatching and wildflower meadows. Moderate difficulty.

## CULTURE & SPIRITUALITY

### Attend a Tshechu Festival

1–3 days

Immerse in sacred mask dances (cham), receive blessings, and witness the giant Thongdroel unfurling. A genuinely

### Meditation Retreat

3–7 days

Several monasteries offer guided meditation programs. Uma by COMO and Six Senses run structured programs for beginners and

### Archery Match

2–3 hrs

Bhutan's national sport. Traditional bows fire over 140m. Ask your guide to arrange a local match — intensely competitive and

### Farmhouse Homestay

1–2 nights

Sleep in a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse, help with cooking, learn about Buddhist daily life. One of the most authentic

## ★ ADVENTURE & WILDLIFE

### White-Water Rafting

Half day

Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu rivers near Punakha. Grade 2–3 rapids through pristine forest. Best Sep–Nov. Cost ~USD \$100

### Mountain Biking

Various

Bhutan has excellent biking routes from easy valley rides to challenging mountain descents. Bikes available

### Bird Watching

Year-round

700+ bird species including Black-Necked Cranes, Rufous-Necked Hornbills, and the rare Ward's Trogon. Phobjikha

### Hot Stone Bath

1–2 hrs

Traditional Bhutanese therapy: river-heated stones placed in a wooden tub with wormwood herbs. Incredibly relaxing after

## BHUTANESE FOOD — WHAT TO EAT

### Ema Datshi

The national dish. Fiery green or red chilies cooked

*Spice level: ●●●●● (Very Hot)*

### Jasha Maroo

Minced chicken cooked with tomatoes, onions, ginger,

*Spice level: ●●■■■ (Medium)*

### Suja (Butter Tea)

Tea churned with yak butter and salt. Acquired taste for

*Cultural tip: Let your host refill often*

### Phaksha Paa

Pork cooked with dried red chilies, radishes and leafy

*Spice level: ●●●■■ (Medium-Hot)*

### Red Rice

Nutty, slightly chewy short-grain red rice is

*Must try — uniquely Bhutanese*

### Ara (Rice Wine)

Traditional distilled spirit made from rice, wheat, or

*Alcohol content: Varies! Sip cautiously*

## DINING TIPS

- Most tours include all meals — confirm with your operator
- Street food is limited — Bhutan has very few food stalls
- Vegetarians well catered for: lots of vegetable datshi dishes
- International food available in Thimphu & Paro (cafes, Indian, Continental)
- Water: drink bottled or filtered. Tap water not safe for most visitors

## CULTURAL ETIQUETTE

### ✓ DO: Cultural Dos

- Dress modestly when visiting dzongs & temples (no shorts or sleeveless)
- Remove shoes before entering temples — always
- Walk clockwise around chortens (stupas) and prayer wheels
- Ask permission before photographing monks or

### ✗ DON'T: Avoid These

- Don't touch or climb on religious statues or structures
- Don't bring leather goods into temple interiors
- Don't point feet toward religious objects or people
- Don't refuse offered butter tea — sip it as a gesture of respect
- Don't photograph the interior of dzongs without permission
- Don't litter — Bhutan is immaculately clean; keep it that way

## SAMPLE BUDGET BREAKDOWN (7 NIGHTS, 1 PERSON)

Item	Cost (USD)	Notes
● Visa Fee	\$40	One-time, non-refundable
● SDF (7 nights × \$100)	\$700	Mandatory; funds education, health
● Tour Package (budget)	\$700–\$1,050	Accommodation + meals + guide
● Tour Package (mid-range)	\$1,050–\$1,750	Better hotels, more flexible itineraries
● Tour Package (luxury)	\$2,800+	5-star resorts (Uma, Six Senses)
● 5% GST (from 2026)	+5%	On tour services only (not SDF)
● Personal spend (7 nights)	\$100–\$300	Souvenirs, tips, extra activities

★ Budget 7-night trip: ~\$1,540+ | Mid-range: ~\$2,490+ | Luxury: \$3,500+

## WHERE TO STAY

Budget \$40–\$80/night	Mid-Range \$80–\$200/night	Luxury \$300–1,200+/night
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Standard guesthouses &amp; small hotels</li><li>Basic amenities; clean &amp; welcoming</li><li>Many run by local</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Comfortable 3–4 star properties</li><li>Often include Bhutanese architecture</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Uma by COMO Paro; Six Senses Bhutan</li><li>Amankora (5 lodges across Bhutan)</li><li>World-class spa,</li></ul>

## ESSENTIAL PACKING LIST FOR BHUTAN

### Clothing & Footwear

- Layers: temperature drops sharply at night even in summer
- Modest clothes for monastery visits (no shorts / sleeveless tops)
- Comfortable trekking shoes with ankle support
- Rain jacket — even in 'dry' season, afternoon showers occur

### Health & Safety

- Travel insurance with emergency evacuation cover (essential!)
- Altitude sickness medication (consult your doctor — Diamox)
- SPF 50+ sunscreen — UV is intense at altitude
- Insect repellent for lower elevation areas

### Tech & Documents

- Visa clearance letter (printed + digital copy)
- Travel insurance documents (printed)
- Universal power adapter (Bhutan uses types D & G sockets)
- Power bank — mountain lodges may have limited power
- Camera (smartphone ok) — but respect no-photo zones
- Offline maps downloaded — mobile data is limited outside cities

Currency	Language	Religion	Time Zone	Electricity	Emergency
Ngultrum (BTN) Indian Rupee also accepted	Dzongkha (official) English widely spoken	Vajrayana Buddhism (~75% of population)	<b>Tourism Council of Bhutan</b> → <a href="http://www.tourism.gov.bt">www.tourism.gov.bt</a> Official government tourism portal; visa & SDF info		2

## CONNECTIVITY & COMMUNICATIONS

### Mobile Data:

TashiCell and B-Mobile sell SIM cards at Paro airport. Good 4G coverage in valleys; none on

### WiFi:

Available in most hotels and restaurants in Thimphu & Paro. Speeds are moderate. Remote

### Calling:

International calls via WhatsApp/Messenger work fine in towns. Local SIM gives much

## HEALTH & MEDICAL

- Altitude: Most of Bhutan is 2,000–4,000m. Acclimatise slowly; ascend no more than 300–500m/day on treks.
- Water: Drink only bottled or purified water. Carry purification tablets for treks.
- Vaccinations: Hepatitis A & B, Typhoid recommended. Check with your doctor 4–6 weeks before travel.
- Medical care: Thimphu has the main referral hospital (JDWNRH). Paro has a district hospital. Remote areas have basic health units only.

## SAMPLE ITINERARY IDEAS

5-DAY ESSENTIALS	8-DAY CLASSIC	14-DAY IN DEPTH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Day 1–2: Paro — Tiger's Nest hike, Rinpung Dzong, Kyichu Lhakhang</li><li>● Day 3: Drive Thimphu via Dochu La Pass (108 chortens, mountain views)</li><li>● Day 4: Thimphu — Tashichho Dzong, Buddha Dordenma, weekend market</li><li>● Day 5: Fly home from Paro (explore valley before transfer)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Days 1–2: Paro — Tiger's Nest + local monasteries</li><li>● Day 3: Dochu La → Punakha Dzong + Chim Lhakhang</li><li>● Day 4: Thimphu — culture &amp; city highlights</li><li>● Days 5–6: Gangtey / Phobjikha Valley nature &amp; cranes</li><li>● Days 7–8: Return Paro — Drukgyel Dzong, local markets</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Days 1–2: Paro — arrival, Tiger's Nest, dzongs</li><li>● Days 3–4: Punakha — Dzong, rafting, fertility temple</li><li>● Day 5: Thimphu highlights</li><li>● Days 6–7: Gangtey Valley — cranes &amp; nature</li><li>● Days 8–11: Bumthang — 4 valleys, ancient temples, cycling</li><li>● Days 12–13: Druk Path Trek (optional)</li><li>● Day 14: Final Paro day, depart</li></ul>

## KEY CONTACTS & RESOURCES

Time Zone	Electricity	Emergency
<b>Tourism Council of Bhutan</b> → <a href="http://www.tourism.gov.bt">www.tourism.gov.bt</a> Official government tourism portal; visa & SDF info		2
<b>Bhutan Immigration (Visa)</b> → <a href="http://www.immi.gov.bt">www.immi.gov.bt</a> Online visa application portal		
<b>Druk Air (National Airline)</b> → <a href="http://gettravelled.com.au">gettravelled.com.au</a> Bhutan's national carrier; book Paro flights		
<b>Bhutan Airlines</b> → <a href="http://gettravelled.com.au">gettravelled.com.au</a> Second carrier; sometimes lower fares		
<b>Bhutan Broadcasting Service</b> → <a href="http://www.bbs.bt">www.bbs.bt</a> Local news & travel updates		

## GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

### ■ Bhutan's GNH Philosophy

Bhutan measures national success through Gross National Happiness (GNH) rather than GDP. The four pillars — sustainable development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and good governance

★ **IMPORTANT:** All visa fees, SDF rates, and travel requirements verified as of June 2026. Always confirm latest details at [tourism.gov.bt](http://tourism.gov.bt) before booking.

Druk Gyalkhap Bhutan • Tashi Delek! (Greetings & Good Luck!) • ■ ■ ■ ■