

# BHUTAN

DETAILED ITINERARY

DARJEELING AND SIKKIM

Nov 20/23



Land of the Peaceful Dragon - if ever there was an intriguing description of a country, this must be it. A land of friendly, devout Buddhists, mountain monasteries and snow-capped 22,000-foot peaks, Bhutan and its neighbors, Darjeeling and Sikkim, are the cultural explorer's Philosopher's Stone.

Our trip begins with a short flight to Bagdogra, India. From here, we drive to the former hill station of Darjeeling, famous for its tea plantations, temperate climate and the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute. Views of Kanchenjunga (the world's third highest mountain) and a visit to a tea plantation feature prominently during our days in Darjeeling.

In Sikkim, a kingdom formerly closed to tourists, be awe-inspired by spectacular views of mountain peaks. Experience a rare opportunity to mingle with a traditional

## FACTS & HIGHLIGHTS

- 21 land days • Maximum 16 travelers • Start and finish in Calcutta, India • All meals included • Includes 2 internal flights • Enjoy the colorful dance and music of Paro or Thimpu festivals • In India, visit Darjeeling Hill Stations & see Mount Kanchenjunga, world's 3rd highest • In Bhutan, visit Thimpu, Paro, Bumtang and Trongsa Punakha and their impressive Dzongs (administrative and religious fortress) • Visit the Kingdom of Sikkim & Rumtek Monastery • Climb to spectacular Taktasang Monastery

## DEPARTURE DATES & PRICE

**Δ Mar 26 - Apr 15, 2025 - \$9995 USD**

**Δ Paro Festival**

Dates may change due to Festivals

\*Price includes new \$200 per day government tourism fee.

**Activity Level: 2**

**Comfort Level:** Elevation: 3 times we drive over mountain passes just over 3000m/10000ft. Some rough/winding roads and long drives. Temperatures can be cold at night at high altitude so warm clothing is necessary.

## ACCOMMODATIONS

Comfortable hotels with private bathrooms.

**ELDERTREKS**

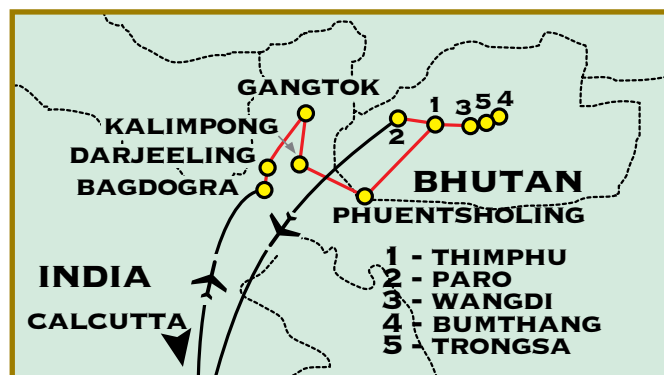


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FOR TRAVELERS 50 PLUS

Himalayan community, considered by many to be the last Shangri-La.

We travel to Bhutan along winding mountain roads. We visit Thimphu, the nation's capital, and wander through markets, Buddhist temples and monasteries. We journey to Wangdi and visit the famous Punakha Dzong via the Duchola Pass, with its stunning views of the Himalayas.

Add a visit to Paro, where one can hike to Taktsang Monastery, and encounter Bhutan's gentle and gracious people. It's the perfect recipe for a magical itinerary set against the mystical backdrop of the majestic Himalayas.



### **DAY 1 ARRIVE IN CALCUTTA, INDIA**

Upon arrival in Calcutta you will be met at the airport and transferred to your hotel. The remainder of the day is free to explore on your own before meeting with the group for dinner and our orientation meeting.

Overnight in Calcutta.

### **DAY 2 CALCUTTA - KALIGHAT KALI TEMPLE**

A full day exploring the ancient sights of Calcutta. We visit Kalighat Kali Temple, Victoria Memorial hall and Mother Teresa's Tomb.

Overnight in Calcutta.

### **DAY 3 FLY TO BAGDOGRA, INDIA - TEA FACTORY**

Today, we fly from Calcutta to Bagdogra in India. Our adventure to Darjeeling (West Bengal), Sikkim, and Bhutan begins with a scenic drive to Darjeeling, where we will have a time to explore and relax. We will visit a tea factory and a Tibetan refugee center.

Overnight in Darjeeling.



Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta

Mt. Kanchenjunga — 3rd highest peak on Earth.



#### **DAY 4 DARJEELING — MT. KANCHENJUNGA**

This morning we take a trip to Tiger Hill for a view of the sunrise over the mountains in hopes to see Mt. Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world. After breakfast we will visit the Railway Museum and then continue on to visit the Ghoom Monastery.

Overnight in Darjeeling.

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#### **DAY 5 DARJEELING — MOUNTAINEERING INSTITUTE**

Today we drive to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute. The Institute was established in 1954 following the mountaineering success of Hilary and Tenzing. After the museum, we walk through the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park as they protect endangered species, including some of the most unusual animals in the world. Amongst these

are red pandas, Siberian tigers, yaks, snow leopards and Himalayan bears.

Overnight in Darjeeling.

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#### **DAY 6 GANGTOK, SIKKIM**

In the morning, we drive and cross the border into Sikkim where we will then continue on after lunch to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Until 1965, Sikkim was a separate state ruled by a Chogyal (a Sikkim king) whose history dates back to the 16th century. Today, the monarchy has been abolished and Sikkim is part of the Indian union.

We will visit a handicraft center to see the beautiful fabrics of this land.

Overnight in Gangtok.

Rumtek Monastery



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## **DAY 7 GANGTOK - INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOG**

We start off our day with a visit to the Ganesh Tok temple, which is also a view point. We then visit the Flower Exhibition Center that was once the Loop Garden in North Sikkim during 1963 and then inaugurated by the Gyalmo Hope Namgyal. The most beautiful Himalayan flowers can be seen here, including orchids.

After lunch we will visit the Institute of Tibetology. The Institute was established in 1958 to promote research on the language, culture and religion of Tibet. It houses an impressive collection of over 3,000 books, containing some of the earliest translations of Buddha's teachings. In the evening we walk through the Lal Bazaar Market, the main attraction for the locals in Gangtok town.

Overnight in Gangtok.

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## **DAY 8 RUMTEK MONASTERY - KALIMPONG, INDIA**

Today we drive to Kalimpong, first stopping to visit the Rumtek Monastery. Rumtek Monastery was the seat of the Kagypa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The first monastery was built here in 1717, but crumbled to ruins and the present monastery dates from 1960.

We return back to the Sikkim border to drive to Kalimpong.

Overnight in Kalimpong.

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## **DAY 9 PHUENTSHOLING, BHUTAN**

We have an early start to the morning so we can visit Durpin Dara Monastery also known as Thongsa Monastery. We continue to Phuentsholing,

just inside the Bhutan border. Today is a long day so we will have a box lunch to save time. On our first night in Bhutan, we have a short walk through the streets of Phuentsholing and savor being among the few who have traveled to this remote and exotic land.

Overnight in Phuentsholing.

Elevation of Phuentsholing: 300m /985ft.

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## **DAY 10 SPECTACULAR DRIVE TO THIMPHU**

We have a full day drive through the spectacular countryside to Thimphu, the nation's capital. The driving distance today is about 175 kms and will take about 5 - 6 hours. Enroute, we visit Rinchending Monastery, also known to some as the Kharbandi Monastery, built in 1967 by the great grandmother of the present king of Bhutan. Thimphu is the modern capital of Bhutan with an estimated population of more than 99,000 people. Afterwards, we visit the Thimphu post office where we can make our own stamp and send a post card home with your self made stamp.

Overnight in Thimphu.

Elevation of Thimphu valley: 2, 400m / 7,875ft.

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## **DAY 11 SITES OF THIMPHU**

Bhutan is the only country whose government is officially Buddhist and as such, a walk through the streets of Thimphu is a walk unlike any other in the world. We visit the National Memorial Chorten, built in 1974 in memory of the third king of Bhutan. Later, we visit the Mini Zoo to see a real life takin (a goat-antelope), the national animal of Bhutan.

We also have the opportunity to visit the School of Arts and Crafts - commonly known as the "painting

school” and several handicraft emporiums.

We have a late afternoon visit the TrashiChoe Dzong, built in 1641. The Dzong houses the office and the Throne Room of his Majesty the King, the ministers and various government organizations. The Dzong also houses the home of the Central Monastic Body and serves as the summer residence of the monk body and the Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot of Bhutan).

Overnight in Thimphu.

Elevation of Thimphu valley: 2,400m / 7,875ft.

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## **DAY 12 TO WANGDI VIA DOCHULA PASS, PUNAKHA DZONG**

We depart Thimphu and drive over the Dochula Pass which is approximately 3100m / 10,170ft and walk around the Chortens of the fallen soldiers and get lost in the prayer flags that cover this high pass. On a clear day, one can view the magnificent sights of the Eastern Himalayan Ranges.

Our first stop is a visit to the Punakha Dzong built in 1637 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, the unifier of Bhutan. This fortress is the winter residence of the Central Monastic Body and the Je Khenpo. It is one of the most beautiful Dzongs in Bhutan. Punakha served as the ancient capital of Bhutan until 1955.

After visiting Punakha Dzong, we proceed to Wangdue Phodrang valley via the ruins of the Wangduephodrang Dzong, which was a peaceful monastery set on top of the hill overlooking the Wangdi River. The Dzong, which was built by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1638 and the third oldest Dzong in Bhutan, was burned down on June 24, 2012. We will see the new Dzong they created in a month all by hand, to house the relics and learn more about the Dzong, the monastery and the resident monks.

Overnight in Wangdi.

Elevation of Punakha valley: 1,300m / 4,265ft.

Elevation of Wangdue Phodrang valley: 1,350m / 4,265ft.

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## **DAY 13 TO BUMTHANG**

After breakfast, we begin our journey to Bumthang, crossing 3 passes. Bumthang valley is the cultural heartland of the country. The route is along a spectacular winding road, crossing 3,300m / 10,820 ft high Pele La pass, and at certain times of year it's possible to see yaks. One will pass the magnificent stupa of Chendebji, which is similar to the Boudhnath in Nepal.

You will stop in Trongsa for lunch. After lunch, you'll visit Trongsa Dzong built in 1646, the masterpiece of Bhutanese architecture and one of the most impressive Dzong in Bhutan. Trongsa is also the ancestral home of the Royal Family. We proceed to Bumthang with its lush valleys and hilly forests. Along the way, we will stop at a yathra (textile weaving) factory, where the yathras are designed with patterns unique to Bumthang, and we can even watch some of the weavers at their looms.

Overnight in Bumthang.

Elevation of Trongsa valley: 2,200m / 7,218ft

Elevation of Bumthang valley: 2,600m / 8,530ft

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## **DAY 14 BUMTHANG - JAKAR DZONG, JAMBHEY LHAKHANG, TAMSHING LHAKHANG**

Today we explore the Bumthang valley with visits to Jakar Dzong, the administrative center of the valley, built in 1667. We will visit Jambey Lhakhang, one of the oldest monasteries in Bhutan, dating from the introduction of Buddhism in Bhutan in 746 AD. Next we stop at Kurjey Lhakhang, one of the most



Paro Festival





sacred places, because Guru Rinpoche left his body imprint on the cave when he was meditating.

After lunch we will visit the Tamshing Lhakhang Temple, built in 1501 by Terton Pema Lingpa, a renowned Buddhist saint. The temple houses the religious Buddhist paintings and is the most important Nyingmapa temple in Bhutan. The original murals on the walls still survive, which are considered to be the oldest paintings in Bhutan, dating back to the 15th century.

If time permits, we visit the Wangdicholing Palace, which was built in 1857, and was the first palace in Bhutan for the Royal Family.

Overnight in Bumthang.

Elevation of Bumthang valley: 2,600m / 8,530ft

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## DAY 15 TRONGSA

After breakfast, we return to Trongsa, where we have lunch.

After lunch in Trongsa, we visit the Ta Dzong, perched over the Trongsa Dzong. This fortress was originally built as a watch tower and later converted into a heritage museum. Late afternoon, we explore

the small quaint town of Trongsa.

Overnight in Trongsa.

Elevation of Trongsa valley: 2,200m / 7,218ft.

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## DAY 16 THIMPU VIA DOCHULA PASS

We have an early start to the morning, which will once again take us over the Pele La and Dochula passes, before we drive back to Thimpu. On our drive we will see the Simtokha Fort, with its impressive views of the surrounding countryside.

Later this afternoon we will visit the Zilukha Nunery School perched high on the hill overlooking the Thimphu valley and enjoy a relaxing evening.

Overnight in Thimphu.

Elevation of Thimphu valley: 2,400m / 7,875ft.

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## DAY 17 BUMTHANG - WANGDI

Today we begin with a short drive to Paro, visiting the Simtokha Dzong enroute. The dzong is one of the oldest dzongs in Bhutan, built in 1629. At present, it is the home of the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies.



Upon arrival in Paro we have lunch. After lunch we visit the National Museum of Bhutan, originally built as the watch tower overlooking the Paro Dzong and the valley. We also visit the Kyichu Lhakhang, which is one of the oldest temples in the country, built in the 7th century by the Tibetan King - Songtsen Gampo. It is believed that Kyichu Lhakhang held down the left foot of a demon who was obstructing the spread of Buddhism in the region.

Late afternoon, if time permits, we visit the Paro Festival before ending the day with a short stroll in

the Paro town.

Overnight in Paro.

Elevation of Paro valley: 2,200m / 7,218ft.

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## DAY 18 PARO FESTIVAL

This special departure was planned around one of Bhutan's biggest and most popular festivals, the Paro Tsechu or Paro Festival. Every spring people from all over Bhutan come to Paro to partake in the festivities. Festival goers and monks alike dress in brilliant costumes and wear masks representing Buddhist deities. Here they dance and re-enact Bhutanese legends.

Today we will wake before sunrise, approximately 3am (optional but recommended), to see the morning rituals of the Unfurling of Thongdril (Giant Holy Thanka of Shri Guru Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche). We can mingle with the pilgrims from far and wide and march in the procession to witness this holy festival.

We will return back to the hotel for a breakfast and rest before we start our day with more of the closing ceremonies of the festival, and participate in the mask dance ceremony.

Overnight in Paro.

Elevation of Paro valley: 2,200m / 7,218ft.

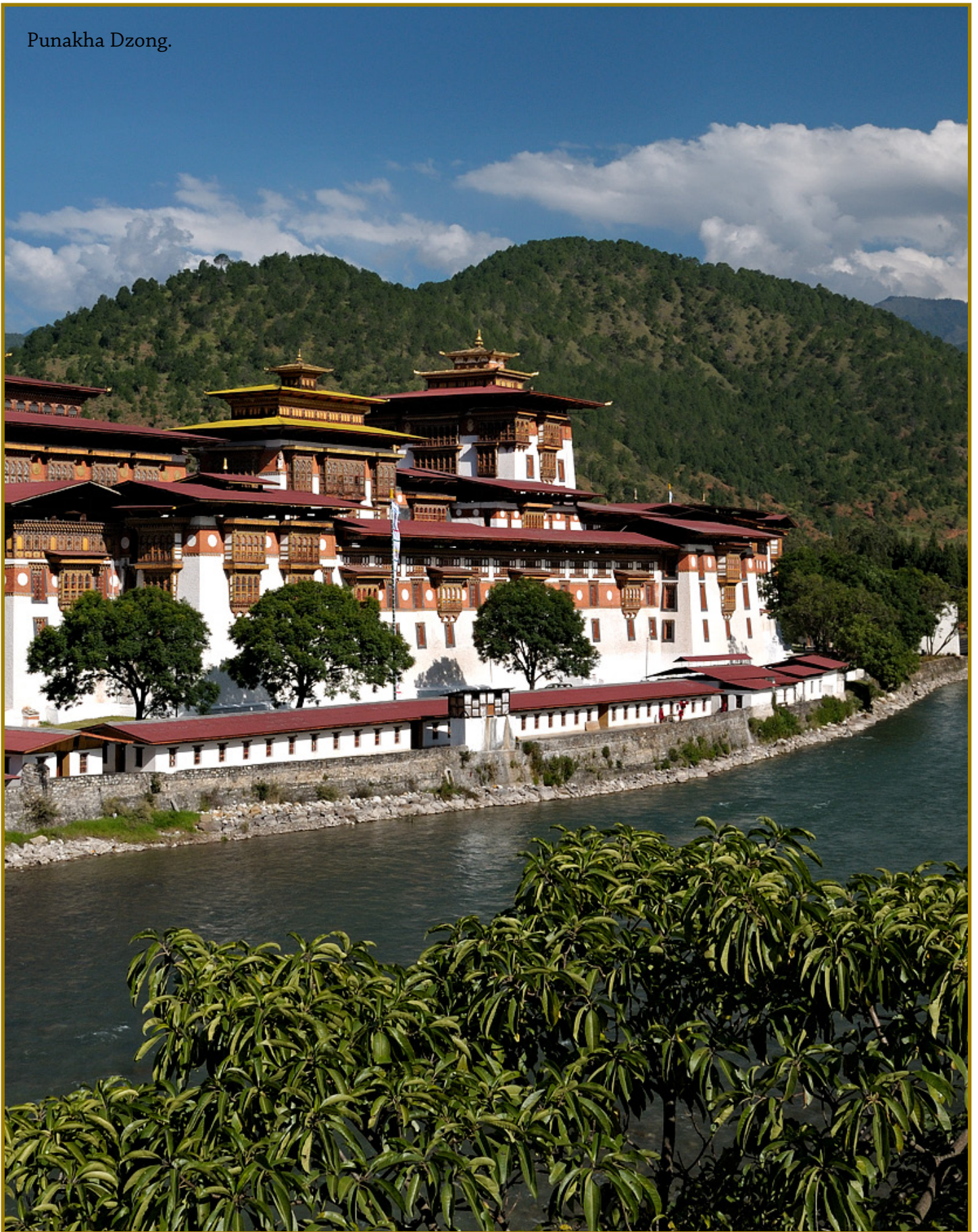
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## DAY 19 HIKE TO TAKTSANG MONASTERY

We spend the morning sightseeing in Paro with visits to Drukgyel Dzong. The Drukgyel Dzong was built in the 16th century to commemorate a victory over the invading Tibetan forces. The fortress today lies in ruins, due to corrosion from elements and a fire in the 1950s which have taken a toll on the site. This afternoon, we hike up to the famous Taktsang



Punakha Dzong.



Monastery, or Tiger's Nest, where we marvel in the history of this holy place and see the holy cave where it is said to be the origin of Buddhism in Bhutan. This monastery is miraculously perched on the side of a sheer cliff 900m above the Paro Valley. It is said that Guru Rinpoche flew to the site of the monastery on the back of a tigress believed to be his consort - Yeshey Tshogyel, to subdue the local demon. Guru Rinpoche meditated in the cave for three months.

The views over the Paro Valley will take your breath away!

Overnight in Paro.

Elevation of Paro valley: 2,200m / 7,218ft.

## **DAY 20 FLY TO CALCUTTA, FAREWELL DINNER**

Today we say goodbye to Bhutan and fly to Calcutta, where we will have a free afternoon before we have our farewell dinner.

Overnight in Calcutta.

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## **DAY 21 DEPART CALCUTTA**

After breakfast you will be transferred to the airport for your departing flights.







# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

## 1. HOW BIG ARE THE GROUPS?

Each group is limited to 16 participants. Small groups are an important ingredient in adventure travel. They allow for more interaction and more personalized service throughout the itinerary.

## 2. WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE TOUR PRICE?

All accommodations throughout; all meals, starting with dinner on day 1 and finishing with breakfast on departure day (i.e. the last day of the ElderTreks tour); bottled drinking water throughout the trip; all internal transportation; airport transfers on day 1 and departure day (i.e. the last day of the ElderTreks tour); all day trips and entrance fees as outlined in the itinerary; tips for hotels (portage), national guides, bus drivers, restaurants and spot guides; services of a trip leader.

## 3. WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED IN THE TOUR PRICE?

International flights, tips to ElderTreks tour leader, alcoholic drinks, visas and travel insurance.

## 4. ARE THESE “EDUCATIONAL” TOURS?

Yes, in the broadest sense of the word, “educational”. We visit many temples and historic sites, and have talks and discussions on the region’s history, culture and politics, but this is only one element of what we do. We believe that it is equally educational to get to meet new people on a non-commercial basis, visit their homes, and even try to learn a few words in the native language. Sometimes the most “educational” moments are spent walking down a country road.

## 5. HOW DO WE TRAVEL DURING THE TOUR?

All land transportation and internal flights are included in the land price of the trip. We use SUV’s in India and minibus for road travel in Bhutan, and have one internal flight and a short train journey.

## 6. WHAT ARE OUR ACCOMMODATIONS LIKE?

We always stay in good accommodations — both hotels and guest houses, where every room has a private bathroom. The accommodations have been chosen on the basis of location, atmosphere and local charm.

## 7. WHAT ABOUT THE WEATHER?

The weather in the region can change quickly and you can experience wide variation in one day. Due to the elevations

and seasons, it is difficult to predict the weather, but we have planned our tours to run during the dry season from October to May. Rainfall is minimal and the best views of the Himalayas occur at this time of year. Daytime temperatures are approximately 75°F (23°C), but night time temperatures can drop below 60°F (15°C).

## 8. WHEN IS PAYMENT DUE?

A non-refundable deposit of \$500 USD (plus insurance if you require it) is due at time of booking and will reserve your place on the adventure. Payment of the full land cost is due 120 days before departure. Cancellation charges are applicable and are outlined in the “Terms and Conditions” section of our brochure.

## 9. IS MEDICAL INSURANCE REQUIRED?

Insurance coverage is not included in the cost of your trip. Please note that medical insurance is not required for this adventure but is recommended. ElderTreks offers comprehensive travel insurance and we are happy to provide you with a quote if you call our office. If you are purchasing insurance elsewhere, please ensure you provide the details to ElderTreks as soon as possible.

## 10. WHAT SHOULD I TAKE ON THE TOUR?

There is a detailed “What to Take” list in our Trip Kit, which we will send to you once you have booked the trip.

## 11. WHAT MEALS ARE INCLUDED?

All meals are included, starting with dinner on day 1, and finishing with breakfast on departure day. We eat a variety of local foods prepared in a wide range of settings. In many cases, we simply order a number of dishes and share, allowing you to sample new foods and decide what you enjoy best.

## 12. CAN YOU ARRANGE MY FLIGHTS?

We would be happy to take care of your air arrangements. ElderTreks has a full air department and we offer highly competitive airfares. Whether you simply want an air quote, or you would like to make an air reservation when booking your tour, just give us a call and we’ll work out a routing for you.

## 13. WHAT IF I WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION?

If you have any further questions about the trip, please do not hesitate to contact our office or your travel agent for additional information. A Trip Kit containing further details on the destination will be sent to those who have booked on the tour.

