

EXPLORE!

Inside the Hidden Kingdoms
23 days

Bhutan, India, Nepal - Trip code BH



Inside the Hidden Kingdoms

Travel with us on this cultural adventure from bustling Kolkata and the nearby Sundarbans, through the tea plantations of Darjeeling and into the Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan. Along the way we explore relics of the Raj, ruined monasteries and ancient temples. These awe-inspiring religious sites are set against the dramatic backdrop of the Himalayan Mountains. This departure also spends time at the annual Thimpu Festival.

Trip highlights

- ★ **The Sundarbans** - Take a cruise through the UNESCO World Heritage landscapes of one of the world's largest mangrove forests
- ★ **Darjeeling** - Take a ride on the 'Toy Train' in this famous hill station
- ★ **Gangtok** - Soak up the atmosphere in the colourful Sikkimese capital
- ★ **Thimpu** - Spend time in the most relaxed capital city in the world
- ★ **Punakha** - Visit the stunning Dzong, located at the confluence of two rivers
- ★ **Paro** - Spend a day at the famous Paro festival

ACCOMMODATION GRADE:

Standard

Our standard, mid-range accommodation offers a good level of service, often with other amenities such as a restaurant, bar, garden or swimming pool. Generally rooms will be comfortable with en suite facilities.

TRIP PACE:**Full on**

Full on paced trips are for travellers who like their holidays packed with activities and experiences, moving on quickly from place to place with lots of early starts and long, busy days. Some may find them tiring, but others get a buzz from packing their precious holiday-time as chock-a-block full of new experiences as possible!

GROUP SIZE:**10 - 16**

Maximum group size ranges from between 6 to 20 people, depending on the type of trip, the transport and accommodation used and activities included. We rarely have groups that are smaller than five or six people and the average is 12 people plus an Explore leader.

Itinerary

Itineraries on some departure dates may differ, please select the itinerary that you wish to explore.

DAY 1 - Join trip in Kolkata (Calcutta)

Our trip begins this evening in Kolkata (Calcutta). Once the capital of British India, Kolkata has had a turbulent past. It was central to the struggle for Indian independence and thousands of Bengali refugees came here at the start of the 1900's. It is a city of striking contrasts and can be overwhelming initially, but the unusual sights, pungent smells and the chaotic sounds of the country's second largest city are an experience unique to India.

Flights to Kolkata often arrive in the middle of the night, so while the trip begins today we will expect some of the group to arrive in the early hours of day two.



Accommodation: Lytton Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: None

DAY 2 - Explore Kolkata's temples and historic buildings

Today we intend to explore this most interesting of cities, with a tour of some of its major sites. We plan to visit St John's Church and the many historic Raj buildings around Dalhousie Square, the Jain and Kali temples and the magnificent marble dome of the Victoria memorial, where the sumptuous grandeur of European and Mughal influences come together in a blaze of white marble. We also visit the clay modeller's village of Kumartuli where the potters spend all year creating a wealth of images and idols for the annual festivals and, as the time approaches for the models to be prepared for the coming pujas, the streets are filled with an overwhelming display of brightly coloured and richly attired idols.



Accommodation: Lytton Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 3 - Discover more of Kolkata; visit to Belur Math and Dakshineswar Kali Temple

We will pay an early morning visit to the colourful flower market where tons of brightly coloured marigolds are sold by traders, before driving to Belur Math on the banks of the sacred Ganges. A place of pilgrimage for people all over the world, the site is famous for its tranquil setting and the architecture of its buildings, in particular the Ramakrishna temple which is designed to celebrate the diversity of Indian Religions and resembles a temple, a mosque, a church when viewed from different vantage points. After exploring Belur Math we'll take a short boat ride across the river to the Dakshineswar Kali Temple. Constructed in the 19th century by wealthy widow Rani Rasmani, it is said that the goddess Kali appeared to her in a dream promising to manifest herself at the site if a temple was constructed in her honour.



Accommodation: Lytton Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 4 - Search for wildlife in the Sundarbans

After breakfast this morning we leave Kolkata for the unique landscapes of the Sundarbans. Translating as the 'beautiful jungle', this UNESCO World Heritage setting is home to one of the largest mangrove forests on the planet. Set amongst a vast delta that is fed by the waters of the Padma, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers, the area is a haven for Bengal tigers, crocodiles and a remarkable diversity of birds. A short cruise takes us to the Sundarban Tiger Camp, our base for the next two nights. We'll have lunch before heading out by boat again to the Sajnekhali Tiger project area. There is a small museum and a watch tower for spotting tigers and other wildlife, and a crocodile enclosure and a turtle hatchery which helps preserve these endangered animals. The nearby heron sanctuary is a beautiful spot, and Egrets are common visitors to this part of the jungle and are likely to be spotted.



Accommodation: Sunderban Tiger Camp (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 5 - Cruise through narrow creeks to Dobanke wildlife viewing platform

Starting early we continue our exploration of the Sundarbans, cruising along winding creeks and through dense mangrove forest in search of the wildlife the area is famous for. If we are in luck we may spot Royal Bengal tigers relaxing on the mudflats next to the rivers and creeks. Other wildlife we can see includes Fishing cats, Leopard cats, Macaques, Wild boar, Indian grey mongoose, Pangolin, and Chital, as well as an abundance of birdlife. We'll make a stop at Dobanke Watch Tower where we'll enjoy a canopy walk to view the animal and bird life at the tree tops, and visit the spotted deer rehabilitation centre. In the afternoon we pay a visit to some of the local villages where we'll get an insight in to local culture and life, including the challenges of living with Bengal Tigers as neighbours.



Accommodation: Sunderban Tiger Camp (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 6 - Return to Kolkata. Overnight train and drive to Darjeeling

After a final cruise in the Sundarbans, a visit to Sudhanyakhalī Watch tower and lunch at the Tiger Camp, we'll leave for Kolkata. There'll be time for an evening meal in the city before boarding the Darjeeling Mail overnight sleeper train to Darjeeling.



Accommodation: Overnight Train Kolkata to New Jalpaiguri



Simple Overnight Train



Meals Provided: Breakfast & Lunch

DAY 7 - Continue to Darjeeling and enjoy an orientation walk of the town

Our train is scheduled to arrive in to New Jalpaiguri station at 08.00 and we'll stop for breakfast before continuing by road to the hill station of Darjeeling. In the days of the Raj the Bengal government escaped from the Calcutta heat to take up its official summer residence here and today's city dwellers still do likewise with Darjeeling being a popular holiday spot. At 2134m, the town is beautifully situated on a mountain ridge; the near vertical streets are crowded with a colourful mixture of Hindus and hill tribes - Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetans among them. On a clear day the views over the mountains to the snowy Himalayan peaks are magnificent. There'll be time to relax after the train journey before enjoying an afternoon orientation walk of the town.



Accommodation: Sinclairs Darjeeling (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 8 - Watch the sunrise across the Himalaya at Tiger Hill

Tiger Hill is the area's highest viewpoint (2590m), some 8 miles from Darjeeling and weather permitting, we plan to make a dawn

excursion here to contemplate the sunrise and the beauty of the world's third highest mountain Kanchenjunga (8586m) and other eastern Himalayan peaks. If the morning is very clear it may also be possible to see Mt Everest (8848m). There are many things to see in the town; the Himalayan Zoological Park which has had success at breeding snow leopard, Tibetan wolf and Red panda, the Mountaineering Institute with its Everest Museum or you may wish to visit the Tibetan Refugee centre where Tibetan craft work is on sale. This afternoon will be left free for you to explore Darjeeling and take some of the other smaller walks around town.



Accommodation: Sinclairs Darjeeling (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 9 - Ride on the Toy Train to Ghoom Monastery

Ghoom Gumpa (monastery) is about 8km south of Darjeeling and well worth a visit. The journey there is taken on the Toy Train line, a narrow gauge railway running between New Jaipauri and Darjeeling. Whilst we endeavour to book the traditional steam trains many of the trains servicing this route are now diesel. There will also be plenty of time to make short walks in the surrounding area or alternatively you could visit the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway museum. There will be an option to walk back to Darjeeling along the scenic ridge track via Allobari village (weather permitting) approximately 2hrs walk.



Accommodation: Sinclairs Darjeeling (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 10 - Drive to Pelling. Evening walk to Sanga Choling Monastery

Today we have a long drive to Pelling (approximately 8 hours) and this afternoon we cross into the former Kingdom of Sikkim, annexed by India in 1975 to become the 22nd Indian state. On arrival in the town there will be the opportunity to take an optional walk to the Sanga Choling monastery, approximately one hour each way.



Accommodation: Norbu Ghang Resort (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 11 - Walk on the shores of Kecheopelri Lake; visit Pemayangtse Monastery

Today we visit Kecheopelri or the Wishing Lake, considered to be the holiest lake in Sikkim. It is a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists and Hindus alike. We will have a picnic lunch at the lake and then return to Pelling. This afternoon we will visit Pemayangtse Monastery. This great monastery is the second oldest and one of the 60 still active and has an exceptional collection of religious artworks. Established in the 8th century by the famous Indian teacher Padmasambhava, its members are devotees of a mystical type of Tantric Buddhism, characterised by the red caps they wear. Their religion is derived from Tibetan Lamaism, a curious mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, mythology and magic.



Accommodation: Norbu Ghang Resort (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast & Lunch

DAY 12 - Explore Sikkim's former capital. Drive to Gangtok

On our 8 hour drive along the mountain roads today we pay a short visit to Rabdentse, the former capital of Sikkim in the 16th century before continuing on through semi tropical forests, cardamom plantations and small villages to Gangtok the present day capital of Sikkim, spectacularly set on a long ridge flanking the Ranipul River and offering many fine vantage points of the entire Kanchenjunga range. On arrival in Gangtok we visit the Drodul Chorten, built to commemorate the victory of good over evil. Surrounding the chorten are 108 prayer wheels. We also pay a visit to the Institute of Tibetology whose collection of rare books and manuscripts will interest students of Buddhism. Here there are numerous priceless religious paintings, statues and other religious artwork.



Accommodation: The Chumbi Residency (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 13 - Visit a Tibetan craft centre. Free time to relax


Today we explore Gangtok. We will pay a visit to the Tashi Handicraft Centre, a small centre established to help Tibetan refugee women find work. There are many items of tapestry, knitting and embroidery in traditional ornate designs. The rest of the day is free to relax and soak up the capitals atmosphere.



Accommodation: The Chumbi Residency (or similar)



Standard Hotel

 Single room available

 Meals Provided: Breakfast


DAY 14 - Drive to Kalimpong stopping at Rumtek Monastery

We drive today to the other side of the Ranipul valley to the Gompa at Rumtek. The headquarters of the Kagyupa sect of Tibetan Buddhism was built in the 1960s as a replica of the Tsurpu's monastery in Tibet. The religious murals are still being added to today. We then continue to the little bazaar town of Kalimpong. The town was formerly an important trading post for wool merchants coming from Tibet and the local bazaar is still the place to meet people of a dozen different cultures and religions.



Accommodation: Sinclairs Retreat Kalimpong (or similar)

 Standard Hotel

 Single room available

 Meals Provided: Breakfast


DAY 15 - Pass through vast tea estates and enter Bhutan

Departing for the Bhutanese border town of Phuentsholing we drive for approximately 6 hours through the vast tea estates of the Gangetic plains of Bengal. Approximately one quarter of India's tea is grown in West Bengal state. On arrival in Phuentsholing we will meet our Bhutanese local guide and there will be time for a wander in the town.



Accommodation: Lhaki Hotel (or similar)

 Standard Hotel

 Single room available

 Meals Provided: Breakfast & Dinner


DAY 16 - Discover Thimpu's Tashichho Dzong

We drive towards Thimpu along winding roads, passing paddy fields, apple orchards, pine forests and small hamlets, protected by sculptures of the eight auspicious signs of the Tashi Tagye. The Bhutanese capital lies in a fertile valley formed by the Wang Chu River, and has expanded rapidly over the last couple of decades. On arrival in Thimpu we will have a sightseeing tour to see the Tashichho Dzong - the religious and political centre of Bhutan.



Accommodation: Riverview Hotel (or similar)

 Standard Hotel

 Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 17 - Cross the Dochu La Pass en route to Punakha

On the road to Punakha we climb up through oak, pine and rhododendron forest to reach Dochu La Pass (3050m). If the weather permits, magnificent views pan out across the mountains towards Gangar Pensum at 7541m, the tallest mountain in Bhutan. Dropping down into the valley, Punakha's benign climate allows orange and banana groves to flourish within sight of the snow capped Himalayan Mountains. Our accommodation tonight is set 8 kilometres from the centre of Punakha on the banks of the Mo Chu River. We camp in two man walk in tents with thick mattresses, all bedding and towels. Toilet tents are provided with flush toilets. There are shower tents with hot water available as well as the chance to try out a traditional hot stone bath. There is a central area with space to relax around a camp fire and the cook team will create traditional Bhutanese meals to be served in the dining tent. Electricity is supplied in the dining and toilet tents and the walk ways are lit by small lamps but you will find a torch useful.



Accommodation: Punakha Camp (or similar)



Premium Camping



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 18 - Visit the riverside dzong before driving to Paro

In the morning we pay a visit to Punakha Dzong built in 1637 on a sand bank at the confluence of the rivers Mochu and Phochu, this sacred dzong was the seat of the Bhutanese government until 1960 and is a fine example of Bhutanese monastic architecture with squat rectangular buildings made up of two or more tiered levels crowned by a tower and small golden spire above. Returning westwards we take an afternoon drive to Paro. (Approx. 5 hours.)



Accommodation: Hotel Drukchen (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 19 - Enjoy the displays at the famous Paro Festival

Today we spend the full day at the famous Paro Festival. This annual festival draws crowds from all across Bhutan to witness the monks depicting teachings through dance. Their brightly coloured costumes and sometimes terrifying masks make quite a spectacle. As the festival draws to a close a huge Thangka painting is displayed, said to cleanse the sins of everyone who sees it. Although this does not happen every year, it's a spectacular sight and well worth the very early start. The festival is a great chance to talk to locals and learn a little more about why these annual monastery festivals are so important.



Accommodation: Hotel Drukchen (or similar)



Standard Hotel

DAY 20 - Hike to the Tiger's Nest Monastery

This morning there is an opportunity to climb up to visit the Taktsang or Tiger's Nest Monastery. The monastery clings precariously to a cliff face, and local legend recounts that Guru Rinpoche, who founded the Drukpa Sect and brought Buddhism to Bhutan, flew here on the back of a tigress to start the first monastery. In the afternoon we'll visit a local farm and have the chance to sample some yak butter tea and have a group talk with the farm host. Paro is also home to Kyichu, Bhutan's oldest temple or lhakhang as it is also known.



Accommodation: Hotel Drukchen (or similar)



Standard Hotel

DAY 21 - Fly to Kathmandu. Walk through Durbar Square

Today we fly the short distance to Kathmandu, the bustling Nepalese capital. On arrival we take a walking tour visiting the bazaar and the Durbar Square area, the centre of old Kathmandu. Much of the day to day life of Kathmandu takes place in the bazaar: a fascinating mixture of people selling fruit, vegetables and spices; potters spinning their wheels to produce small household bowls and containers for temple offerings; devotees visiting their favourite gods at temples and small shrines dotted along the sides of alleyways; rickshaw wallahs honking their horns and the ever present sacred cow wandering amongst it all. In the afternoon we plan to visit the Temple of Pashupatinath on the banks of the Bagmati River, the holiest Hindu shrine in Nepal. Please note: Our flight between Bhutan and Nepal is with Druk Air. Druk Air sometimes changes their flight schedule at short notice - if this happens, then we will inform you of any itinerary change as soon as possible.



Accommodation: Yellow Pagoda Hotel (or similar)



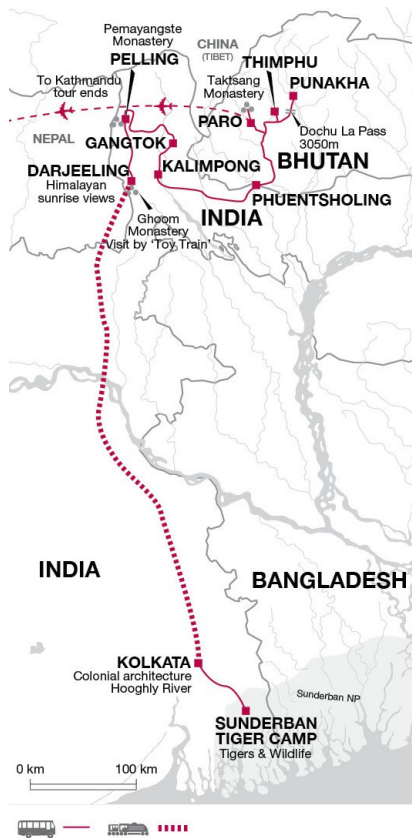
Standard Hotel



Single room available

DAY 22 - Tour ends in Kathmandu

Our tour ends this morning after breakfast.



Why book this trip

Paro Festival

Attending a Bhutanese Tshechu (festival) is one of the best ways to experience the ancient culture of this most fascinating of destinations. This tour is planned to coincide with Paro Tshechu, one of the most colourful and popular of Bhutanese festivals, which often includes the unfurling of the Thangka - a giant embroidered silk painting the size of a house! Held every spring, this event attracts locals from neighbouring districts and is an unforgettable way to experience the ancient culture of Bhutan.

What's included?



Included meals

Breakfast: 21
Lunch: 9
Dinner: 8



Transport

Bus
Boat
Flight



Trip staff

Explore Tour Leader
Driver(s)
Local Guide(s)



Accommodation

1 nights premium camping
19 nights standard hotel
1 nights simple overnight train

Trip information

Country information

Bhutan

Climate

The best weather lasts from September (after the monsoon) through to Jun and the mountains are best admired, with greater air clarity in the autumn. Spring (mid Mar-May) is cool & often stormy. Autumn is from Oct to mid Nov with clear skies, warm days & cool (sometimes cold) nights. As in any high mountain area it can rain, hail or snow at any time of year.

Time difference to GMT

+6

Plugs

2 Pin Round

Religion

Lamaistic Buddhist, Indian/Nepalese Hinduism.

Language

Dzongkha, plus various Nepalese and Tibetan dialects.

India

Climate

There is considerable variation between the different regions of India but, in general, the climate is tropical. Summer temperatures on the plains are very hot, but cooled by the South-West Monsoon, which lasts from June- September. During these months it can be very wet and therefore very humid. At altitude, temperatures can become quite cool at night even in the summer and may drop below freezing between December and February so warm clothing is necessary. In the winter, northern and mid India can be very cool, with cold evenings, so warm clothing, including plenty of layers, are essential. The south of India remains warm and sunny during the winter months.

Time difference to GMT

+5

Plugs

3 Pin Round

Religion

Catholicism, Hindu, Islam and Sikhism

Language

Hindi and English.

Nepal

Climate

Temperatures in the lower altitude regions are extremely pleasant. At Pokhara variations in temperature are very limited: from the coldest recorded of 8°C (46°F) to the highest of 31°C (88°F). The mountains are best admired, with greater air clarity, from October to January, while from February to May the skies may be hazy. Monsoon rains are strongest in June, July and August. The coldest months are December and January.

Time difference to GMT

+5.45

Plugs

2 Pin Round

Religion

Hinduism

Language

Nepali

Budgeting and packing

Optional activities

The following excursions and/or activities are usually available and may be arranged locally. Estimated costs are provided below for guidance only, are on a per person basis unless shown otherwise, and may depend on the number of participants. Prices quoted are correct as of the date these tour notes were originally issued but may change at any time due to currency fluctuations. Please note: These activities are booked and paid for direct with the supplier and do not form part of your Explore holiday contract.

Some free time has been allowed for you to explore on your own or with your travelling companions.

Clothing

High altitude night temperatures in the Himalaya are cold so make allowance for warmer clothing, including jumpers, warm pajamas, and socks, and a waterproof accordingly. On the Gangetic plains, only lightweight clothing is needed from March to November. If travelling from December through February you will need at least some warmer clothing for evenings. Local people may be offended by western styles of dress. Brief shorts tight fitting clothing etc. should be avoided by both men and woman. For Dzong visits, you will need collared, long-sleeved shirts and closed shoes.

Footwear

Comfortable closed shoes suitable for walking and sandals. Good walking shoes are needed to walk to the Tigers Nest monastery.

Luggage

20kg

Luggage: On tour

One main piece of baggage and daypack. Remember you are expected to carry your own luggage so don't overload yourself.

Equipment

Bring a personal water bottle, sunhat, sunscreen, torch and mosquito repellent. You may also like to bring walking poles for our walk to the Tigers Nest Monastery.

Tipping

Explore leader

At your discretion you might also consider tipping your Tour Leader in appreciation of the efficiency and service you receive.

Local crew

Although entirely voluntary, tipping is a recognized part of life in this region of the world. Some local staff will look to members of the group for personal recognition of particular services provided. In order to make things easier for you, the Tour Leaders may organise a group's tips kitty and if this is the case, they will account for it throughout the tour.

Accordingly, you should allow for 70USD for tipping. This tip will need to be provided to the tour leader in USD rather than GBP.

Country Information

Bhutan

Food and drink

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch price

£7

Dinner price

£10

Beer price

£2

Water price

£1

Foreign Exchange

Local currency

Ngultrum

Recommended Currency For Exchange

USD and GBP

Where To Exchange

Your Tour leader will advise you.

ATM Availability

You may occasionally find cash machines but they are very unreliable - do not rely on plastic!

Credit Card Acceptance

Very limited. There is a 5% surcharge for using them at places where the facility is available.

Travellers Cheques

Very limited opportunities to exchange.

India

Food and drink

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch price

£6

Dinner price

£8

Beer price

£1.4

Water price

£0.5

Foreign Exchange

Local currency

Indian Rupee Recently new 500, 1000 and 2000 rupee notes have been bought in to circulation and as the old notes are no longer accepted there have been some cash flow issues. You don't need to worry about being given old notes as it's very easy to tell the difference, the new notes are pristine in comparison with most Indian money which is fairly tatty.

Recommended Currency For Exchange

GBP/US\$ are the best currency to change into local currency.

Where To Exchange

The Indian rupee is a restricted currency and it is best not to obtain in the UK as rates are very poor. You can either change money at the airport on arrival or in major towns during the tour. Your Tour Leader will advise you on the best places in each town. Both GBP and USD cash are easy to exchange at the airport and at hotels however you will be restricted to changing £60 cash at a time and it's not possible to change money at these locations using a credit or debit card.

ATM Availability

ATMs are available in most large cities in India but they are very limited elsewhere so please do not rely on this.

Credit Card Acceptance

Very rarely, only in the larger outlets.

Travellers Cheques

Opportunities to exchange are limited.

Nepal

Food and drink

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch price

£7

Dinner price

£10

Beer price

£3

Water price

£0.3

Foreign Exchange

Local currency

Nepali Rupee.

Recommended Currency For Exchange

US\$ or GBP.

Where To Exchange

In major cities and towns

ATM Availability

Although you may occasionally find cash machines these are very unreliable - do not rely on plastic!

Credit Card Acceptance

Credit cards are not generally accepted except in larger establishments in Kathmandu.

Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques are not accepted as a valid mode of payment in Nepal.

Transport, Accommodation & Meals

Transport Information

Bus, Boat, Flight

Accommodation notes

Booking a Single Room

All of our group tours are planned and operated on a twin-share basis, meaning that the standard cost is based either on individual travellers sharing accommodation with another group member of the same sex, or people who book together sharing accommodation. Please refer to the tour notes where the single room option availability is detailed on a night by night basis for this tour, and the price for the available nights is detailed on the dates & prices tab by departure date. For Self-Guided trips the Single Room supplement offers the option of a single room each and is charged per person. The Single Room supplement also applies to the third person in a party of three that will be accommodated in a single room.

Accommodation in India is as varied as the country itself. On our tours we stay in a mix of hotels, heritage properties, camp sites and homestays. Standards do not equate to standards in the UK and it's best to approach each type of accommodation with an open mind. Service can be slow in places especially when travelling with a group. For the most part hotels do not have heating so in the winter months it can be chilly and if you feel the cold you may wish to ask for extra blankets. Hot water is not always available 24 hours a day in some of the smaller properties, and with a group staying you might find if you are showering last you may miss out on the hottest water.

Food and drink

Bhutan

Food in Bhutan whilst delicious can be a little on the repetitive side. Most meals consist of fresh vegetables, locally grown red rice and often a meat dish. Vegetarians will eat well as many Bhutanese are totally vegetarian in accordance with their Buddhist faith. Every meal comes with Bhutan's national dish, chilli's with cheese! It might sound a little odd, and perhaps concerning for those not comfortable with spices but it's very tasty and a great accompaniment to a meal. The chillis vary in heat and are smothered in a cheese sauce made from yak cheese. It is usually served as a side dish so you can be as brave as you like!

Essential Information

FCO Advice

We strongly recommend that you check your government's travel advisory for up-to-date information and advice about your destination: safety and security, entry requirements, health, local laws and customs. For UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice click [here](#).

For more information from Explore about travel advice, click [here](#)

Under 18 immigration guidance

Please note that some countries require proof of parental consent when travelling overseas with under 18s. Please check requirements with the relevant embassy or consular office well in advance of travel if this applies to your party.

Price Guarantee

Once your booking has been confirmed we guarantee the price will not increase, whatever the circumstances. Before booking please ensure you have read our important tour pricing information. [Booking Conditions](#)

Visa and Passport Information

India: Holders of passports endorsed 'British citizen' may be eligible for the e-Tourist Visa to enter India.

The visa can be applied for through the official Indian government visa website only - <https://indianvisaonline.gov.in/visa/tvoa.html>. Please check all eligibility criteria that can be found on the website but important points are listed below -

You must be arriving into one of 16 selected entry points, however, you can exit from any of the authorised immigration check posts in India.

Entry points are - Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Goa, Kochi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Thiruvananthapuram, Jaipur, Amritsar, Gaya, Lucknow, Trichy, Varanasi and Ahmedabad.

Passports must have at least 6 months validity from the date of arrival in India and at least two blank pages for stamping. The visa application will take approximately 4 days to process. It is only valid for 30 days and is only allowed for a maximum of two visits in a calendar year.

The visa costs \$60. Biometric data will be collected on arrival in India.

Whilst the online form offers a relatively quick way to apply for a visa, a number of applicants have reported difficulty in completing the form. Travcour will complete the on-line visa on your behalf for a fee of £25 + the visa cost. Please contact them directly if you wish to take up this service.

If you are not eligible for the e-Tourist Visa, please refer to VFS Global to apply for your Indian visa - http://in.vfsglobal.co.uk/how_to_apply.html.

Sikkim: Please do not apply for a Sikkim permit, this will be organised locally for you by our local agent.

Nepal: An entry visa is required by UK, New Zealand, Australian, USA & Canadian citizens and can be obtained on arrival at Kathmandu Airport and various international border crossings between Nepal and its neighbouring countries. This currently costs 25USD for a 15 day visa. All visas are issued as multiple entry visas and are valid from the date they are issued. A passport-sized photograph for immigration is required. Payment must be made in cash, UK sterling and US dollars are both accepted.

Bhutan: A visa for Bhutan will be arranged locally. In order to do this please forward a scanned colour copy of your passport to Explore at least 8 weeks before your departure. You will pay for your Bhutan visa on arrival so allow approximately US\$ 40 cash.

Passengers with dual or multiple passports must ensure that they use the same passport for entry to all countries on this trip.

If you do require assistance in obtaining a visa then you may consider applying through Explore's recommended visa service in the UK, Travcour. See www.travcour.com to download the relevant visa application for your trip, if applicable (UK citizens only), along with details of how to apply for your visa through Travcour. The Team at Travcour will be happy to answer specific questions relating to visa applications, please call them directly on 0208 5431846.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, with the correct validity for your chosen destination.

Booking conditions

Before booking your Explore trip, please ensure that you read both our [Essential Information](#) and [Booking Conditions](#).

Transfers

[Find out more about Trip Transfer Terms and Conditions before you book.](#)

Booking a land only package with Explore

Customers who have chosen to book on the 'Land Only' arrangements of our tour, please ensure that you have checked your tour specific 'Joining Instructions' prior to booking your own travel arrangements. Your joining instructions can be found below in the dates and prices information.

You may also be eligible for the Free Explore Transfer.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will now receive a Free Transfer, provided you arrive and depart on the tour only itinerary start and end dates. The transfers will be from the Explore designated airport or train station to the joining point of your tour, and then back from the ending point to the designated airport or train station. The exception to this rule is customers who are booked on a tour where the joining and ending point is at the designated airport or train station.

Free transfers are not available for Self-Guided, Polar, Tailormade or Tours for Churches customers.

If you are not eligible for the Free Transfer then you will need to make your own way through to the joining and ending point. On a majority of our tours Explore will be able to provide a private transfer at an additional cost. Please ask for a quote at the time of booking.

For more information regarding the Explore Free Transfer [click here](#)

Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Explore that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country. Please ensure your policy includes medical emergency helicopter evacuation in the event of illness or injury and covers the entire duration of your holiday. If you are trekking at altitude please ensure that there is no upper altitude limit which may limit or exclude cover for your trip. The cost of many of our Polar Voyages will exceed the capped amount covered by standard insurance premiums and you will be required to pay an additional premium to cover the full value of your trip. Please ensure that you are covered for the full amount of your holiday cost, as insufficient cover could invalidate a claim under the policy. Medical and repatriation insurance cover is not mandatory for UK residents who are travelling on trips within the United Kingdom.

Read more information about what travel insurance is required.

Flight information

Explore offers a wide range of flexible flying options to make joining and leaving our trips easy. [Read more about them here.](#)

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Booking a flight inclusive package with Explore

We have a good selection of flights not only from London but from many regional airports around the UK allowing us to compare fares between scheduled carriers as well as low cost and charter airlines. Our dedicated flights team will match the best flight options to your arrival and departure airport.

On our website we display a UK flight inclusive package guide price which is generally based on a London departure. To avoid paying supplements or to secure your preferred flight option, we recommend booking as early as possible, especially for peak travel dates.

Bhutan

Vaccinations

Nothing compulsory, but we recommend protection against malaria, tetanus, infectious hepatitis, typhoid and polio. Consult your travel clinic for latest advice on different prophylaxis available against malaria (eg. Paludrine, Chloroquine, Mefloquine etc.) Please check the latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at [Explore Travel Health](#) and from your local healthcare provider. Visa and vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed by you before travelling.

India

Vaccinations

Nothing compulsory, but we recommend protection against Tetanus, Infectious Hepatitis, Typhoid and Polio. Please consult your travel clinic for the latest advice on Malaria, Dengue and Zika Virus. Please check the latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at [Explore Travel Health](#) and from your local healthcare provider. Visa and vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed by you before travelling.

Nepal

Vaccinations

Nothing compulsory, but we recommend protection against malaria, infectious hepatitis, typhoid, tetanus, polio and Japanese encephalitis. Consult your travel clinic for latest advice on different prophylaxis available against malaria. Although not compulsory, travellers may wish to take immunisation against meningococcal meningitis. Please check the latest requirements with

your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at [Explore Travel Health](#) and from your local healthcare provider. Visa and vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed by you before travelling.
