



Festivals of Bhutan

13 days

Bhutan, Nepal - Trip code BI

Festivals of Bhutan

Peaceful monasteries, jagged Himalayan mountain peaks and deep, green valleys characterise this fascinating journey through the Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan. The annual monastery festival is the highlight of the social calendar, and we join the celebrations with the welcoming locals. After discovering this unique country's rich cultural heritage we return to Kathmandu to sample busy and chaotic Nepalese city life.

Trip highlights

- ★ **Punakha** - The ancient capital of Bhutan. Visit Punakha Dzong and hike in the Punakha Valley
- ★ **Phobjika Valley** - Look out for the rare black-necked crane
- ★ **Paro** - Climb up to the 'tiger's Nest' Monastery, perched high on the cliff side
- ★ **Thimpu** - Walk through the most relaxed capital in the world
- ★ **Kathmandu** - Explore the old city on foot before visiting the Pashupatinath temple complex

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 tour in Kathmandu

Our tour begins this afternoon in the busy Nepal capital Kathmandu.



Accommodation: Hotel Annapurna (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: None

DAY 2 - Fly to Bhutan and explore the peaceful city of Paro

Leaving Kathmandu behind we fly to Paro, beautifully set amidst the wooded valleys of Western Bhutan. It lies along the banks of Paro Chu River, overlooking terraced farmland, and is home to some of the largest and oldest of Bhutan's majestic dzongs - fabulous buildings that serve as the political, religious or military centres of their regions. On arrival we will be met by our Bhutanese tour leader and transfer the short distance to our hotel and if time allows we shall take a brief orientation of the town and visit the Rimpung Dzong.



Accommodation: Dewachen Resort - Paro (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 3 - Cross the Dochu La Pass en route to Punakha

Departing Paro we turn east, taking the mountain trails that head through the beautiful landscapes of the Black Mountains and across the high Dochu La Pass (3200m). Our journey takes us across lands blanketed in rice terraces and scattered villages and, as we climb up towards the heights of Dochu La, the road becomes festooned with colourful prayer flags. On a clear day this meandering highway offers some breathtaking views across the Bhutan Himalayas towards the towering peak of Gangkhar Punsum (7541m), the highest mountain in the country. Descending towards the bewitching Punakha Valley the landscape changes; from forests of pine and oak, through rhododendron, alder and cypress, to turn more tropical as we approach the valley floor. In the warmer climate around Punakha we can find cactus, oranges and bamboo. The fertile valley, drained by the Phochu and Mochu Rivers, produces a perfect environment for farming. We will stop and visit the Chimmi Lhakhang Monastery, the \Mad Monk\ monastery built at the end of the 15th century by the Lama Drukpa Kuenley, the revered and decidedly controversial saint who is believed to have subdued the demoness of the Dochu La. To say that this remarkable yogi's teachings went against the normal conventions of Buddhist dharma would be something of an understatement, given that he was prone to the most outrageous excesses to get his message over. The Lama believed that the rigid doctrines of the day were isolating the priests from the ordinary people, so he set out to break down these barriers by deliberate provocation by, in his own words, using '...fair and foul words for mantras'.



Accommodation: Zhingkhram Resort (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 4 - Visit Punakha's dramatically located riverside Dzong

This morning we visit Punakha Dzong. Built on a sandbank at the confluence of these two rivers sits the majestic 17th century Punakha Dzong, once the seat of Bhutanese government, but today the winter retreat of His Holiness the Je Khenpo, the Chief Abbot of Bhutan. A superb example of Bhutanese monastic architecture, the dzong presents us with a collection of tiered halls, inner courtyards and golden spires that have managed to survive numerous fires, floods and earthquakes over the intervening centuries. This afternoon we can hike to Khamsum Yuley Chorten. This is a lovely 2 hour round trip through the valley littered with farms and houses. We will call in at a typical farm house to try yak butter tea and learn more about everyday life for families in Bhutan.



Accommodation: Zhingkhram Resort (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 5 - Drive to the beautiful farming valley of Gangtey

Today we have a long but beautiful drive through the glacial landscapes of the Phobjika Valley, an area that is a prime wintering ground for the rare black necked cranes that flock here from the Tibetan Plateau between October and March to feed. The area is also home to sambars, red foxes, Himalayan black bears and muntjaks. We'll stop at the famous Gangtey Monastery. Built in the early years of the 17th century the goemba was built by Tenzing Legpai Dhendup, the second reincarnation of Pema Ligpa, and its Tibetan style prayer hall is one of the largest in Bhutan. The monastery is still an active seminary and its government-funded college

offers a nine-year course in Buddhist studies. We will then begin our walk down the picturesque valley and back to Phobjika village where we visit the black-necked-crane information centre to learn more about this interesting bird.



Accommodation: Yueloki Guest House (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 6 - Travel to Thimpu, Bhutan's relaxed capital city

We'll leave early this morning heading for Thimpu, the Bhutanese capital that occupies the wooded western banks of the Wang Chhu. Our journey winds its way past paddy fields and apple orchards, forests of pine and tiny hamlets whose houses are decorated with the Tashi Tagye, the 8 symbolic signs of Himalayan Buddhism. On arrival we aim to pay a visit to the King Jigme Dorij Wangchuk memorial, a Tibetan-style chorten built to commemorate the country's third king and today one of the centre points of daily life in the city. Then, if time allows, we will walk along Thimpu's bustling streets, soaking up the rich atmosphere of this most unique of capitals, one that doesn't possess even a single traffic light. Our driving time today will be around 8 hours including stops along the way.



Accommodation: Pedling Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 7 - Share the celebrations at the annual Thimpu Festival

Today we spend a full day at the capitals annual festival. Preparations for the festival begin days in advance with rituals and prayers offered up to the gods. During the day we will witness traditional masked dances known as chhams which are performed by the monks. The festivals are a great time for people to catch up with friends and family from other districts which offers us a wonderful chance to meet with locals and celebrate with them.



Accommodation: Pedling Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 8 - Watch the closing displays of the Thimpu Festival

Today we hope to see the Dzong's enormous Thangka painting raised and hung from the side of the building. Although this does not happen every year, it's a spectacular sight and well worth the very early start. The Thangka is only on display once a year as the Festival draws to a close and it is said to cleanse the sins of all those who view it. Once the festival formalities have come to an end we have some free time to relax in Thimpu.



Accommodation: Pedling Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 9 - Return to Paro and hike to the Tiger's Nest Monastery

We leave Thimpu behind and head back towards Paro. Where we will head out to the fabulous Taktsang Monastery, one of the most revered in the country and precariously located on a cliff face some 900m above the Paro Valley. The name translates as Tiger's Nest and local legend recounts how Guru Rinpoche, who founded the Drukpa Sect and brought Buddhism to Bhutan, flew here on the back of a tiger and founded the monastery on the site of a cave where he spent a few months deep in meditation. The demanding hike up to the monastery follows a path that cuts through oak and pine forests before emerging onto a ridge with amazing views of the monastery and surrounding area. We will also visit the temple of Kyichu Lhakhang en route back to the city, one of the holiest temples in Bhutan and said to have been built by the Tibetan king Songsten Gampo in 659AD. This temple was believed to have been just one of many, part of an incredible undertaking of over 100 temples, built to subdue a demoness that lived in this land. The temples were built across Tibet and Bhutan, as a means of pinning down the ogress and converting the people to Buddhism and Kyichu Lhakhang is believed to hold down the left foot of this huge demon.



Accommodation: Dewachen Resort - Paro (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

DAY 10 - Fly to Kathmandu. Walk through the Durbar Square

Today we fly back to Nepal and have a day of sightseeing with a local guide. Our sightseeing this morning takes in the sumptuous majesty of Durbar Square and its collection of ornate palaces, courtyards and temples, spanning some three centuries of dynastic rule by Malla, Shah and Rana kings. We will also visit the Asan Bazaar and the Kumari Ghar, home to the Kumari Devi; a living goddess worshipped by both followers of the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. Later today we also plan to visit the Temple of Pashupatinath on the banks of the Bagmati River, the oldest and holiest Hindu shrine in Nepal and regarded by many as the most revered temple of Shiva on the planet. The river is considered holy because its waters eventually flow into the sacred Ganges, and the ghats - steps leading down to the river - are regularly swamped by pilgrims bathing in the waters. This area is also one of the city's most important cremation areas, where both royalty and the common people are cremated and have their ashes sprinkled on the waters of the Bagmati, to make their way downriver towards the sacred Ganges. Please be aware that cremations take place here in the open and may be in progress during our visit. Returning back to the city we pay a visit to the stupa of Bodnath, at 40m the highest in the Kathmandu Valley and one of the largest on the planet. Revered by Buddhists this remarkable structure is a dazzling vibrancy of prayer flags, monks and pilgrims, all overlooked by the ever-present and all seeing eyes of the Buddha himself.



Accommodation: Hotel Annapurna (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available

DAY 11 - Free time to explore Kathmandu's temples and bazaars

Today we have an unescorted free day to further explore the delights of Kathmandu and the surrounding area. Depending upon your interests you might like to spend it visiting the almost perfectly preserved Newari town of Bhaktapur in the eastern corner of the Kathmandu Valley. Also known as Bhadgaun or the City of the Devotees, Bhaktapur evokes the feel of a medieval village, a snapshot of a time when the city lay along the prosperous trade routes between Tibet, China and India. The ancient centre of the town is a dazzling collection of temples, palaces and monasteries that have earned it a place on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. A wander through this cultural gem affords an opportunity to take in its beguiling charms and enjoy the site of artisans going about their craft much as they have for generations. You can watch potters throwing clay on traditional wooden wheels, watch jewellers and artists as they go about their daily business and wander through the handicraft shops and stalls seeking out some exquisite bargains. Another alternative for this afternoon is a trip up to the nearby the hilltop temple of Swayambunath, the captivating 'Monkey Temple', whose all-seeing Buddha eyes gaze out across the Kathmandu Valley. The temple is aptly named and the cheeky monkeys that inhabit its ancient walls are not averse to trying to relieve passers by of food, bags and cameras, so be warned.



Accommodation: Hotel Annapurna (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 12 - Tour ends in Kathmandu

Our tour ends this morning after breakfast.



Meals Provided: Breakfast



Why book this trip

Thimpu Festival

This tour is planned to coincide with Bhutan's biggest and most spectacular Tshechu (festival). This three day event attracts thousands of people from all over Bhutan and takes place within the confines of the magnificent Tashichho Dzong monastery that dominates the skyline of Thimpu. Ideal for those who wish to immerse themselves in local culture and witness dancing monks, along with the fabulous masks and costumes of performers in the courtyard of this ancient place, amongst throngs of local Bhutanese.

What's included?



Included meals

Breakfast: 11
Lunch: 8
Dinner: 8



Transport

Bus
Flight



Trip staff

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



Accommodation

3 nights premium hotel
8 nights standard hotel

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.

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

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.

Kathmandu - Bhaktapur US\$ 35 (minimum 4 people).

Clothing

High altitude night temperatures in the Himalaya can be cold so make allowance for warmer clothing and a waterproof accordingly. Clothes should be casual and practical but to avoid giving offence to local people you may need to cover legs, heads and arms. Shorts and leggings are not appropriate. A scarf or bandanna can be useful on the dustier sections of road. For Dzong visits, you will need collared, long sleeved shirts, long trousers and closed shoes.

Footwear

Light walking boots/comfortable walking shoes, trainers. Ankle support is recommended for the Tigers Nest hike.

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

Binoculars, torch, water bottle, insect repellent, high factor suncream (at least factor 15), good quality sunglasses and a lip salve with sun protection. You may wish to take a walking pole with you for the Tigers Nest walk and a swimming costume if you wish to swim at the Kathmandu hotel.

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 look to members of the group for personal recognition of particular services provided.

Accordingly you should allow approx. £30 for gratuities for local staff.

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.

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, Flight

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

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, Travcours. See www.travcours.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 Travcours. The Team at Travcours 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.

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.
