

West-Bhutan Walking & Zhemgang Tsechu – 14 days

Highlights of W-Bhutan with day walks, plus visit Zhemgang Festival

Tour JAN-BW-02: Delhi/Guwahati - Paro - Haa - Thimphu - Punakha - Zhemgang – Gelephu – Manas N.P. – Guwahati

Fixed dates: March 30 – April 12, 2015



Walking is the best way to discover natural areas and to see truly authentic villages. On this tour we enjoy the comfort of jeep travel, visiting the beautiful *dzongs* and tempels of western Bhutan and staying in good hotels. But every day we leave the tarmac for a short or long walk through lush green forests and picturesque time-warp villages. Anyone with a reasonable fitness can participate.

Starting from Paro Airport in NW-Bhutan, we travel along some of the highlights of western Bhutan, such as the impressive and beautiful Punakha Dzong. Then we head south into the lush green jungle of lower Bhutan. At the little known small town of Zhemgang we'll attend a *tsechu*, a Buddhist festival, before exiting to Assam (India).

Day 1: Delhi or Guwahati – Paro

On a clear day, the Druk Air flight to Bhutan provides wonderful views Himalayan scenery. Then, especially when flying in from Delhi, the Nepali and Sikkimese parts of the Himalayan Range can be seen very clearly – with giants like Mt. Everest, Lhotse and Kangchenjunga looming imposingly at the horizon. On arrival at Paro Airport (2250m), immigration and customs formalities will be surprisingly quick and smooth. Our representative will meet you outside the Airport.

Depending on the arrival time of your flight there is time to visit the National Museum. The collection includes ancient Bhutanese art & artifacts, weapons and the country's exquisite postage stamps. After that we drive down to Rinpung Dzong situated at commanding height overlooking Paro Valley. This impressive Dzong is symbolic of the religious and secular (administrative and formerly defensive) importance of Paro as the *dzongkhag* (capital) of the district. Overnight at Paro.

Day 2: Paro – Taktsang Hike

After a short drive up till the road end we hike to the famous Taktsang Gompa. This monastery, also known as Tiger's Nest, clings spectacularly to a high rock face. In the afternoon drive up the valley to Drukgyel Dzong, built in 1646 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal to commemorate his victory over Tibetan invaders. We may also have time to visit the 7th century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest monasteries of the kingdom and Drugyen Dzong, which was built to commemorate the victory from Tibetan invaders. Overnight at the hotel in Paro.



Day 3: Paro – Haa

First, we drive halfway up the Chele La (3988m), the highest motorable road in Bhutan. From the road we hike to Kila Goenpa, a nunnery monastery about an half an hour climb up and from there we continue hiking for about an hour in a gradual ascend towards the Chele La. The pass itself is marked by a multitude of prayer flags. We descend down to Haa valley and visit two temples, Lhakhang Karpo and Nagpo. Overnight at the hotel in Haa.



Day 4: Haa – Thimphu

Drive to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, through the villages of Haa district to Chuzom ('confluence'). On arrival we visit Tashichho Dzong, ('the fortress of the glorious religion'), the largest dzong of Bhutan which houses His Majesty's throne room and office for the cabinet secretariat, and the central monk body. Overnight at Hotel in Thimphu.

Day 5: Thimpu Halt

Today will be spent doing local sightseeing in Thimphu. We can visit if time permits: the National Chorten (built as a memorial to Bhutan's Third King and as a monument to world peace); the Changangkha Lhakhang which dates back to the 12th century; the Takin Reserve, (the strange looking national animal of Bhutan); Dupthob Goemba, where females practice Buddhism. The institute for Zorig Chusum, where students learn the 13 traditional arts and crafts of Bhutan; the National Institute of Traditional Medicine (only the museum) where herbal medicines are made up and dispensed and traditional medicine practitioners are trained; the Folk Heritage Museum, dedicated to connecting people to the Bhutanese rural past through exhibits of rural life; the National Library, which houses an extensive collection of Buddhist literature including many ancient Buddhist texts in Block-Printed format. In the afternoon we can continue visiting these sights, along with a factory for traditional paper-making or the National Weaving Centre. For those who would like to discover Thimphu on their own, this is always possible. Also there a number of day walks around Thimphu that can be arranged.

Day 6: Thimphu - Punakha

We drive to Punakha via Dochula La (pass of 3120m), stopping briefly here to take in the view of the Himalayan peaks and admire the 108 Chortens or Druk Wangyel Chorten which was initiated by Her Royal Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck to honour the 4th Druk Gyalpo (king) and his people for the victory in the war in southern Bhutan



in 2003. The memorial is also for the well-being of all the sentient beings. If the weather is clear the following peaks can be seen from this pass (left to right): Masangang (7158m or 23,484 feet), Tshedengang (6960m or 22,835 feet), Terigung (7060m or 23,163 feet), Jejegangphugang (7158m or 23,484 feet), Kahngphugang (7170m or 23,524 feet), Zongaphugang (7060m or 23,163 feet), a table mountain that dominates the isolated region of Lunana, and finally, Gangkar Puensum the highest peak in Bhutan at 7497m or 24,596 feet.

From the pass we climb to Lunchuzay Temple, which has a commanding view of the Himalayas (clear day). After descending we'll have lunch. Then we continue walking down descending through rhododendron forest to Tebesa/Lumits Hawa, a little hamlet on the road. On the way we will pass another beautiful temple plus monastic school. Apart from the blossoming of the rododendrons in the spring time, this areas is very rich in birds. Here the jeeps will pick us up again, to take us to our hotel in Punakha.

Overnight at the Hotel in Punakha (1300m).

Day 7: Punakha – Halt



After breakfast we visit Punakha Dzong, the winter residence for the Chief Abbot, the head of the Monastic Body and the old capital of Bhutan. After this we drive a few km and then hike to Khamsum Namgyel Chorten. This stupa was built by the Queen mother of the 5th King of Bhutan.

After Khamsum we walk to Punakha through Yebasa village to Sonagasa

where the car will be waiting. After lunch visit to a newly built nunnery cum temple above hotel Zangdopelri.

Dinner and overnight at hotel.

Day 8: Punakha – Phobjikha

First we walk up to a newly constructed nunnery with a big stupa. From there we descend to the bridge and continue walking through the rice fields to Chhimi Lhakhang, a fertility temple which dates back to 15th century. Couples without children, miscarriage, and early death of the children come here to get the fertility blessings. The temple was constructed in honour of the 'divine madman, a monk who tried to make buddism more accessible for lay people. These days he is mainly know for his preaching (and practising) of free sex. After lunch, we drive to Phobjikha via Wangdue town (1350m). Phobjikha is a beautiful wide high valley, lying in a Landscape Conservation Area. Itis most known for its population of wintering Black Necked Cranes that descend here every autumn from the Tibetan highlands.

Overnight at the Hotel in Phobjikha (3000m)

Day 9: Phobjikha – Halt

We drive down to the school ground and hike up to the Gangtey monastery. Now controlled by the government, it is the only Nyingmapa monastery in western Bhutan and the biggest Nyingmapa monastery in Bhutan as well. It's a 4 km hike through marshy dwarf bamboo and blue pines decorated with long 'old man beard' (lichens) hanging from the trees. After seeing the Monastery we'll visit the RSPN Crane information centre. Overnight at hotel in Phobjikha.



Day 10: Phobjikha – Trongsa

After an early breakfast we set out on a 3 hour walk. We'll climb the Phobjikha Mountains and cross them to the northeast. From the pass we'll get splendid views of Trongsa Valley, and, wheather permitting, of the Himalayas in the North. We'll descend down to the road, where the jeeps will pick us up to continue our journey to Trongsa.

Trongsa sits on the border between East and West-Bhutan. Its main attraction is the magnificent elongated dzong. Previously, the road ran straight through the dzong giving the authorities full control over the traffic.

Day 11: Trongsa – Zhemgang

Following the fast flowing Trongsa Chu, one of the main rivers of Bhutan, down south we drive to Zhemgang. Tomorrow and the day after this little province capital will be the venue of a *tsechu*, a traditional Buddhist festival.

Overnight at guesthouse in Zhemgang.



Day 12: Zhemgang – Halt

Tsechu means tenth day of the month in Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Every tenth day of the month is considered as an auspicious day in Bhutan and most of the festivals are performed on this date to honour Guru Rinpochhe.

To witness the costumes, dancing and singing of one of Bhutan's tsechus is a treat! It will be easy to see how the Bhutanese manage to hang on to their culture after experiencing one of these festivals. Probably the tsechu is performed for three consecutive days.



Day 13: Zhemgang – Gelephu – Manas N.P.

Today we leave Bhutan through the border town Gelephu. There, Indian jeeps will wait for us and take us further eastward to Manas N.P. Here, we'll stay at the Bansbari Lodge, situated among lush green tea plantations right at the border of the magnificent park which is

both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and an International Biosphere Reserve. On top of this, it is also a Project Tiger Reserve, boasting at least 40 individuals of world's biggest and most endangered cat. After reaching the lodge we make an afternoon jeep drive in the park

Day 14: Manas N.P. - Guwahati

We do an early morning elephant ride through tall grassland. *Wild* elephants – numbering more than 500 – hog deer, musk deer, sambar deer and the beautiful Hoolock gibbon – an endemic ape species – can be seen with some luck. Manas is also extremely rich in bird species. At least 400 different species have been sighted, of which we hope to see some particularly colorful ones. Such as the strikingly blue Indian roller, the orange-red flameback (a woodpecker) and the little minivet, to name just a few. Minivet males are strikingly red, the females no less strikingly yellow. If we're lucky we'll witness the majestic (and noisy!) flight of the Great Hornbill or of the less majestic but even more rare rufous-necked hornbill (see picture).



After lunch we drive to Guwahati Airport, where the tour ends.

Price

USD 3280 during high season (4 pax, slightly cheaper for larger parties). During low season (Jan, Febr, June, July, August) USD 2680.

Price includes all accommodation (twin-sharing), full board, all transport, English speaking Bhutanese guide throughout (Indian guide in Assam), two elephant rides/jeep drives and entree fees at Manas N.P.

Not included: flights to Paro (Bhutan) and from Guwahati (Assam). Please ask for quotation for additional services.