

WEST – CENTRAL – EAST CULTURAL TOUR (16 DAYS)
(SAMPLE ITINERARY)

Arrive in Paro

Day 1

The flight into Paro on the National Airline, Druk Air, is a magnificent introduction to the mystical beauty of our Kingdom. On a clear day, breathtaking views of the world's highest peaks give way to the fertile green valley of Paro. After you finish your immigration and custom formalities, our representative will greet you at the arrival entrance. You will then drive through the beautiful valley of Paro and across the Paro Chhu River to your hotel.

Spend your first night at a hotel in Paro.

Paro – Thimphu

Day 2

In the morning start your day with a visit to the Ta Dzong, an ancient watchtower which now houses the only National Museum in Bhutan, featuring ancient and modern Thangkhas (religious scrolls) depicting Bhutan's important saints and teachers, marvelous Bhutanese Philatelic collections, ancient and modern religious statues and ancient weapons and shields (many captured during various Tibetan invasions).

Below the museum is the Paro Rimpung Dzong, meaning the Fortress on a heap of jewels, which houses the centre of civil and religious authority in the valley. A short walk takes you to the base of the Dzong and across a traditional cantilevered, covered bridge. A short distance further is one of the innumerable archery grounds where we will hope to catch a match; archery is the national sport of Bhutan. A 16km drive up the valley will take us to the ruins of the Drukgyal Dzong, meaning the Fortress of Victory. Built in 1649 by the great Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, father and unifier of medieval Bhutan, the Dzong was built to commemorate the victory of Bhutan over Tibetan invasions in 1644. The Dzong was destroyed in an accidental fire in 1951 and left in ruins as an evocative reminder of the great victories it was built to commemorate. This Dzong was featured on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1914. Explore the ramparts and on a clear day experience an unforgettable view of Mt. Jhomolhari (7,314m). After lunch, an hour's drive will end our day in Thimphu, the capital of the Kingdom, which is the only capital city in the world without traffic lights.

Overnight at hotel in Thimphu.

Thimphu

Day 3

The day begins with a visit to the National Memorial Chorten (Stupa) built in honor of the third king of Bhutan, His Late Majesty King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, known as the Father of Modern Bhutan. This large Tibetan-style whitewashed Chorten is decorated with richly carved annexes facing the cardinal directions, and features elaborate mandalas, statues and a shrine dedicated to the beloved monarch. There are numerous religious paintings and complex tantric statues housed inside reflecting both peaceful and wrathful aspects of Buddhist deities. We will then visit the Institute of Traditional Medicine and Science where traditional medicines are made from medicinal herbs. There is a day care facility where doctors diagnose patients and prescribe medicines/treatment by reading the pulse of the hand of the patient.

The Institute was established in 1978. Then visit the National Institute of Zorig Chusum commonly known as "the painting school". Students here follow a comprehensive course of 4 – 6 months that starts with drawing and progresses through painting, woodcarving, embroidery and statue making. Next, visit the National Library – established in 1967 to preserve many ancient Dzongkha and Tibetan texts. It also houses many holy books and statues of important and religious figures in the history of Buddhism and Bhutan. In the afternoon visit the Dupthop Lhakhang one of the few surviving nunneries in Bhutan. A short drive uphill will provide a wonderful view of Thimphu Valley and the city. After 5pm in the evening visit the Tashichho Dzong, the Fortress of Glorious Religion, this houses the Throne room of the King, various Government Ministries and the office of the Prime Minister seat of the National Government. It is the summer residence of Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot) and the monk body. Finally visit the Government run Handicrafts Emporium shop, which has a variety of Bhutanese handicrafts for sale.

Overnight at hotel in Thimphu.

Thimphu – Punakha

Day 4

Today depart for the western valley of Punakha, less than a 3 hour drive. Punakha was the capital of the Kingdom until 1955. Leaving Thimphu the road climbs steeply through a forest of pine and cedar, festooned with hanging lichen high up near Dochula Pass at 3,050m. The pass is marked by a large array of prayer flags and an impressive collection of 108 chortens – the Druk Wangyal Chorten consecrated in 2005. On clear days, the pass offers panoramic views of the Bhutan Himalayan mountain ranges, and during spring it is covered in lovely rhododendron forests. A stop for tea and snacks at the cafeteria located near the pass will also provide a breathtaking view of the mountain range on a clear day. Our descent will take us along a series of hairpin bends to the fertile valley of Punakha. In Punakha you will visit the Punakha Dzong, originally christened Punthang Dechen Phodrang, meaning Palace of Great Happiness. The Dzong, remarkably located between 2 rivers, the Pho Chu (male river) and the Mo Chu (female river), is the winter seat of the Je Khenpo and the Monk body. It is a short hike to the Chimi Lhakhang built in 1499 in honor of the Devine Mad Man, Lama Drukpa Kunley, after the Lama subdued the demoness of the nearby Dochula Pass with his "magic thunderbolt of wisdom". A wooden effigy of the Lama's thunderbolt is preserved in the Lhakhang. Childless women go to the temple to receive a wang (blessing) from the saint, many have received their blessings.

Overnight at hotel in Punakha.

Punakha – Trongsa

Day 5

The drive to Trongsa takes about 5 hours. Start early for the fabulous drive to the central valleys of Bhutan. Pass through the windy valley of Wangdue Phodrang, one of the major towns and district headquarters of Western Bhutan. Make a short stop to visit the Wangdue Phodrang Dzong founded in 1638; dramatically located on the spur of a hill at the confluence of the Tsang Chu and Dang Chu Rivers. The site was selected for its commanding view of the valleys below. The journey then climbs steadily passing through semi-tropical vegetation and then reaches the Pelela Pass at 3,420m with an alpine environment of rhododendrons and dwarf bamboo. This Pass marks the boundary between West and East Bhutan and the gateway to central Bhutan. On clear days the Himalayan ranges can be seen, particularly the peak of

Jhomolhari (7,314m) to the west. In route cross the Chendebji Chorten located at a lovely spot by a river confluence. This large white chorten, built many centuries ago to suppress a demon that was killed here, is patterned after the Swayambhunath in Kathmandu (Nepal).

Arrive at Trongsa and overnight at hotel in Trongsa.

Trongsa – Bumthang

Day 6

In the morning visit the impressive Trongsa Dzong, built in 1644, the ancestral home Bhutan's royal family. This commanding Dzong, high above the roaring Mangde Chu is perhaps the most spectacularly sited Dzong in Bhutan. In olden days the Dzong commanded the passage between East and West Bhutan. Spend the morning in Trongsa and then proceed further to the Bumthang Valley, often referred to as "one of the most beautiful spots in the Himalayas" across the Yotongla Pass at 3,425m. The drive will take about 2 hours.

Arrive in Bumthang and overnight at hotel in Bumthang.

Bumthang

Day 7

After breakfast drive through the picturesque valley of Bumthang to visit the sacred sights, shrines and monuments. Visits include:

- The Jakar Dzong, known as the Castle of the White Bird. This picturesque Dzong built in 1667, believed to be the largest Dzong in the Kingdom, is located on a small hill top overlooking the Choekor Valley. The Dzong houses the office of the local governor, some administrative offices, a small court and the monks' residence.
- The Vegetable Dye Project, which produces traditional vegetable dyes made from local plants that are used in the production of cotton thread and raw silk.
- The Jambey Lhakhang, believed to have been built in the year 659 by the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo to subdue an Ogress of Tibet.
- The Kurjey Lhakhang, a monastery named after the body print of Guru Rinpoche, which is preserved in a cave inside the oldest of the three buildings that make up the temple complex. The first temple upon entering the complex was built in 1652 by a local governor (Penlop); the second temple was built in 1900 by the first King of Bhutan and the third by the present Queen Mother in 1984.
- The Membartsho, The Burning Lake, is a 5 minute walk from the roadside in the Tang Valley. This lake occupies a wide place in the Tang Chhu (River). Terton Pema Lingpa, a renowned treasure revealer in the 15th century, found several of Guru Rinpoche's treasures in this lake. A wooden bridge crosses the river, providing a good vantage point to look down into the lake. Perhaps you will spot the temple that is said to exist in the lake's depths. The importance of the site is indicated by the extensive array of prayer flags and the small clay offerings. There is a large rock with a carving of Pema Lingpa and his two sons. Under the carved rock is a cave that virtuous people can crawl through, no matter how big they are.

Bumthang – Mongar

Day 8

After an early breakfast, proceed further to Mongar (198kms), about an 8 hour drive. At a distance of 42kms from Bumthang, the road reaches the Ura Shelthangla where there is a magnificent view of Bhutan's highest peak, Gangkar Puensum (7,500m). The road then descends into Ura Valley by long loops across fields and pastures. Ura's main occupations are raising sheep, yaks and the introduction of potato farming which has brought a certain degree of prosperity of people. At the far end of the Ura Valley, the road starts to climb towards the highest pass in Bhutan, Thrumshingla (3,800m). The mountains of eastern Bhutan can be seen in clear weather. From the pass, along the highway, the road begins a dizzying descent passing through semi-tropical forests of bamboo and liana before reaching Kuri Chu River. You will arrive in Mongar toward late afternoon; a packed lunch will be served at a picnic spot while in route.

Overnight at hotel in Mongar.

Mongar – Trashigang

Day 9

In the morning visit the Mongar Dzong which houses the local monastic community and the offices of the District Administrative. Mongar is the first town built on a mountainside instead of in a valley. After the visit to the Dzong, drive for 3.5 hours to Trashigang Valley over the Korila Pass (2,450m) where there is an array of prayer flags and a small mani wall. Enjoy a short break for tea and snacks in Yadi, a substantial village. Beyond Yadi, there are numerous switchbacks, nicknamed the Yadi Loops, leading down through a forest of Chirpine, dropping 350m in 10km. Trashigang Valley is the heart of eastern Bhutan and was once the centre of important trade route with Tibet. After lunch, set out to view the Tashigang Dzong and stroll through the bustling small town. This is a relatively relaxed day to recuperate from the long drive from Bumthang to Mongar.

Overnight at hotel in Trashigang.

Trashigang - Tashi Yangtse – Trashigang

Day 10

An early start to Tashi Yangtse, less than a 2 hour drive to visit the impressive monument of Gom Kora. Trashi Yangtse borders the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and there is some cross-border trade. Gom Kora, a whitewashed monument, is uniquely constructed in the Nepalese style and is the site of a great annual religious festival, drawing devotees from all over Bhutan and the neighboring Indian state. The name of the Chorten Gom denotes a sacred meditation site of Guru Rimpoche, and Kora means circumambulation. The Guru meditated here and left a body impression on a rock similar to that in Kurjey Lhakhang in Bumthang. Then, a visit to the Tashi Yangtse Dzong, a fortress inaugurated in 1997; being new it has little historical or architectural significance. If time permits, a visit to the National Institute for Zorig Chusum established in 1997 to provide opportunities in vocational training for those who do not continue on to higher studies. A packed lunch will be served at one of the many inviting spots along the route.

Return to Trashigang for the night.

Trashigang – Mongar**Day 11**

Return drive back to Mongar and spend the night in Mongar.

Mongar – Bumthang**Day 12**

Return drive to Bumthang via the same route and overnight in Bumthang.

Bumthang – Wangdue Phodrang**Day 13**

The drive today will take 6 – 7 hours; you will spend your night in Wangdue Phodrang.

Wangdue Phodrang – Paro**Day 14**

From Wangdue Phodrang it is about a 3 hour drive to Thimphu. Stop in Thimphu for lunch and proceed on to Paro.

Overnight at hotel in Paro.

Paro**Day 15**

Today make a late morning start for the hike to the famous Taktsang Monastery, Tiger's Nest, located north of the valley. The uphill hike from the end of the road will take about 1.5 hours to reach to the Monastery. The trail climbs through blue pines and offers excellent views across the valley. After about an hour, we will rest at a tea house, and then continue on for another 30 minutes. Taktsang Monastery is the most famous of Bhutan's monasteries miraculously perched on the side of a sheer cliff 900m above the floor of Paro Valley. It is believed that Guru Rimpoche flew to the site of the monastery on the back of a tigress, a manifestation of his consort Yeshe Tshogyal, to subdue the local demon. On April 19, 1998, a fire destroyed the main structure of Taktsang and all its contents. It was re-constructed to its original form in 2005. Upon our descent, lunch will be served at the tea house.

Afternoon at leisure and overnight at hotel in Paro.

Paro**Day 16**

After early breakfast you will be escorted to the airport to board your flight out of our magical Kingdom.