

EAST - WEST CULTURAL TOUR
(14 Days / 13 Nights)
(SAMPLE ITINERARY)

Arrive Paro

Day 1

The flight in to Paro 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 completing immigration and customs formalities, our representative will drive you through the beautiful valley of Paro to the hotel beside the Paro Chhu (river).

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 National Museum. It displays 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 this valley. A short walk takes you to the base of the Dzong and across a traditional cantilevered, covered bridge. A little further is one of the innumerable archery grounds where we will hope to catch a match; archery is the national sport of Bhutan. The ruins of the Drukgyal Dzong, meaning the fortress of victory, are a worthwhile drive 16km up the valley. 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 invaders 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* magazine in 1914. Explore the ramparts and on a clear day experience an unforgettable view of Mt. Jhomolhari (7,314m). After lunch, drive for an hour to Thimphu, the capital of the Kingdom, 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. 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 and treatments 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. Take a short drive uphill high above the town to enjoy a wonderful view of Thimphu Valley. In the evening visit the Tashichho Dzong, meaning the Fortress of Glorious Religion. The Dzong houses the throne room of our 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 various Bhutanese handicrafts for sale.

Overnight at hotel in Thimphu.

Thimphu - Punakha

Day 4

Today depart for the western valley of Punakha, a drive which will take less than 3 hours. Punakha was the old 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 marked by a large array of prayer flags and an impressive collection of 108 chortens, the Druk Wangyal Chorten built in 2005. On clear days, the pass offers panoramic views of the Bhutan Himalayan Mountains. The pass is covered in lovely rhododendron forests during spring. Stop for tea and snacks at the cafeteria located near the pass and if the weather is clear, view the breathtaking mountain range through a powerful binocular at the cafeteria. After stopping for tea and the view, descend 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. Also take a short hike to the Chimi Lhakhang built in 1499 in honor of the Divine 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. The local belief is that the childless couples are rewarded with a child after getting blessing from the wooden effigy of the Lama's thunderbolt.

Overnight at hotel in Punakha.

Punakha - Trongsa

Day 5

The drive to Trongsa takes about 5 hours from Thimphu. Start early for the fabulous drive to the central valleys of Bhutan. In route, 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 that was founded in 1638. It is 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. If the weather is clear the

Himalayan ranges can be seen, particularly the peak of Mt. 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. It is the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family. This commanding Dzong, high above the roaring Mangde Chu is perhaps the most spectacularly in Bhutan. In the past the Dzong commanded the passage between East and West Bhutan. Spend the morning in Trongsa and then proceed further to the Bumthang Valley, described 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. The Jakar Dzong, known as the Castle of the White Bird, was built in 1667 and is believed to be the largest Dzong in the Kingdom, 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 monk's quarters. Other sites to visit include:

- The Vegetable Dye Project: This project is producing traditional vegetable dyes to use in the production of cotton thread and raw silk. Local plants are used to make the dyes.
- Jambey Lhakhang: It is believed to have been built in the year 659 by the Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo, to subdue an Ogress of Tibet.
- Kurjey Lhakhang: This Monastery is 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 as you enter 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.
- Membartsho, The Burning Lake: A 5 minute walk from the roadside in the Tang Valley, this lake occupies a wide place in the Tang Chhu (river). Tertön 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 and is a good vantage point to look down into the lake. Perhaps you may 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 stupa locally known as the 'tsatsa' offering.

Bumthang – Mongar

Day 8

After an early breakfast, we embark on an 8 hour drive to Mongar (198kms). At a distance of 42 kilometers 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 has brought a certain degree of prosperity to its people. At the far end of the Ura Valley, the road begins 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). A packed lunch will be served in route to Mongar.

Overnight at hotel in Mongar.

Mongar - Trashigang

Day 9

After breakfast we visit Mongar Dzong which houses the local monastic community and the District Administrative offices. Mongar is the first town built on a mountainside instead of in a valley. The valleys are usually little more than riverbeds and the mountain slopes which rise abruptly from the rivers, flattened out as they approach their summits. Our 4 hour drive to Tashigang takes us over the Korila Pass (2,450m). Upon arriving in Tashigang, we will check in at our lodge and have lunch before setting out to view the Tashigang Dzong and stroll through the bustling town. This is a relaxed day to recuperate from the long drive from Bumthang to Mongar.

Overnight at lodge in Trashigang.

Trashigang - Tashi Yangtse - Mongar

Day 10

After an early breakfast, we drive for 2 hours to Tashi Yangtse, the nation's nineteenth and most recently created district, and the impressive monument of Chorten Kora. This whitewashed monument is uniquely constructed in the Nepalese style and is the site of an annual religious festival drawing devotees from all over Bhutan and neighboring India. We also view the Tashi Yangtse Dzong. A packed lunch is served on one of the many inviting spots along the route. From Tashi Yangtse, we drive straight to Mongar.

Dinner and overnight at hotel in Mongar.

Mongar - Bumthang

Day 11

Drive back to Bumthang, and overnight at hotel in Bumthang.

Bumthang - Wangdue

Day 12

The drive takes about 7 hours via Trongsa and Wangdue. A packed lunch will be served along the way.

Dinner and overnight at guest house in Wangdue.

Wangdue - Thimphu - Paro

Day 13

After breakfast we return over the Dochula Pass to Thimphu. The drive will take us through Mendegang Village. Lunch will be served at the hotel in Thimphu. Enjoy some time for shopping and then depart for Paro.

Overnight at the Hotel in Paro.

Paro

Day 14

In the morning our escort will assist you with exit formalities and bid you farewell at Paro airport.