

The Isolated Kingdom of Bhutan



At the eastern end of the Himalayan Mountains, where the arid plains of India meet waves of dense green forest rising toward the high Tibetan Plateau, the small country of Bhutan remained isolated and overlooked for centuries. Virtually the storied Shangri-La of the Himalayas, this tiny Buddhist kingdom opened to foreign visitation in the 1970s and has managed to maintain its unique cultural identity, and traditional customs, by moderating the number of outside visitors through the use of high per diem visitor fees.

While the Himalayas surrounding Bhutan have kept it in geographic isolation, this same seclusion has shielded the nation from the cultural shock waves that globalization has created in other parts of the developing world. Roughly



the combined size of Maryland and Delaware, and fondly referred to by the Bhutanese as Druk Yul, Land of the Thunder Dragon, Bhutan is a colorful kaleidoscope of photogenic traditional culture, architecture and landscapes rapidly disappearing in neighboring Himalayan countries.

The strong fusion of church and state in Bhutan is visible in the spectacular buildings called dzongs—Tibetan for fortress. These striking white-washed citadels house both government officials

and Buddhist monks and are the centerpiece of larger towns. We arrive in time for three autumn festivals, including the Thimphu Tsechu, one of the country's most colorful and traditional. Spectacular Bhutanese mask dances are a highlight of our photographic excursion into this timeless world.

While traveling to Bhutan's central valleys, our journey takes us through farming villages with photogenic terraced landscapes, dense blue pine and juniper forests where yak herding provides the local livelihood, and over mountain passes above the tree line up to 13,000 feet. Each day brings something new—vistas of great beauty, monuments with rich architectural and decorative detail, images of traditionally-attired villagers, picturesque contoured farmlands, vibrant markets, and temples with thousands of colorful prayer flags waving in the sun. With luck, we may see rare migrant black-necked cranes returning to Phobjikha Valley.

Expect to photograph a lot of people—willing photo subjects happy to interact with inquisitive foreigners: monks chanting in incense-filled monasteries while lighting scores of butter lamps; craggy-faced, weather-worn elders; children—a lot of children—wearing traditional hats decorated with ornaments that ward off evil spirits; plus artisans, dancers, religious pilgrims, archers, weavers, yak herders—and more.

We photograph men wearing the national dress—a knee-length robe (*kho*) tied around the waist by a slim belt, with a cotton or silk vest with broad white cuffs underneath. At the waist is a small sword for chopping betel nuts, meat and wood. Every man from the King to his most humble subject wears this same costume. Bhutanese women wear the ankle-length *kira*—a brightly colored, intricately woven rectangular piece of fabric, wrapped and folded around the body, pinned at both shoulders with silver brooches, and bound at the waist with a woven belt.



Although Bhutan has long been a stalwart holdout from modernity, change is coming to this small mountain kingdom. The introduction of television, cell phones, internet and an experiment with democracy are quickly altering Bhutan and its people. The unique photographic opportunities of well-preserved and long-guarded traditional culture may not last much longer!

Join us on our photo journey into this mystical realm of the thunder dragon. Here, for a time, you can still glimpse a truly rich and lively Buddhist culture where age-old customs and enduring traditions remain a part of everyday life.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1

Depart from the US.

Day 2 (Sep 22 in Bangkok)

Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand, and check into our airport hotel.

Day 3

We meet very early this morning for our flight to Paro, Bhutan. After we check into our hotel and rest, we have lunch at a local restaurant. In the afternoon we have a leisurely exploration of the small town of Paro, located at 7,500 feet in the emerald green Paro Valley, giving us time to adjust to the high elevation. We visit Kyichu Lakhang also known as the sacred jewel of Bhutan, one of the oldest temples in the Kingdom. (BLD)

Day 4

A 3-hour drive takes us over scenic 13,000-foot-high Cheli La mountain pass to the mountain-ringed Haa Valley at 9,000 feet. With clear weather sweeping views of Mount Chomolhari, Jichu Drake and other Himalayan peaks can be photographed from the pass. We stop at Kila Nunnery, one of the few nunnery monasteries in Bhutan, before our road descends into the Haa Valley. Closed to outsiders for decades, the picturesque valley is one of the most deeply traditional regions in Bhutan. Following lunch in a local restaurant, we visit the Lakhang Karpo (the White Temple), one of the oldest in the valley, as well as a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse. (BLD)



Day 5

This morning we photograph the Cham (masked) dances of the Haa Tsechu, the annual religious festival for the Haa Valley. Following lunch in a local farmhouse and an opportunity to photograph daily farm activities, we have a 4-hour drive through an idyllic countryside of terraced rice fields interspersed with pine forests with a rhododendron understory to Thimphu, the tiny capital city of Bhutan nestled in a 7,600-foot-high valley. En route we stop at Dobji Dzong, perched on a high ridge amidst forested mountains. (BLD)

Day 6

In the morning we photograph the narrative Cham dances—Black Hat Dance, Dance of the Stag and Hunter, Dance of the Wrathful Deities—theatrically performed by monks in honor of Guru Rinpoche at the annual Thimphu Tsechu festival held inside the large courtyard of Tashichho Dzong. Later, a short drive north of the valley brings us to Dodina village, where a 40-minute walk through a forest of oaks leads to Cheri Monastery, built in 1688, and impressive views of the Thimphu Valley. We visit the monastery's main temple and brightly-painted inner courtyard before returning to Thimphu. (BLD)

Day 7

A short drive into the mountains takes us to the Great Buddha statue for photography of the massive gold-gilded structure, only completed in 2015, in early morning light. We drive about 2.5 hours to Punakha, stopping at 10,000-foot-high Dochula Pass for scenic views of the Himalayas and the Druk Wangyal Chortens in clear weather. After descending into the terraced valley of Punakha, we take a short walk through mustard fields and tiny villages to Chimi Lhakhang (the Temple of Fertility). The temple, flanked by nearly 100 tall prayer flags, sits on a picturesque hilltop and has long been a pilgrimage site for childless couples. We end our day with a visit to the Nunnery Vocational School. (BLD)

Day 8

From the village of Nezigang, a 30-minute scenic morning walk past terraced rice fields and small hamlets brings us to Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten. From the recently-built elaborate pagoda-like shrine we can capture superb views of the Punakha Valley. Following lunch we visit Panukha Dzong, Bhutan's former winter capital built at the confluence of the Mo Chu and Po Chu (Mother and Father rivers) in 1637. Six stories high, with a white-washed stupa, intricately carved timbers, and richly-gilded interiors, the dzong is a majestic photo subject. (BLD)



Day 9

A morning drive brings us to vast bowl-shaped Phobjikha Valley, carved by glaciers and surrounded by the Himalayan peaks. En route we stop at Wangdue Phodrang Dzong, damaged by fire but undergoing a major renovation which should be completed at the time of our visit. The high-altitude wetlands of the Phobjikha Valley are the winter roosting grounds of the threatened black-necked crane. We visit the crane center in the afternoon to learn of Bhutan's efforts to protect this stately species. (BLD)

Day 10

Perched on a mountainside overlooking Phobjikha Valley is the Gangtey Monastery dating back to the 17th century. This morning we photograph the masked dancers at the annual autumn Gangtey festival held in the courtyard of the monastery. Later we have a 6-hour drive to Bumthang with short stops at the Chendebji Chorten, a Nepalese-style stupa, and the Yathra Weaving Center in scenic Chumey Valley. (BLD)

Day 11

This morning we photograph the ancient and sacred monasteries of Jambay and Kurjey, as well as

Tamzhing Monastery, built in 1501 and one of the most culturally significant in Bhutan. After a visit to a local farm we drive to Ngang Lakhang monastery, founded in the late 1500s, in the village of Thangbi. A walk over a suspension bridge brings us to the monastery. (BLD)

Day 12

We drive to Trongsa, the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family, in the morning. In the afternoon we visit Trongsa Dzong—spectacularly sited overlooking the precipitous ravine of the Mangde River—and Ta Dzong, the royal heritage museum. (BLD)



Day 13

A 6-hour drive returns us to Thimphu, with stops for lunch and photo opportunities en route. (BLD)

Day 14

In the morning we drive to Paro, stopping at Simkotha Dzong, one of the oldest in Bhutan. Later we visit the National Museum of Bhutan, housed in a watchtower built in 1649. Nearby is imposing Paro (Rinpung) Dzong, towering over the town on a steep hillside and reached by a picturesque covered bridge. (BLD)

Day 15

Perched on a sheer cliff at 10,200 feet above the Paro Valley, Takstang Monastery (the Tiger's Nest), Bhutan's most iconic dzong, is our destination today. This site has long been recognized by innumerable pilgrims as a place of incredible religious significance. The Tiger's Nest is only accessible by foot or horseback—we hike up through pine forest to reach the retreat, stopping for lunch at a teahouse midway. (BLD)

Day 16

We transfer to the Paro airport for our return flight Bangkok and transfer to our airport hotel. (BLD)

Day 17 (Oct 7)

Depart Bangkok for home. (B)

Accommodations are slowly being developed in Bhutan, and although better than 7 to 10 years ago, some hotels may lack the service and quality of international hotels. In remote areas it may be necessary to stay in a guesthouse where bathroom facilities will be shared.

Activity Advisory Our Bhutan Photo Safari has a high altitude component of 10,000 feet above sea

level at two photo locations. One excursion while traveling between photo locations may reach 12,000 feet for a short time during the drive. Expect several extended periods of hiking on dirt trails to religious shrines situated in remote locations.

Trip Details

Sep 21 - Oct 07, 2020

Fee: **\$6,595 from Bangkok, Thailand**

Deposit: **\$800**

Limit: **12**

Bangkok-Paro-Bangkok flights arranged at additional cost; approximately \$860 (economy)–\$965 (business class)

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Tour Leader



ERIC ROCK

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