



## Bhutan - Culture & Women in the land of happiness

### Exploring West- & Central Bhutan

The Kingdom of Bhutan captivates with untouched nature and its magnificent mountain scenery, lush valleys, picturesque rice paddies and an authentic culture shaped by Tibetan Buddhism and unique architectural beauty. Monasteries (Dzongs) built over high precipices, prayer flags on mountain ridges, traditional festivals and infinitely friendly people who always seek contact. This trip takes us to the most iconic places and allows us to immerse ourselves in nature on a few hikes. With our Bhutanese tour guide, deeply rooted in her homeland, and our local agency – which is not only committed to sustainable and social tourism, but also ensures that the Bhutanese themselves benefit from us touring their beautiful country – we too are supporting the “Gross National Happiness” for which Bhutan is so well known. Happiness for everyone involved!

### The happiness of the women

And how happy are the women in the Land of Happiness? This is a question that we will pursue over and over again and shall receive many answers: in the feminist women's project RENEW, which is committed to the fight against domestic violence, or with young nuns who have only recently been allowed to practice and study in monasteries.

## Intention

### Entdeckungs- und Begegnungsreisen

Begegnungen und Kultur



Naturerlebnisse



Aktivitäten



Genuss und Muße



Anforderung



## Reiseleiterin



### Dechen Dema

Dechen is working more than 15 years as an English-speaking Guide for Culture-Tours in Bhutan. She studied also for 1 year in Austria. She loves to show all the tradition and culture of her land to the tourists.

### Day 1: Arrival in Paro

Flight from Kathmandu - Paro (09:10 - 10:30). Arrival in Paro Airport. Paro is situated in a beautiful valley at 2280 metres and is a fitting introduction to this charming kingdom. Your guide will meet you and take you on a short one-hour drive along the Paro and Thimphu river valleys to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, at 2320 metres. You can stop on the way to take in the magnificent Tamchhog Lhakhang, the hereditary place of worship for Bhutan's iron bridge builder.

*This afternoon you can meet Madam Tshering Dolkar, the Director of Professional Services for RENEW (which stands for Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) - an NGO dedicated to ensuring a gender-based violence-free happy society and that the rights of women and families remain a priority. Madam Tshering Dolkar will be pleased to tell you more about the work of RENEW and what they are doing to help women in society.*

Take an evening walk around town and soak in the atmosphere of this magical capital with its busy shops and bazaars and photogenic citizens in national dress.

Overnight in Thimphu

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### Day 2: Thimphu sightseeing

We will visit the revered Memorial Chorten and Changangkha temple, perched on the hilltop overlooking the town. Devotees flock throughout the day to circumambulate and turn the prayer wheels. The temple also contains beautiful wall paintings and hundreds of religious scriptures written in gold.

Afterwards you could also visit the huge statue of Buddha Dordenma, which commands a tremendous view of Thimphu valley. The huge 3-storey throne holds several chapels and the body itself is filled with 125,000 smaller statues of Buddha.

After lunch, you can also visit the School of Traditional Arts, browse the striking collection of intricate textiles at the National Textile Museum or visit the Folk Heritage Museum. You can also visit the Takin Reserve showcasing the unique national animal, the Takin.

If you would like to view or buy Bhutanese handicrafts you may like to visit the new market opposite Taj Tashi hotel which has an array of stalls run by local handicraft shops selling purely home made articles with no imports. The guide will discuss the plan for the day with the group.

Overnight in Thimphu

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### Day 3: Thimphu to Punakha

In the morning drive approximately 3 hours to the old capital, Punakha, via Dochu La pass at 3050 metres, where we will stop for a hot drink and enjoy spectacular panoramic views of the Eastern Himalaya ranges.

You will notice the change of climate and vegetation as we approach low-lying Punakha at 1250 metres.

In the afternoon visit the imposing Punakha Dzong, "Palace of Great Happiness". Built in 1637, it is strategically placed at the confluence of two rivers, the Po Chu and the Mo Chu. Then take a pleasant walk for an hour or so across terraced fields to Chimi Lhakhang (Temple of Fertility) built in the 15th century by the 'Divine Madman' (Lama Drukpa Kuenley).

Overnight in Punakha

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### Day 4: Drive to Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup nunnery

This morning we drive to Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup nunnery, a large temple complex located on a ridge amidst pine trees. The temple complex has a learning and meditation centre for the nuns, and it also provides them other training such as embroidery, tailoring, statue making, and the famous thangka painting. There are about 100 nuns and you can spend some time with them.

After lunch take a hike to the village of Yebisa – start at the suspension bridge below Khamsum Yuelley Namgyel Chorten but after 40 minutes there is a diversion to the village of Yebisa with a beautiful view of paddy fields as you walk down and if you are interested you can also visit a local farmhouse. Then you can walk back towards the suspension bridge where you will be picked up by your driver.

Overnight in Punakha

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## Day 5: Punakha to Bumthang.

Drive approximately 4.5 hours to Trongsa, the gateway to central Bhutan at 2180 metres. Set amidst spectacular scenery, Trongsa Dzong, the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family, commands the eye from miles away.

Continue a further 2.5 hours through some of Bhutan's most beautiful landscapes to Bumthang, an area of high valleys at 2580 to 3100 metres and the spiritual heartland of Bhutan, with its many legendary monasteries, temples and palaces.

Bumthang is the collective name for an area of 4 valleys - Chokhor, Tang, Ura and Chumey.

Overnight in Bumthang

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## Day 6: Drive to Tang valley and meeting with a famous woman/ Author

Drive to Tang valley, the most remote of Bumthang's valleys, at 2700 metres. The road climbs past the trail to Membar Tsho (the "burning lake"), which is one of Bhutan's most important pilgrimage sites. Then on to Drangchel, Pema Lingpa's birthplace. You will also see some picturesque villages and temples and can walk up to visit Ugyenchholing Palace, which is now a museum and gives an interesting insight into life in an aristocratic family in the last century.

*We will arrange for you to meet Ashi Kuenzang Choden, the current owner of Ugyenchholing and a prominent woman in local Bhutan society who will be happy to talk to the group about life as a woman in Bhutan.* Overnight in Tang

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## Day 7: Free time in Tang Valley

Spend the day in Tang valley. If you wish to do a hike you can hike up to Kunzangdrak Gumpa. Or we will just visit some local homes and we can also arrange a cooking class for you at one of the homes in the valley.

Overnight in Tang

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## Day 8: Tamshing Phala Festival

This morning return to Bumthang and visit Tamshing Phala Festival. You will get to see masked dances performed by demons and animals and be captivated by the sound of cymbals, drums and horns and the unforgettable chanting of Buddhist monks who perform religious dance of purification. Arrays of colourful brocades whirl through the air as the dancers spin and dance the "thunderbolt step". An amazing experience to be had!

You will see locals dressed in their finest clothes who have walked from miles around to attend the festivities. They come to watch masked dances, to pray, and to feast. While the underlying purpose of the festival is spiritual, dances are more often like plays, telling stories where good triumphs over evil, or depicting significant historical events, especially surrounding the life of Bhutan's patron saint, Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche).

There is inevitably a great deal of socialising as well. The occasion provides an opportunity for people to relax and forget the daily routine, and to dress in their finest clothes and jewellery, but it is also an occasion for prayer and blessings.

Overnight in Bumthang

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## Day 9: Drive to Gangtey

Drive approximately 5-6 hours to Gangtey at 2900 metres. Enjoy the views of the immense and remote Phobjikha valley and the black mountain ranges. Visit Gangtey Gumpa (one of Bhutan's oldest monasteries and recently extensively renovated) and explore the valley where the villagers continue to live a traditional Bhutanese rural lifestyle. This is the site where black-necked cranes visit in their hundreds in November each year after spending the summer in Tibet.

Overnight in Gangtey

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## Day 10: Freetime or long walking day

Today you can do a day walk around the Phobjikha Valley. You can start your walk at the Dewachen hotel and walk from here to the Black-Necked Crane Information Centre, which has lots of information on the valley and its famous migrating birds.

From here you can walk to Beta Village, then continue to Gangtey Gumpa from where you can walk along the Gangtey Nature

Trail, past Semchubara village, through forests of blue pine trees covered with lichen (known as old man's beard) and where you can hopefully see some birds.

Continue from the end of the nature trail to Kingathang village where you can visit a temple built by the Queen Mother. From Kingathang, you can walk via Yusa village back to your hotel.

Total distance 12 to 13 km (6 to 7 hrs).

Overnight in Gangtey

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## Day 11: Return to Thimphu

Today we return to Thimphu, a drive of approximately 5 hours, via Wangdi. Wangdi (also known as Wangdue Phodrang) was originally considered Bhutan's secondary capital and it commands an important central position. Wangdi Dzong was gutted by fire in June 2012, destroying in a few hours not only a magnificent building that had stood proudly for hundreds of years, but also the painstaking work that had been in progress for many months to rebuild damage from a recent earthquake using traditional construction methods. 10 years of renovation work is finally complete and it is now open to visit. After visiting the Dzong continue on your way to Thimphu.

Overnight in Thimphu

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## Day 12: Shechen Orgyen Chodzong Nunnery

In the morning we will drive 45 minutes to Shechen Orgyen Chodzong Nunnery in Sissinang. Shechen Orgyen Chodzong Nunnery is one of the few facilities in Bhutan where women can study and practise. This small nunnery was the first monastic centre founded by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche after he left Tibet. He gave numerous important teachings there and its beautiful temple frescoes are painted according to his instructions.

At present 125 nuns, mainly Bhutanese and ranging in age from 15 to 70 years old, live, meditate, and study at the nunnery under the guidance of Dilgo Khyentse Yangsi Rinpoche and Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche. The nunnery offers women the rare opportunity to study and train in the lineage of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. It provides for the nuns' complete education in addition to covering all expenses for their food, medical care, shelter, and clothing. Eleven of the nuns have taken Bhiksuni ordination and were the first group of nuns from the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism to receive this full ordination.

You can spend as much time here as you wish and then continue your journey to Paro. Later there should be time to visit the impressive Paro Rinpung Dzong, one of the finest examples of Bhutanese architecture. You can also visit the 7th century Kyichu Lhakhang, a temple of historical significance and one of the most sacred shrines in Bhutan.

Overnight in Paro

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## Day 13: The 'Tiger's Nest'

Take a day walk to the 'Tiger's Nest', the sacred Taktshang monastery which clings to the rock face 900 metres above the valley floor. Guru Rinpoche is said to have flown to the site riding on a tigress. He subsequently meditated here for three months. It is one of Bhutan's most holy sites and draws pilgrims not only from Bhutan but also from neighbouring Buddhist countries. You can have lunch at the Taktshang cafeteria from where you get a spectacular view of the monastery. Afterwards you may also have time to visit Dumtse Lhakhang, a temple built by Thangtong Gyalpo, the iron bridge builder.

Overnight in Paro

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## Day 14: Flight back to Kathmandu

Early in the morning your guide will accompany you to the airport to see you off onto your flight ( Paro - Kathmandu 07:10 - 08:10) and wish you Tashi Delek (goodbye and good luck).

Maybe you will fly back directly to your country or stay longer in Kathmandu... Just talk to us.

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## Enthaltene Leistungen

- ▶ Flight Kathmandu/Paro/Kathmandu
- ▶ Transport - meet on arrival, airport transfers on arrival and departure and all overland transport within Bhutan
- ▶ Accommodation in standard hotels (see below)
- ▶ Food - full board throughout the trip
- ▶ All sightseeing and entrance fees including any festival visits
- ▶ Visa entry for Bhutan
- ▶ a daily sustainable development fee (SDF) of US\$200 per person per night (must be paid to the government for the visa to be authorised)
- ▶ English-speaking guide throughout the tour from arrival to departure

## Zusätzliche Entgelte / nicht enthalten

- ▶ International Flights
- ▶ Travel Insurance
- ▶ Items of a personal nature such as drinks, alcohol, laundry and tips

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