



# COUNTRY BRIEFING: Bhutan

*Bhutan is a country unlike any other. For years the Bhutanese monarchy staunchly refused to allow more than a few lucky visitors into their beautiful kingdom. Still little visited, there's a good deal packed into the country's small borders. There are wonderful Dzongs (administrative and monastic centres of each district) with huge courtyards and intricately painted shrines. There are temples galore and many wonderful examples of traditional Bhutanese architecture. For the active, there are various walks and treks over the high mountain passes. For nature enthusiasts, viewing the endangered black-necked crane which winters in the central regions of the country is a rare treat.*



## WEB PLUS

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Suggested itineraries and country guide

## Western Bhutan

The airport, built on Bhutan's only piece of land flat enough to accommodate a runway, is located in Paro, a small town set in a beautiful valley. The best part of our stay in the Paro valley was the trek up to the Tiger's Nest Monastery. Clinging to a sheer cliff high above the valley, it is accessible by a steep and winding path up the hill. A tea house half way up offers welcome refreshment and wonderful views of the hermitage. At the top you are rewarded with a tour of the sacred shrines by a resident monk. Bhutan's capital city, Thimpu, is a two hour drive east of Paro and boasts a delightful School of the Arts, where age-old Bhutanese craft skills are passed down to the next generation, and beautiful wood carvings and many other skills can be seen in action. The friendly students speak good English so conversation is easy.

Paro and Thimpu are home to Bhutan's two most famous festivals, celebrated annually in honour of Guru Rinpoche, the founder of Buddhism in Bhutan. These are colourful celebrations embracing music, dance and religious readings. The Bhutanese enthusiastically embrace festival time, best clothes are worn and the merriment is more than helped along by a few drinks! Thousands of people flood to Bhutan to experience these two main festivals.

Heading east towards Punakha, you will cross over the Dochu La pass. At 3,050 metres it is home to 108 small Buddhist stupas. After marvelling at the Himalayan panorama in front of you, your driver may drive clockwise around the stupas a couple of times in order to gain you some merit for the next life! Punakha Valley is at a lower altitude than most of Bhutan, and as a result is green and fertile. It is home to Chimi Lakhang, a small temple built by Drupka Kunley, the "mad monk", and favourite saint of the Bhutanese.

## Central Bhutan

Central Bhutan offers the delights of a less travelled part of the country. Tradition and religion remain as deeply engrained here as in any other part of the kingdom. People wear national dress - for men this is a long woven garment

called a *gho*, tied up at the waist to make it knee length. Women wear a *kira* - a woven dress finished with a small jacket.

Travel beyond the west of Bhutan can be slow on roads that wind their way around valleys and over high mountain passes. Gangtey is the main village in the Phobjikha valley, which lies at the edge of the Black Mountains National Park. It is here that the endangered black-necked cranes seek refuge from the extreme cold of Tibet during the winter months. A few hours east of Gangtey is the town of Trongsa, famed for its impressive Dzong. Your guide will show you around the labyrinth of stairways and courtyards.



Punakha Dzong

The most eastern point that most visitors to Bhutan reach is the Bumthang valley. Jakar is the main town in the four valleys that are collectively known as Bumthang. This area is famous for its production of cheese, honey and apples. You can visit the local dairy where cheese is made, and at breakfast time, don't miss the opportunity to try the local honey on your toast. For the intrepid, it is possible to travel from Jakar into Eastern Bhutan over the high passes towards Tashigang, but few make this journey as the roads past Jakar are poor and the journey is long.

The unique kingdom of Bhutan is famous for its stunning scenery, friendly people and lively festivals. Whilst accommodation is fairly basic, it is very comfortable and people are more than keen to make you feel welcome in their beautiful country. This is all part and parcel of visiting a unique, untouched land which has only recently opened its doors to travellers.

**Beatrice Bowen and Emma Shaw**  
Bhutan Specialists



Views of the Punakha Valley



Traditional kira

## FACT FILE

A two week tour of Bhutan taking in the country's main cultural highlights, with a guide and driver and all meals included, costs from £3,000 per person including flights. For further details please contact Emma or Beatrice on 01993 838 320.

