

THE RISE OF BHUTAN

SINCE OPENING ITS BORDERS TO TOURISM,
THE BUDDHIST NATION OF BHUTAN HAS
REVEALED THE GENUINE BEAUTY OF ITS PEOPLE
AND PLACES WHILE REMAINING FIERCELY
PROTECTIVE OF ITS TRADITIONS.
WORDS AND IMAGES BY LUXURY TRAVEL
MAGAZINE EDITOR Katrina Holden.

Clockwise they move around a tall god flag. A steep flight of white-washed stone steps stand like a wall before your eyes, forming a backdrop to the colourful national dress of locals as they climb with a mix of ease and eagerness to the most important fortress in Bhutan. Women in bright striped *kera* dresses down to their ankles – some with babies in slings on their backs, others in heels – make their ascent. Men wear the traditional *gho* dress with betel leaves stashed in their large pockets. Monks of all ages in blood-red robes rise the narrow treads with agility to the warriors guarding the entrance. Two young monks spin the large cylindrical golden prayer wheel, emerging from behind the giant drum arm-in-arm and laughing. This is the land of happiness after all and the people are gathered at the annual Punakha *Tsechu* (festival) at Punakha Dzong to celebrate.

The Kingdom of Bhutan stands almost as a last frontier to the world's most curious travellers. Sandwiched between India, China and Nepal in the central Himalayas and dating back to 2000BC, Bhutan has managed to evade invasion and has never been colonised – though Tibet has tried. A Buddhist nation, the Bhutanese are proudly independent and fiercely loyal to their King and royal family, enjoying life in a land where the King has decreed it's more important to measure the Gross National Happiness of the people rather than Gross Domestic Product. Since 2008, the country has been a democratic constitutional monarchy with present King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the government making it a priority to preserve the country's culture and environment.

The country has only been opened to tourism since the 1970s, making it a still relatively untouched and exotic destination. Tourism growth is restricted, with a controlled tourism and development policy. Visitors are welcome – but they have to pay for the privilege. A fixed US\$250 (about A\$335) per day tariff automatically limits



From left: Taksang Palphug Monastery (Tigers Nest); Intricate interiors inside Thimphu temples; Crowds at the Tibetan-style National Memorial Chorten, Thimphu.

the number of tourists. Additionally, no independent travel is allowed. Visitors can only gain an entry visa with a pre-planned, prepaid, guided package tour or custom designed travel program with an officially approved tour operator.

This policy is inviting to the avid, exploratory luxury traveller as the standard of hotels is high, attracting only those who can afford to stay. Official tourism figures show that 155,121 visitors went to Bhutan in 2015 – of which 1,833 were Australian. Travellers staying in three-star hotels have all their food, accommodation, transport and guides included in the daily US\$250 (about A\$332) tariff, which is still beyond the usual budget of party-hard backpackers (the Bhutanese don't wish to follow the path of an over-developed Kathmandu in Nepal). Visitors staying in four and five-star hotels are luxury travellers, as they pay the tariff in addition to the hotel's own nightly room rates.

While it may take some time to arrive (my trip was 29 hours from wheels up in Sydney until touchdown at Paro Airport), the effort of the journey is unquestionably worth it, knowing that once you're here, you will feel like you're in another world as noisy bars, hawkers, laminated menus and youth hostels are nowhere to be seen. Booking with a luxury travel destination specialist is the only way to go here and if you'd like to *Travel the Way We Do*, we recommend luxury specialist Australian agent Executive Edge Travel +

Events who, along with the Tourism Council of Bhutan, helped us put together this sample itinerary.

It would be perhaps naïve to think that time and development won't have any impact. At the Punakha Tsechu, where there were thousands of locals and nomads in beautiful dress gathered in the fortress to watch performances and honour Buddha, I saw monks taking selfies. More hotels are scheduled to open (Six Senses has five hotels under construction around the country) and the capital Thimphu is apparently the fastest-growing city in the world. After seeing the natural riches and meeting its gentle people, one hopes change will continue to be measured by the government, but our tip is to go there as soon as you can to discover for yourself this magical kingdom. Roads can be rough in parts – extensive roadworks are in progress now. Depending on your itinerary, some drives between towns can be long (three hours plus) along winding roads, quite bumpy and hair-raising in parts (I spotted one overturned truck and a car that was being winched back up from the bottom of a cliff!) – but to get to the very best little pockets of Bhutan, it's an absolute must and the King himself also travels these roads by car. The government does run a helicopter service and though the priority for the choppers is reserved for local emergencies, they can be chartered for private transfers for travellers, subject to availability.

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TRAVEL THE WAY WE DO

This is a first-person account of the six nights I spent in Bhutan, giving a taste of the best sights, hotels and moments of my trip. A customised and catalogued version of this itinerary that we recommend for our readers, designed by Executive Edge Travel + Events, follows this article.

Day 1

The pilot on the flight into the international airport at Paro casually announces to those on the left-hand side of the plane that the big mountain they can see out their window is Mt Everest (take note, ask for a seat on the left). Only eight pilots in the world are qualified to navigate the descent into Paro, which literally weaves and bumps its way through the wind

currents of enormous mountains.

I'm met by my guide Araya Dewa who drapes a white welcome scarf over my neck that features the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism. Driving to the capital Thimphu, we curve along a road overlooking glacial rivers, forested mountains with clusters of blue pine trees and 15th-century monasteries dominating the mountaintops marked by flapping colourful *lungdar* (prayer wind flags).

In Thimphu, I visit the National Memorial Chorten, a temple for remembering the deceased. Locals of all ages move in rhythmic, clockwise motion around the large *stupa*, a round monument said to contain the relics of past Buddhist monks or nuns. Pigeons flap overhead as Bhutanese officials serve bowls of rice and the national favourite, chilli and cheese, to the crowd. At the busiest intersection of the capital, traffic is expertly controlled by a white-gloved male traffic controller. Hearing noise coming from the large stadium, we head downhill to investigate. A man wheels closely past on a scooter at pace and politely calls in Bhutanese, “Excuse me, I don't have any brakes!”. Inside, hundreds of school children are rehearsing a concert for the King's 36th birthday. We have lunch at Babesa Village Restaurant in one of the few remaining traditional houses in the city, built in the 15th century. I clamber up two flights of extremely

steep and narrow timber ladders to the dining room where I'm treated to a traditional feast of Bhutanese favourite dishes – with potatoes and chilli, buckwheat pancakes, dried turnips, and chilli and cheese. We drive on to Punakha, about a three-hour drive around winding roads, stopping at a road-side vegetable market beneath a waterfall. As the sun is setting, I arrive at the remote and private Uma by COMO, Punakha (read more on p.45).

Day 2

Having dined with the manager of Uma the night before, he has convinced me to rise early and go for a walk to the mountaintop behind us. We meet at 6am and set off in the dark for what Roy promises will be “fantastic”. We walk along the riverfront to the sound of the streaming water. As the sun rises, we reach the school at the very crest of the hill and I wonder how easily children navigate that climb every day. “We build our schools at the top because children soon learn that in life, you have to work hard,” explains Roy, adding that if I want my shoes cleaned back at the hotel, his staff can take care of it.

After breakfast by an open fire on the terrace, we head to the annual Tsechu at Punakha Dzong, built in 1637. It's a saturation of colour, tradition and religion, and I barely know which direction to look as I want to

absorb every vivid moment. Hundreds of Bhutanese file past me, in vibrant colours of their finest dress; children stand or sit calmly to watch the show; monks offer trays of betel leaves; warriors wear rather frightful monkey masks. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder to get a glimpse of the main stage before reluctantly, we must depart.

On the path to the Fertility Temple, giant phallus paintings decorate the sides of houses – dots of white paint oozing from the head have not been overlooked. Wooden phallus carvings are erected over doorframes. Gift shops sell phallus handicrafts. In Buddhist Taoist culture, my guide explains, the phallus is seen as a symbol of fertility and capable of warding off negative powers. Many couples having fertility issues and those praying for the health of their children visit the temple in honour of the Divine Madman, a Buddhist master from the 15th century. The studying monks here are on a break – some play soccer; we play a coin game with them, while others are watching a Bollywood movie.

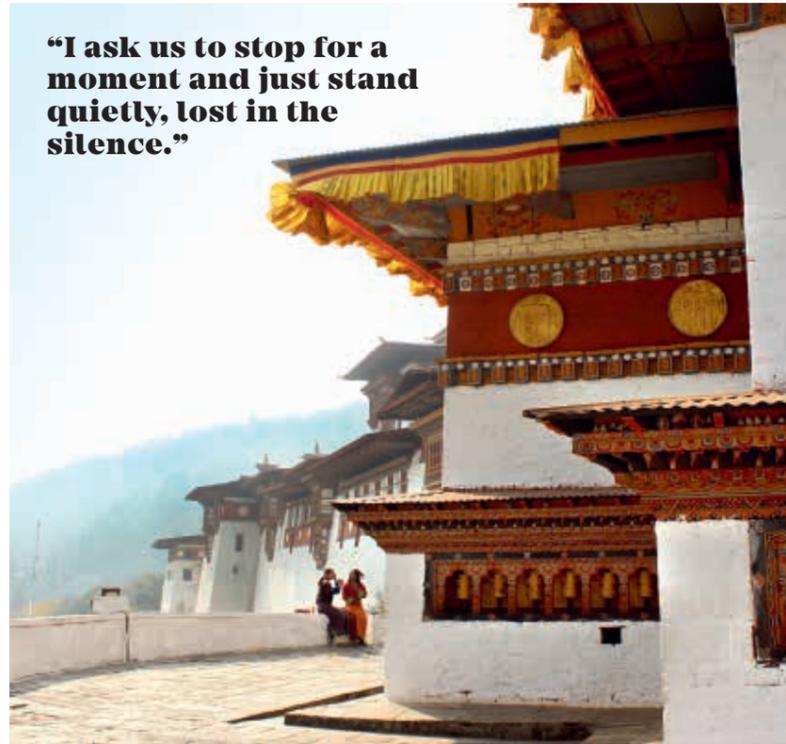
On the way back to the hotel, I ask to stop at the riverfront to collect stones. My guide and I walk along the river spotting stones that literally shimmer like glitter thanks to the high mica content. Two local boys begin to help, handing me smooth beautiful stones and wanting nothing in return. With a few favourite rocks in my hat, I return to the warm comfort of Uma by COMO, Punakha.

Day 3

It's three hours by car to our next destination high in the mountains at Gangtey. Dusty roads carved into the cliff have, at times, a concerning proximity to both the towering escarpment of mountain above, and the sheer cliff drop to the valleys below. There's only one main road through the centre of Bhutan and it's busy today and being widened. A road worker is sleeping on an enormous rock jutting out from the road and forming a small, precarious platform over the valley – his face covered by his jacket and oblivious to the spray of dust from passing wheels. My guide quips that I'm getting a “free chair massage” from the bumpy drive and it's true, at times the journey is anything but smooth. But seeing eagles soaring over deep pine tree-covered mountains that in spring time are covered in flowers, watching flowing rivers running at the bottom of the gullies, and passing through



“I ask us to stop for a moment and just stand quietly, lost in the silence.”



From left: Local food at the Tseche Festival at Punakha Dzong; Exterior of the six-storeyed Punakha Dzong; Painted prayer wheels.

Below right: Minimalist courtyard entrance at COMO Uma, Punakha.

tiny villages where young children play by their parents side reminds me that I'm travelling through the heart of the land.

We reach Gangtey Gomba Monastery, built in 1613, that stands atop a majestic hill. My guide turns each prayer wheel towards the entrance as crows shrill and bells chime. We quietly enter the colourful monastery, shoeless, where the various depictions of Buddha adorn the walls and offerings of money, food and butter lamps have been placed before Buddha.

On the drive from the monastery we spot my next lodging, Amankora Gangtey – resembling, from the distance, a curved amphitheatre flanked by towering trees.

Day 4

I'm already awake when I hear the unique squawk of the black-necked crane birds that migrate to this valley in the winter season. After a breathtaking breakfast on the lawn, my guide and I take the nature walk through the valley, which is, thankfully, downhill. There are longer, uphill hikes for those so-inclined but today, my instinct is to head down, not up.

We pass down green hills with towering trees. My guide Araya points out the various species of wildflowers, including some of the

46 types of rhododendron that thrive in Bhutan in the spring and summer. We cross little streams and pass farmhouses, eventually ending in a quiet forest that could be straight from the set of *The Lord of the Rings*. A lone cow passes us on the path. My guide leans to pick up a colourful feather. I ask us to stop for a moment and just stand quietly, lost in the silence. We pass only one other tourist and guide on the track, before coming to a lookout viewing area over the wetlands to watch the revered black-necked cranes, which the Bhutanese call Birds from Heaven. At 1.5 metres tall, they glide in packs throughout the skies, soaring to great heights and we're treated to a mesmerising aeronautical display by several flocks. We learn more afterwards at the Crane Centre which has been set up to continue research and funding to help protect the beautiful species, with more than 450 visiting the region this season.

I also popped into the newly opened 12-room Gangtey Lodge that has a beautiful outlook and retains a strong sense of place with its monastic design enhanced with luxury touches. The lodge is co-owned by an Australian and interiors were brought to life by a Sydney-based interior designer. Giant comfy

floor cushions were scattered by an open fire on my visit.

Day 5

After a departure blessing by the monks at Amankora Gangtey, we set off for our long drive to Bhutan's capital, Thimphu. We stop at Buddha Point where the Buddha Dordenma Project is, at 51 metres, the world's largest and tallest Buddha statue. It overlooks the city and houses 125,000 gilded gold Buddha statues. In Thimphu, a craft market and stalls line the street that runs behind the Taj Tashi Hotel where I will rest my head for the night, just a few weeks before the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge do the same at this hotel. After a greeting and blessing by a monk, I was shown to my room. All guests have the opportunity to experience a fitting in the local costume. I buzz reception and within minutes I have a female staff member in my room helping me to dress in the *ker*a outfit where the long skirt and fuchsia pink silk jacket make me feel like an elegant Bhutanese lady for the evening.

Day 6

This morning we head to Paro for the pilgrimage that most visitors to Bhutan undertake

the climb to Taktsang Palphug Monastery, also known as Tiger's Nest. From the base, the monastery appears but a dot of white paint rising high in the clouds at 3,120 metres clutched to a sheer cliff-face. The ascent raises 900 metres above the Paro Valley floor and it takes me two hours in total to reach the top (but depending on pace, it can take up to four hours). Guides travel at all different speeds to suit their group. As we walk up the steep but peaceful path surrounded by blue pine trees, Arya picks up rubbish that hasn't made it into the bins along the way. It's Bhutan's most visited site but despite this, there is an air of calm and serenity as one climbs closer to the top, passing prayer flags and stupas. Near the top, a waterfall, bridge and a final 800 steps brings you to the entrance of the monastery where afterwards, we sit still overlooking the valley and the heights we have overcome, looking over the green valley crests and folds, the donkeys waiting for tourists resembling little ants at the base – this moment feels like pure truth.



See more on this story at luxurytravelmag.com.au

BHUTAN

● STAY HERE

Uma by COMO, Punakha

Arriving feels like entering a secret kingdom in this sub-tropical enclave of Bhutan. The 11-room property opened in 2013 and has the feel of a contemporary but homely lodge with pine wood and river-bed stones throughout the main lobby and lounge area. All meals are prepared fresh by Chef Arsa from Indonesia. The Spa overlooks the flowing river and is tucked away in a beautifully scenic position. Rates start from US\$600 (about A\$829) per room per night. comohotels.com/umapunakha

Amankora Gangtey

Amankora Gangtey is perched high on the hill overlooking the surrounding valleys. Views to the Gangtey Monastery create a mystical sense of wellbeing and reverence. The design of the hotel is in keeping with Aman's style of minimal fuss but quality furnishings and fittings that make the most of the environment. If weather permits, take your breakfast on the lawn – it's truly a magical feeling to be dining in the crisp air at such high altitudes. Rates start from US\$1,100 (about A\$1,529) per room per night plus taxes. Aman also offers seven-night packages throughout its five Bhutan properties in Punakha, Gangtey, Paro, Thimphu and Bumthang. Rates for double occupancy on a seven-night Amankora Journey start from US\$14,450 (about A\$20,092) plus taxes inclusive of a guide and driver, all transfers within Bhutan, all meals, house beverages including select wines and spirits

and complimentary laundry. aman.com/resorts/amankora

Taj Tashi, Thimphu

Opened in 2008, Taj Tashi in the capital of Bhutan has the renowned Taj Hotels service and hospitality locked down, in a key location. Taj Tashi plays host to dignitaries and government officials from all over the world including the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on their recent royal visit to Bhutan. Four luxury suites occupy the four corners of the hotel. Staff will personally fit and dress guests in their rooms in traditional *ker*a (female) and *gho* (male) Bhutanese costume. Rates start from US\$300 (about A\$414) per night. taj.tajhotels.com/en-in/taj-tashi

Uma by COMO, Paro

This hotel makes a great base from which to explore the stunning Tiger's Nest monastery. The COMO health and wellness focus is evident throughout with a small gym with bikes, treadmills and fitness balls; a beautiful indoor heated pool (I'm told the only one in Bhutan); a traditional bath treatment house and an in-house Indian yogi master. Guests staying in the villas have a private butler who will pack or unpack for you. Rates start from US\$480 (about A\$661) per night. comohotels.com/umaparo

● GET THERE

The writer travelled with Qantas on a direct flight from Sydney to Bangkok. Connections on Bhutan Airlines into Bhutan's international airport at Paro depart Bangkok at 6:30am, 7:45am, 8:15am and 9:55am – therefore passengers travelling from Australia are advised to stay

overnight in Bangkok. qantas.com.au; bhutanairlines.bt

For extreme convenience and five-star comfort, we recommend Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel. Within moments from the terminal, you're transferred to this hotel (limousine by arrangement) avoiding the congested drive into Bangkok. The hotel has a swimming pool, a VOUS spa, fitness centre with sauna, steam room and jacuzzis, an executive lounge, six restaurant and bar options and 24-hour room service. The hotel has recently introduced '24 Hours Flexi' and 'Flexi Meal', which means guests can arrive at any time and check out 24 hours later. novotel.com/Suvarnabhumi-Airport

● KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

With Bhutan located in the Himalayas, altitude sickness is possible at such levels above sea. Altitude sickness is brought on by gaining altitude too rapidly, which doesn't allow the body enough time to adjust to reduced oxygen and changes in air pressure. It can be fatal in extreme cases. Acute altitude sickness can arise after at least four hours spent at an altitude above 2,000 metres. Heights of 2,500 metres and more can trigger a range of symptoms including headaches, nausea, lethargy, insomnia, breathlessness and vomiting. Altitude sickness can affect men and women of all levels of fitness. The best way to prevent altitude sickness is to ascend slowly. Speak with your doctor about the necessary first aid items to pack in the event of altitude sickness. Drink plenty of water, more than usual (up to seven litres per day) and avoid cigarettes and alcohol.

● BEST TIME TO GO

In summer (June to August) the country is very lush and green and rhododendron and magnolia flowers bloom in the valleys and forests. In spring (March to May) the colder weather gives way to a pleasant spring chill, and peach blossoms paint the landscape pink. Winter (December to February) offers crystal blue skies and a cooler temperature ideal for hiking in the woods. The Bhutanese celebrate their traditional new year 'Losar' in February and the country comes alive with festivities.



TRAVEL THE WAY
WE DO
BHUTAN

A Luxury Travel magazine itinerary

EXPLORE BHUTAN

WITH EXECUTIVE EDGE TRAVEL + EVENTS

THE ITINERARY

Day 1

Thimphu

Arrive at the only capital city in the world with no traffic lights, yet so contemporary with a mix of traditional customs.

Stay: Taj Tashi

Meals included: Dinner.

Days 2-3

Gangtey

Hike through clear nature trails to the beautiful open valley of Phobjikha, home to the rare black-necked cranes.

Stay: Amankora

Meals included: Breakfast, lunch, dinner for both days.

Days 4-5

Punakha

Witness fine Bhutanese architecture in Punakha, Punakha Dzong and Chimi Lhakhang.

Stay: COMO Uma Punakha

Meals included: Breakfast, lunch,

dinner for both days.

Days 6-9

Paro

One simply cannot miss the majestic Taktsang Monastery hike when in Bhutan. The following day, explore the vast natural beauty that Paro town has to offer via hikes or mountain bikes. Experience a customised reading on astrology, based on your place and date of birth.

Stay: COMO Uma Paro

Meals included: Breakfast, lunch, dinner for all three days.

Itinerary includes

Arrival/departure transfers, accommodation, all specified meals, sightseeing tours and transfers by air-conditioned private vehicle with English-speaking local Bhutanese guide, Bhutan Visa fee, tourism development fund and Bhutan

entrance fees, astrologer meeting, half-day cycling in Paro.

Itinerary excludes

Airfares, travel insurance, alcoholic beverages, personal expenses, meals not specified.

When to go

The best times to visit Bhutan are from mid-September to November and from March to May.

Cost

The cost for this 8 night/9 day package is US\$7,170 (approx. A\$9,521) per person (based on twin-share and 2017 travel).

For a detailed version of the Luxury Travel magazine / Executive Edge 'Explore Bhutan' itinerary, visit luxurytravelmag.com.au/itineraries or call Executive Edge Travel + Events on +61 3 9519 7777