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17 days
Duration

Bhutan
Destination

Level 2 - Moderate
Activity

Bhutan | Small Group Cultural Tour

Apr 13 2024 to Apr 29 2024



Bhutan Small Group Cultural Tour

Odyssey offers easy, convenient, and relaxed escorted small group tours into Bhutan. We explore Bhutan's natural beauty, its ancient history and Buddhist spirituality, and its World Heritage Sites, and cities, all with some truly spectacular scenery along the way. This and more is all waiting to be explored on one of Odyssey's small group tours of Bhutan, designed for the senior traveller, and led by experienced, and enthusiastic like minded people

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The Bhutan small group cultural tours are an unhurried journey set in an ocean of calm in a crowded continent. Bhutan is scenically magnificent. The snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas rise above jungle-covered hills and verdant green river valleys, where farms and villages are clustered. Bhutanese culture remains almost untouched by the outside world. Centuries of Buddhist tradition inherited from Tibet, their northern neighbour, shape this land with art, dance and music. Today, Bhutan measures itself in terms of 'gross national happiness' instead of GDP. A dignified and hospitable people, the Bhutanese will welcome you to share their distinctive culture, and pristine environment on your Bhutan trip.

Small group tours Bhutan itinerary

From the moment you arrive at Thimphu airport you enter a different world. Our tour of Bhutan takes in the majestic architecture of Bhutan's many sacred sites , temples of Bhutan and traditional centres of political power.

We also explore the capital Thimphu, where we visit the National Textile Museum, and a paper factory where you can see paper crafted by hand. A visit to the famous Tiger's Nest Monastery is also part of this tour.

Festivals of Bhutan

Our small group tours Bhutan are generally scheduled around a traditional festival, where you can join the Bhutanese people in the colourful festivities such as the Nalakar Tshechu Festival.

Tshechu, or religious festivals are at the very heart of Bhutan's unique way of life. These sacred festivals take place all year round – in every monastery and temple, even in the most remote parts of the country. Bhutan's festivals are not re-enactments of the traditions of a bygone age, but a form of living art and culture.

- **April 2020 departure: Ura Festival**

At the Ura Festival, you will see locals dressed in their finest clothes having travelled from miles around to watch masked dances, pray, and enjoy a feast. We will see colourful brocades whirl through the air as the dancers spin and dance the “thunderbolt step”. Masks of demons and animals arouse our senses as we watch the purification take place. Watch for the Atsara, or clown, a dancer unique in his own style who mimics the other dancers and entertains onlookers! Festival deities are invoked through benediction.

- **September 2020 departure: Tamshingphala Festival**

The September departure includes an excursion from Bumthang to the Tang Valley to visit Ugyengchholing Palace and Membar Tsho (“the burning lake”)

Upon our return to Bumthang, we will experience a fire ritual, which marks the start of the Tamsingphala Festival. At the Tamsingphala Festival, we will see masked dances representing demons and animals, and be captivated by the sound of cymbals, drums, and horns, accompanied by the chanting of Buddhist monks as they perform the religious dance of purification.

While the underlying purpose of both festivals is spiritual, the dances are more often like plays, telling stories of the fight between good and evil, or historical events, especially those surrounding the life of Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, who is believed to have introduced Buddhism into the Indian subcontinent in the 8th century. He is venerated as a “second Buddha” by adherents of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Himalayan states of India.

Further afield we will visit botanical gardens to view Bhutan’s exotic fauna, including Bhutan’s national animal, the gentle takin. At the National Textile Museum, we see and learn about the creation of Bhutan’s distinctive woven fabrics. We also explore markets where trade continues almost unchanged with the passage of time.







Join us in Bhutan

English is Bhutan's second language, and you will have time with the local guides to wander and meet local people throughout your travels. On this Odyssey tour, travel around Bhutan in a comfortable modern coach at a slow pace, accompanied by knowledgeable local guides as well as your tour leader. Accommodation is in clean, modern hotels that nonetheless retain Bhutanese character. You dine on fresh and healthy local produce during the tour.

Our cultural tours of Bhutan are a unique opportunity to see one of the most exotic lands on earth. Bhutan is truly independent, selecting those aspects of the modern world that it needs while retaining its own colourful and fascinating culture. Bhutan is a special place, a destination you will always remember with pleasure, and a memory you will always treasure.

For more information about Bhutan, take a look at our articles: Bhutan: the Hidden Kingdom, and our guide to the traditional festivals of Bhutan. Travellers interested in Buddhism and South-East Asian culture might also be interested in our article on Bagan, the ancient capital of Myanmar.

For more details about Odyssey's Bhutan tour itinerary, click the 'Top 5' or 'Itinerary' buttons above! If you're keen to experience this tour, please call or send an email. Or, to book, simply fill in the form on the right hand side of this page.







Articles about Bhutan

The following list of articles are either published by Odyssey Traveller or are carefully selected external source to maximise senior travellers' knowledge and enjoyment of Bhutan when visiting:

- Bhutan: A Journey into the Hidden Kingdom

- Festivals of Bhutan
- Visit the world's only carbon-neutral country.
- Traveling in Bhutan: What you need to know before you go
- 23 facts about Asia's most mysterious country



Highlights

1. See and shop for Bhutan's extraordinarily distinctive woven fabrics and other treasures in markets and at the National Textile Museum.
2. Visit Chimi Lhakang, a popular fertility temple honouring the "Divine Madman," religious folk-hero Drukpa Kinley.
3. Walk to the famous monastery Cheri Gompa.
4. Take a walk through a forest to Bhutan's iconic "Tigers' Nest" (Taktshang) Buddhist monastery.
5. Tour Bhutan's great fortresses (dzongs), enormous stone-walled religious and political centres that tower above the surrounding country.

Itinerary

Day 1

Locations: Bangkok

Overview:

After arriving in Bangkok, we make our own way to the hotel, where we meet our tour leader and come together for drinks and a tour orientation. We have overnight accommodation at Bangkok Airport for our early flight to Thimphu.

Accommodation:

Best Western Airport Hotel or similar

Day 2

Locations: Bangkok - Thimphu

Overview:

After flying in from Bangkok, we drive to Thimphu, stopping at Tamchhog Lhakhang (1.5 hour drive), a beautiful monastery with an iron bridge over the river. We also visit the Thimphu Chorten and the Golden Buddha.

Note: *for the September departure, if time permits, we will also include the Zilukha nunnery and Taschicho Dzong on Day 2*

We stay overnight in Thimphu. (L, D)

Accommodation:

Jomolhari Hotel or similar

Day 3

Locations: Thimphu

Overview:

We have a day of sightseeing in and around Thimphu. In the morning, we will visit the National Textile Museum, the Institute of Traditional Medicine, and the School of Traditional Arts and Crafts. The Bhutan Textile Museum was opened in 2001 at the instruction of Queen Ashi Sangay Choden, one of the four wives of the old Bhutanese King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The national museum was established to preserve and showcase the rich cultural heritage that has been preserved between Bhutan's mountainous ridges. The building itself was constructed to replicate a traditional Bhutanese house. Visitors really get a full taste of the country's cultural heritage, and the lingering influence of tradition on the present.

In the afternoon, we explore a postal museum and handmade paper factory, as well as the Changangkha temple.

Note: *for the September departure, this is Day 4*

(B, L,D)

Accommodation:

Jomolhari Hotel or similar

Day 4

Locations: Thimphu

Overview:

This morning we walk to the famous Cheri Gompa monastery, a walk of about 1 ½ hours (2.7 kms). The trail starts by crossing a lovely covered bridge that spans the Wang Chhu, then climbs steeply to the monastery. Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal built this goemba in 1620 and established the first monk body here. A silver chorten inside the goemba holds the ashes of the Shabdrung's father.

In the afternoon we will visit a bustling weekly market, and watch archery at a nearby stadium. We will also see today the Radio Tower and Takin reserve, Zilukha nunnery, and Tashichho Dzong.

We stay overnight in Thimphu.

Note: *for the September departure, this is Day 3*

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Jomolhari Hotel or similar

Day 5

Locations: Punakha

Overview:

In the morning, we drive east to the Dochu-la (*la* means "pass"), where, weather permitting, there are panoramic views of the Himalayan snow-peaks. The drive takes approximately 4 hours. We will visit the modern Victory Temple at Dochu-la, which was built to commemorate Bhutan's victory over Indian insurgents in the early 1980's.

In the afternoon, we visit Punakha Dzong, perhaps the most photogenic of Bhutan's Dzongs, situated at the confluence of two fast-flowing

turquoise rivers.

We stay overnight in Punakha.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Hotel Vara or similar

Day 6

Locations: Punakha

Overview:

This morning we walk to Khamsum Yulley Namgyel Chorten *(1.5 hours, moderately easy)* and visit the famous Suspension Bridge.

In the afternoon we visit Chorten Ningpo monastery.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Hotel Vara or similar

Day 7

Locations: Punakha - Trongsa

Overview:

In the morning we drive from Punakha to Trongsa via Pele La *(5-hour drive).*

In the afternoon, we visit Trongsa Dzong and the royal heritage museum in Ta Dzong.

We stay overnight in Trongsa.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Yangkhil Resort or similar

Day 8

Locations: Trongsa - Bumthang

Overview:

In the morning we drive to Bumthang via Yotong La (approx. 2.5 hours). Bumthang is Bhutan's second biggest town and an ancient centre of religious beliefs. Spread out widely over a valley, Bumthang is an ancient trading centre and has a number of sacred sites associated with Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, who is believed to have introduced Buddhism into the Indian subcontinent in the 8th century. He is venerated as a "second Buddha" by adherents of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Himalayan states of India.

In the afternoon we will visit Jakar Dzong situated on a ridge above the valley, the 7th century Jambay Lhakang, and the 17th century Kurjey Lhakang.

We stay overnight in Bumthang.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gongkhar Guesthouse or similar

Day 9

Locations: Bumthang - Ura Valley

Overview:

Today we will enjoy a day excursion to Ura Valley to join the Ura Festival.

At the Ura Festival, we will see locals dressed in their finest clothes having travelled from miles around to watch masked dances, pray, and enjoy a feast. We will see colourful brocades whirl through the air as the dancers spin and dance the "thunderbolt step". Masks of demons and animals arouse our senses as we watch the purification take place. Watch for the Atsara, or clown, a dancer unique in his own style who mimics the other dancers and entertains onlookers! Festival deities are

invoked through benediction.

After joining the festivities, we drive back to Bumthang.

Note: *The Ura Festival is held in April. If you join the September departure to Bhutan, you will join the Tamsingphala Festival, which will land on Day 10 of the tour.*

While the underlying purpose of both festivals is spiritual, the dances are more often like plays, telling stories of the fight between good and evil, or historical events, especially those surrounding the life of Guru Rinpoche.

Day 9 of the September departure is an excursion to the Tang Valley to visit Ugyengchholing Palace and Membar Tsho ("the burning lake")

From Kizum village, we walk 45 minutes up to the top of the hill where the palace is situated. We walk another 45 minutes on our way back down to the picturesque Gamling village.

Upon our return to Bumthang, we can experience a fire ritual which marks the start of the Tamsingphala Festival.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gongkhar Guesthouse or similar

Day 10

Locations: Bumthang

Overview:

Today we take a day walk to Ngang Lhakhang (a 3-hour walk but also accessible via our vehicle if needed), a Buddhist monastery in the Cheokhor Valley of central Bhutan. A private temple, Ngang Lhkahng was built in the 16th century by a Tibetan lama named Namkha Samdrip.

We return to our hotel in the evening for dinner.

Note: For the September departure, Day 10 is the Tamsingphala festival.

At the Tamsingphala Festival, we will see masked dances representing demons and animals, and be captivated by the sound of cymbals, drums, and horns, accompanied by the chanting of Buddhist monks as

they perform the religious dance of purification.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gongkhar Guesthouse or similar

Day 11

Locations: Bumthang - Gangtey

Overview:

From Bumthang we travel to Gangtey in the remote Phobjikha valley with a stop at Chendibji, where there is a mani wall of sacralised stones. We will have time to stop and enjoy views and sites such as wildlife and yak-herding camps beside the road as we cross mountain passes. The drive today will take approximately 6 hours.

We stay overnight in Gangtey.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Hotel Dewachen or similar

Day 12

Locations: Gangtey

Overview:

Gangtey is the seasonal home of the Black-necked crane, which migrates across the Himalayas between Gangtey and northern Tibet. We will visit Gangtey Gompa (one of Bhutan's oldest monasteries and recently extensively renovated) and have the opportunity to walk through the valley and view rural Bhutan, with its distinctive farmhouses and hospitable people. The walk starts at the Dewachen hotel and passes by the Black-Necked Crane Information Centre, which has lots of information on the valley and its famous migrating birds. From here the clients walk to Beta Village, where there is a small school, which we are welcome to visit if it is open.

The walk continues to Gangtey Gompa from where we 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 we can hopefully see some birds.

The walk continues from the end of the nature trail to Kingathang village where we can visit a temple built by the Queen Mother. From Kingathang, we walk via Yusa village back to our hotel.

The valley is almost entirely flat, and the walks are along a gentle path. The total walk is around 13 km but our vehicle will be available to pick us up at any point during the walk, if needed.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Hotel Dewachen or similar

Day 13

Locations: Gangtey - Paro

Overview:

Today, we drive to Paro (approx. 6 hours), stopping on the way to visit Rinchengang village near Wangdi. After we arrive, we have some free time to walk around the city and do some souvenir shopping.

We stay overnight in Paro.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gangtey Palace Hotel or similar

Day 14

Locations: Paro

Overview:

This morning we enjoy some more sightseeing together in Paro, visiting the Paro Rinpung Dzong, a large monastery and fortress tracing back to the Drukpa lineage of Kagyu School. It houses the district Monastic

Body and government administrative offices of Paro Dzongkhag.

We also visit the National Museum, which features a rich array of displays concerning Bhutan's religion, culture, and natural history.

In the afternoon, we visit the 7th-century Kyichu Lhakang, one of Bhutan's most sacred sites, and the Dumtse Lhakhang, an unusual temple in the Nepali style (chorten) that is said to ward off the threat from a demoness who formerly lived in this valley. In the evening we visit a local farmhouse and have our dinner.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gangtey Palace Hotel or similar

Day 15

Locations: Paro

Overview:

In the morning we drive 30 mins to do the Dzongdra kha hike. We walk 15 minutes from the road to the main temple. Dzongdra kha, also known as Dzongdra nye, is a sacred place of Guru Rimpoche dating back to the 8th century. In the 14th century, the treasure-hunter Gonpo Dorji discovered a crystal stupa and relic of the Buddha on this site.

In the afternoon we drive to Sangchen Choekor and have a picnic lunch, and visit the temple.

We walk around town in the evening.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gangtey Palace Hotel or similar

Day 16

Locations: Paro

Overview:

We rise earlier than usual to visit the spectacularly situated Taktshang Monastery (Tiger's Nest Monastery), a highlight of any visit to Bhutan.

This involves a hike of 3-4 hours to reach the site, on a 900-metre ascent up to the monastery at 3,120 meters. There's a possibility to hire a horse to go up to the halfway point if required.

There is a tea-shop around the half way mark which provides excellent views of the monastery, and some visitors are content with reaching this site. We return in time for lunch, and the rest of the afternoon is free.

In the evening we visit a local restaurant for our farewell dinner and a culture show, a great way to end our Bhutan adventure.

(B,L,D)

Accommodation:

Gangtey Palace Hotel or similar

Day 17

Locations: Bangkok

Overview:

We depart Bhutan from Paro airport in the morning. On arrival in Bangkok, we say our farewells and the tours comes to a close. We recommend booking a late evening flight out of Bangkok.

(B)

Inclusions / Exclusions

What's included in our Tour

- International airfares in economy class – Bangkok- Paro-Bangkok with Druk Air.
- 16 nights of hotel accommodation.
- 15 dinners, 15 lunches, and 16 breakfasts
- Services of a Tour Leader.
- Bhutan guide throughout the tour from arrival to departure.
- All sightseeing and entrance fees.

- Airport transfers on arrival and departure and all overland transport within Bhutan.

What's not included in our Tour

- International flights.
- Comprehensive travel insurance.
- Items of a personal nature such as drinks, alcohol, laundry, and tips.

Level 2 - Moderate

Participants must be able to carry their own luggage, climb and descend stairs, be in good health, mobile and able to participate in 3-5 hours of physical activity per day, the equivalent of walking/hiking up to 8 kilometres on uneven ground.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any requests for further information about this tour or any others offered by Odyssey Travel.