

*BIG FIVE*  
TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

# Kingdom Of Bhutan



The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions, and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip. Be sure to check the reading list included here for more information.



***A traveler without observation is a bird without wings.***

-- Moslih Eddin Saadi

## Thimphu, Bhutan

Elevation: 7544 feet			Latitude: 27 32N				Longitude: 089 43E					
Average Temperature												
°F	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	40.7	45.5	50.3	56.4	64	67.6	61.1	68.7	66.3	61.1	52.6	44.1
Average Precipitation												
Inches	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	0.6	1.6	0.9	2.3	4.8	9.6	14.5	13.5	6	1.5	0.3	0.1

### WEATHER

There are four distinct seasons similar in their divisions to those of Western Europe. The Monsoon season occurs between June and August when the temperature is normally between 8-12 degrees C (46-70 F). Temperatures drop dramatically with increases in altitude. Days are usually very pleasant (average 10 C/ 50 F) with clear skies and sunshine. Nights are cold and require heavy wool clothing, particularly in winter. If you go in winter, be prepared because most hotels do not have central heating. Generally October, November and April to mid-June are the best times to visit-rainfall is at a minimum and temperatures are conducive to active days of sightseeing. The foothills are also very pleasant during the winter. Bhutan's climate varies widely from the tropical southern border areas to the perpetually snow-covered peaks of the high Himalaya. At the same latitude as Miami and Cairo, its climate depends largely on elevation. It bears the brunt of the monsoon, receiving more rainfall than other Himalayan regions, sometimes up to 5.5m (18ft) a year.

### TIME ZONE & FLIGHT TIMES

**Time Zone:** Bhutan is six hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT + 6) and 11 hours ahead of Eastern Standard.

**Flight Time:** From U.S. East Coast, the flying time, via London and Delhi, is approximately 19 hours plus layovers.

### PASSPORT/ VISA REQUIREMENTS

**Passports:** For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least two blank pages is necessary.

**Visas:** Your visa for Bhutan will be issued when you arrive. The visa cost is currently \$20US payable in cash only.

**Important:** Please look at your passport before you travel to insure that:

- 1) Your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

**Please note:** Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

### AIRPORT FORMALITIES

**On Arrival:** Upon your arrival, proceed through Customs and Immigration, obtain your luggage, and exit the airport. If you have booked a complete package with Big Five tours, a representative will be holding a sign identifying you or him/her. If you have not made hotel and transfer arrangements with Big Five Tours & Expeditions, then please

follow the instructions in your final itinerary. We recommend you change money at airports, hotels, or local banks

**Departure Tax:** Currently NU300, about \$6.25US

### CUSTOMS

**Duty Free:** The following goods may be taken into Bhutan by travelers aged 17 years or older without incurring customs duty: 400 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 150g of tobacco; 2 liters of alcohol; 250 ml of perfume.

**Prohibited items:** firearms, narcotics, plants, gold and silver bullion and obsolete currency, export of antiques, religious objects, manuscripts, images and anthropological materials is strictly prohibited and closely monitored by the Bhutanese authorities.

**Note:** Cameras, video cameras, cellular phones, and all other electronic equipment for personal use must be registered with the authorities on arrival and will be checked by Customs on departure.

### U.S. CUSTOMS

Your personal exemption is \$800. There are also limits on the amount of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products you may include in your duty-free personal exemption.

For more information, you can either contact the U.S. Customs Service at PO Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044, or visit the Customs & Border Protection website at [www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml](http://www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml).

### LUGGAGE

Traveling light is always the first and best rule! We recommend passengers limit their luggage to one medium-sized soft bag per person or two small duffel bags. In this security conscious era, airline luggage restrictions may change without notice. Also, luggage limits vary depending on ticket class, plane size, destinations, etc. It is always best to confirm with airlines for specific limitations.

Generally speaking, from the US, economy class passengers are allowed to check in two (2) normal size pieces of luggage (each piece measuring no more than about 62 linear inches, which means length plus width plus height), and not exceeding 70 pounds per bag.

Scheduled flights from other countries and within foreign countries generally limit luggage to 44 pounds total, plus one carry-on personal item. Further restrictions apply for charter flights. We will advise you of those restrictions in your final documents.

Most airlines now allow only one carry-on bag in addition to one personal item such as a laptop or handbag. Most bags within the 22 x 14 x 9 (or, a total of 45 linear inches) size restriction will be considered legal carry-on size by major domestic U.S. airlines. Many US airlines check-in desks have sizing boxes within which your bag must fit.

Obviously, no knives or cutting instruments are allowed in carry-on baggage.

All luggage should have identification inside as well as secure baggage tags on the outside.

Please note that the US National Transportation and Safety Board now suggests that you do not lock your checked luggage. If a screener has to open your bag, the locks may have to be broken. This applies to flights within the US and international flights originating in the US. This, however, does not address other international travel issues. We suggest that you lock your luggage and bring a couple of spare locks in the event, one or more are cut off. But the choice is up to each individual traveler to make.

## **CAMERAS & FILM**

**Photographing:** Please, approach people with an attitude of respect. Do not take anyone's picture without getting their permission. Bhutanese people love to have their picture taken as they consider it to be good luck, but negotiate a fee first because they will expect to be paid. Also, do not disrupt festivals or parades by sticking your camera in anyone's face. Never take any photos of airports, police or government buildings, military installations, or borders.

**Equipment:** Bring a camera & lens you are comfortable with. If you get new equipment, read up on it and practice using it to work out any problems prior to your departure. Shoot and develop at least a dozen rolls before your trip to make sure equipment is functioning well. Don't forget to bring your camera operation manual, filters and flash unit. Cameras should be packed with good cushioning. The roads can be rough and the constant vibration can do damage. Clean your equipment frequently- bring a puffer brush and lens cleaning tissues.

**Lenses:** A combination of fixed and/or zoom lenses with focal lengths from 28 mm to 200 mm is good for general travel photography, although you can take excellent photographs with only a 50 mm lens. Zoom lenses such as 35-80 mm, 70-210 mm, or 100-300 mm will help you capture the sights in a variety of different settings. Many times, you will not need high-powered zoom lenses. But serious photographers will want them handy. A macro lens is helpful for shooting close-ups, but a good set of extension tubes will work very well. A 2x converter is also handy.

**Film:** It is always best to bring along whatever you need with you. Film is generally more expensive abroad and it may be hard to find. You'll be surprised at how much film you use when you are trying to capture all those special moments. Be sure film is fresh and when possible, refrigerate it.

For color prints, Kodak and Fuji are good choices: ASA/ISO 100 & 200 for daylight and ASA/ISO 400 & 1000 are good for lower light and nighttime settings.

It is helpful to have a numbering system for your film. Mark each roll with masking tape and number or letter before leaving home. This way, you can record the rolls of film where they were shot.

Avoid airport x-ray machines when possible and request your film be hand-searched. While security people are often obliging, not all will be so allow for extra time. Lead bags for film are available and worth the small investment because the more times film is x-rayed, the more risk of damage. Also, do not leave film in your camera because it may be opened for inspection.

**Note:** Recent new reports warn that new explosive detectors used in more than 100 U.S. airports to scan checked baggage will ruin unprotected, unexposed film. The technology will eventually be in place worldwide. Experts suggest either carrying your film in you carry-on luggage and/or placing film in a lead bag. Videotape is not affected by airport x-ray, only magnetic fields or prolonged exposure to heat will damage videotape. Your battery charger should be capable of adjusting to 240 volts.

**Batteries:** Put fresh photo-quality batteries in you camera and other equipment before you leave and bring at least two sets of spare batteries with you. Your camera will be useless without them and they are not only hard to find, but expensive too.

## **STAYING HEALTHY**

**Vaccinations:** No inoculations or vaccinations are required unless coming from or passing through an infected area. Protection against malaria, typhoid, tetanus, hepatitis A and B is strongly recommended. Food and waterborne diseases are the number one cause of illness in travelers. Travelers' diarrhea can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or parasites, which are found throughout the region and can contaminate food or water. Infections may cause diarrhea and vomiting. Malaria is a preventable infection that can be fatal if left untreated. Prevent infection by taking prescription anti-malaria drugs and protecting yourself against mosquito bites.

**Please Note:** If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Prescription medicines should always be carried in their original containers in your hand luggage.

As with every trip abroad, travelers should be in generally good health. Health insurance is strongly advised during any foreign travel. See a doctor who specializes in travel medicine for his recommendations or your local health department at least 4-6 weeks to allow for time for shots, if needed, to take effect.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta has a fax information service with updated travel information. To receive these documents, call 404-332-4565. Or, visit the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov> for more information.

### **General recommendations:**

- Wash hands often with soap and water.
- Don't handle any animals (especially monkeys, dogs, and cats).
- Swimming in salt water is usually safer than fresh water.
- Do not drink tap water at all.
- Only drink purified bottle water. Bottled water is readily available and some hotels provide it complimentary. Carry a bottle with you throughout the day.
- Always drink bottled mineral water and soft drinks (diet soft drinks are not always available).
- Do not drink your beverages with ice.
- Don't purchase food from street vendors.
- Don't eat dairy products unless you know they have been pasteurized.
- Avoid any raw foods while traveling in the continent, except in recommended restaurants and hotels, where you may do so if you wish. Always choose cooked food.

- If you wear prescription glasses or contact lenses, it is advisable to bring an extra pair and cleaning fluid.
- In places of altitudes above 8,000 feet, you may suffer digestive problems, light dizziness or headache. We recommend that you only eat light foods the first day or two, and avoid alcohol.
- Sudden dietary changes, from your daily consumption at home to exotic dishes, especially on the first day or two, may result in digestive problems, often leading to headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Please be careful.

## SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

To minimize the risk of personal injury or property loss, let common sense prevail when traveling. Don't put valuables or prescription drugs in checked luggage; carry them with you or leave them in the hotel safe. Leave your jewelry at home!

Passports, exchange vouchers, itinerary, air tickets, traveler's checks, visas and permits, and insurance policies should be with you in your carry-on baggage. Never leave an unlocked suitcase in a hotel room or unattended in airports or train stations.

Women traveling alone: Do not accept food or drink from a stranger! Never get into a taxi if there's a second man accompanying the driver, chain-lock doors in hotel room, and keep purses close to you securely closed.

Be careful when you use your credit cards for payment. Make certain that the card isn't used to make an impression on more than one credit card charge form.

Pamphlets addressing safety issues abroad are available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, or at the Bureau of Consular Affairs' home page at <http://travel.state.gov>. Or, contact the U.S. Department of State, 2201 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20520. (202) 647-4000. Web site: <http://www.state.gov>.

## TRAVELER'S ETIQUETTE

In addition to looking out for one's own safety, the conscientious guest has the obligation of treating his hosts with respect and courtesy. An effort to speak the local language, no matter how rudimentary, is always appreciated as are good manners and discretion in the use of cameras. Above all, one must remember that the polite guest, in a country no less than in a private home, is obliged to learn from and adapt to the ways of his hosts, rather than expecting them to accept his customs.

Travel necessitates being a good-natured realist as well as a romantic, and requires an agreeable acceptance of situations as they exist, not as each of us might prefer them to be. A good attitude makes for an enjoyable travel experience. If you are this appreciative traveler, we want you with us because we know you'll be a wonderful companion and have the time of your life.

Political unrest is an unfortunate reality in the world today, and sometimes changes to your final itinerary may be necessary to ensure your safety while traveling.

A concern for conserving the remaining natural wonders, boundless beauty, and diversity of our small planet is necessary, and always appreciated.

You are entering the blissful and rejuvenating world of discovery; be open to the experience. Our tours are dedicated to the individual with an inquiring mind. This is a time for you to escape the stresses and strains of your everyday life

## SMOKING

We suggest that passengers refrain from smoking in public areas, sightseeing vehicles, and when aboard any cruise vessel while in the cabins, the dining area, or community areas. There are designated areas for smoking on cruise vessels. Please dispose of cigarette butts in the appropriate receptacles / ashtrays. Do not throw cigarette butts on the ground or overboard.

## ELECTRICITY

Bhutan current is 220 volts AC, 50 Hz.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

**Population:** 650,000

**Religions:** Buddhism (official) & Hinduism

**Life expectancy:** 51 yrs (men) / 53 yrs (women)

**Main exports:** Electricity, timber, cement, agricultural products and handicrafts

**Average annual income:** U.S. \$550

## LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

**Language:** Dzongkha is the official language. Many dialects are spoken because of the physical isolation of many villages. Sharchop Kha, from eastern Bhutan, is the most widely spoken. Nepali is common in the south of the country. English has been the language of educational instruction since 1964 and is widely spoken.

**Telephone:** the country code is 975. All other calls must go through and international operator. Outgoing international code is 00.

**Internet:** Thimphu has four internet cafes.

**Mail:** Airmail letters to Bhutan can take up to two weeks and are subject to possible disruption. This is due to the fact that Bhutanese stamps are highly prized and are often steamed off envelopes en route.

## CLOTHING

In the foothills you will need lightweight cottons, linens and waterproof gear. Light sweaters and jackets for the evenings should be enough. In the upland areas you will need heavier items for evenings, particularly during the winter months.

**Laundry:** Laundry can be done at the major hotels at the appropriate charges imposed by the hotels. There are no laundry facilities in remote areas or on cruise vessels.

## CURRENCY

1 Ngultrum (NU) = 100 chetrum (Ch). The Ngultrum is pegged to the Indian Rupee (also accepted as legal tender). Notes are in denominations of NU500, 100, 50, 20, 10, 5, 2, and 1. Coins are in denominations on NU1, and 100, 50, 25, 10, and 5 chetrum. U.S. Dollars are also widely accepted throughout the kingdom.

**Currency Exchange:** Leading foreign currencies are accepted but travelers checks are preferred and receive a better exchange rate. Major hotels in Thimphu and

Phuntsholing, and the Olathang Hotel in Paro, will also exchange foreign currency.

**Credit / Debit Cards:** American Express and Diners Club have very limited acceptability. Check with your credit or debit card companies for merchants that accept these cards.

**Travelers Checks:** Can be exchanged in any branch of the Bank of Bhutan or at all BTCL hotels. Travelers are advised to take travelers checks in US Dollars.

### TIPPING

Tipping isn't widely practiced - staff may act embarrassed, but they will appreciate the gesture. You will probably be accompanied by the same guide and driver throughout your trip and you should tip them the equivalent of about US\$2-3 per day for the guide and slightly less for the driver is standard. Trekking guides expect considerably more, at least twice this amount.

Your professional, licensed guide and driver, who accompany you, work very hard to ensure that you receive the best BIG FIVE service, tour quality, and satisfaction. If you wish to reward them for their work, we suggest the following:

- \$5-\$10 per person per day for services rendered by any licensed guide / naturalist.
- \$2-\$4 per person per day for services rendered by driver.

Tipping is solely at your discretion.

### SHOPPING

Markets are held regularly, generally on Saturday and Sunday, and are a rich source of local clothing and jewelry. The handicraft emporium on the main street in the capital is open daily except Sunday and offers a magnificent assortment of hand-woven and handcrafted goods. The Motithang Hotel in Thimphu has a souvenir shop. Silversmiths and goldsmiths in the Thimphu Valley are able to make handcrafted articles to order.

**Shop Hours:** Mon & Weds– Sun 9am–8pm (closed on Tues).

### ARTS & CRAFTS

All Bhutanese art, dance, drama and music have roots in Buddhism and have a purpose as opposed to contemporary art, which is symbolic and impersonal at times. Unlike many other countries, arts, ceremonies and festivals of Bhutan are still practiced and performed because they continue to have religious and spiritual significance on their culture.

Inspired by a close relationship with nature and its gods, and by their country's extraordinary scenery, Bhutanese craftsmen have preserved the ancient skills of their ancestors through work in bronze, iron, silver, clay, and wood.

The Bhutanese consider commissioning paintings or sculptures to be pious. Next to its spectacular architecture, Bhutan painting is the most visible manifestation of Bhutanese art and is defined in three forms: thangkhas, wall paintings, and statues.

The country's classical dance is lama which symbolizes destruction of evil spirits. The most important festival dances, celebrate the faith, legends, myths and history of the kingdom.

Among Bhutan's hidden treasures is a magical mosaic of rich, vibrant hues and patterns, in myriad weaves that represent the Dragon Kingdom.

### FOOD & DRINK

**Local Specialties:** Restaurants are relatively scarce and most tourists eat in their hotels. Meals are often buffet-style and mostly vegetarian. Cheese is a very popular ingredient in dishes and the most popular cheeses are dartsi (cow's milk cheese), sometimes served in a dish with red chillies (ema dartsi), and yak cheese. Rice is ubiquitous, sometimes flavoured with saffron. The most popular drink is souza (Bhutanese tea).

Menus in Bhutan are a fantasy concocted of the ingredients a restaurant would like to have and what is actually on their shelves. As your trip will be an all-inclusive package, expect to eat most meals at your hotel (buffet fans are in for a treat). Your guide can arrange dinner at local restaurants but beware: traditional Bhutanese food always features chillies and the most popular dish is ema datse made with large, green hot chillies in a cheese sauce. Though there is plenty of white rice, Bhutanese prefer a local, slightly nutty, red variety. At high altitudes, wheat is the staple. Several Tibetan-style dishes are common, including momos (dumplings) and thukpa (noodles). Pork fat is popular in the wilds because of its high energy content - visitors find it almost inedible because it's usually stale. There are no slaughterhouses in Bhutan, and only a few cold storage facilities, so even the keenest carnivores should consider going veggie for their stay.

### GEOGRAPHY

Bhutan, located in the eastern Himalayas, borders China to the north and India to the south, east and west. The altitude varies from 300m (1000 ft.) in the narrow lowland region to 7000m (22, 000 ft.) in the Himalayan plateau in the north. The foothills are tropical and home to deer, lions, leopards, and the rare golden monkey. The Inner Himalaya region is temperate; wildlife includes bear, boar and sambar. The area is rich in deciduous forests. Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, lies at a height of over 2400m (8000 ft.) in a fertile valley. It resembles a large, widely dispersed village rather than a capital. The yearly religious Thimphu festival is held in the courtyard directly in front of the National Assembly Hall. A visit to Paro Valley and the Taksang (Tiger's Nest) Monastery clinging to the face of a 900m (2952 ft.) precipice is highly recommended.

### ENVIRONMENT

Bhutan is roughly the size of Switzerland, bordered by Tibet on the north and northwest with India nudging its remaining borders. Almost the entire country is mountainous. Its great rivers sculpted its geography and the economy has been helped by their enormous potential for hydropower.

Bhutan's ecosystem, virtually intact because of centuries of isolation, has quite a variety of habitats and an array of animal and plant species. Under Bhutanese law, 60% of the kingdom will remain forested for all time. 72% of the country is covered in forest with more than 5500 species, including over 300 medicinal strains. There are 165 species of mammals and 770 species of birds have been recorded, including the rare and endangered black-necked crane.

Over a quarter of the kingdom is in protected areas. A progressive conservation/ development program has been established. National parks sustain important ecosystems

and have not been developed as tourist attractions. In many cases you won't even be aware that you are entering or leaving a protected area.

### **BHUTANESE DRESS**

The national dress of Bhutan is distinctive and visible aspects of Dragon Kingdom's unique character are evident. Men wear Gho, a long robe similar to Tibetan Chhuba while women wear an ankle-length robe called a Kira. The Bhutanese textile is made from fine, hand-woven fabric, with the colorful distinctive patterns.

Formal occasions, men wear a scarf called Kabney which indicates a person's rank. It is an important part of Bhutanese etiquette. In the same manner, women wear rachu over their left shoulder for formal occasions.

### **FESTIVALS**

Throughout the year, annual festivals known as "Tsechus" take place. These are festivals extolling the great deeds of Guru Padsambhava also known as Guru Rinpoche. Festivals are celebrated for several days, the occasion for dances of a religious context. Dancers in brilliant silk costumes act out legendary events, using horns, drums, and cymbals as they whirl and leap against a background of sky and mountains. Certain festivals end with the worship of a huge religious object and festival-goers believe that simply by viewing this thankha, they can be delivered from the cycle of reincarnation which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. For the Bhutanese people, religious festivals offer an opportunity to become immersed in the meaning of their religion and gain much merit. They are also a social occasion for seeing people and being seen. People dress in their finest clothes, and their most beautiful jewelry.

### **VISITING HOLY SITES**

Please be aware that your shoes will have to be removed if you enter the sanctorum when visiting a temple, even if it seems in ruins.

Visiting religious monuments, temples or monasteries requires respect. In some places, cloth overshoes may be provided for a small charge. All religions ask that you do not smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or speak in raised voices on the premises. Some structures are off-limits to those who do not practice the faith.

Women should always be dressed properly (no bare shoulders, no shorts, no midriff exposure) and should cover their heads before entering a temple or monastery.

Many unthinking tourists commit an unforgivable sacrilege when they visit a Buddhist monastery. When you spin a prayer wheel, you MUST follow this rule: as you circumambulate the interior and exterior of a stupa, mani wall or monastery, you must move in a clockwise direction.

Inside a monastery, interior cushions and chairs are reserved for lamas (monks). Sit on the steps outside or on the floor.

If you have the opportunity to meet a rimpoche (head lama), or a respected monk, please do not turn your back on him when you leave. This is considered very impolite. Also remove your hat and lower an umbrella within the confines of a monastery.

Journeying to an exotic country is a spiritually enriching experience. Be a realist and a romantic who can appreciate the differences of this new culture. A positive attitude and eagerness to learn will make for a more enjoyable experience for everyone. By observing simple

rules of common courtesy, you will ensure that the journey is a success.

### **MONASTERIES & TEMPLES**

The monasteries and temples here are often found in valleys or jutting out of a cliff. Over the centuries, their construction has been overseen by saints or lamas. Like their Tibetan counterparts, the temples are called lha-khang, "home to the gods" and the monasteries gom-pa mean "solitary place". These buildings are devoted to prayer and meditation. A temple will house only a few monks who maintain and clean it, but monasteries can house a community of more than 100 monks. Monasteries are primarily a place of study, with the teaching and training of novices forming an important part of their work.

Around any religious building is a profusion of prayer flags, chortens and mani walls. So that monks and pilgrims can walk around the building and turn the prayer wheels that are fixed in the walls, there is usually a small paved pathway around the perimeter.

Holy places are built from stone or rammed mud, with half-timbering and shingle roofs. Inside they are very different from domestic houses. They are richly decorated with vividly colored designs and symbols. The walls are painted with images of Buddhist divinities and of saints and lamas who helped spread the doctrine of the Enlightened One. Inside the monasteries, chapels may be lhakhangs, which are dedicated to the protective spirits, often portrayed in their most fearsome and angry forms. These esoteric images often surprise visitors because of their violent nature. They represent the defenders of religion and destroyers of enemies throughout the world. But it is believed that these enemies live inside men's hearts. Desire, anger and ignorance, symbolized by the snake and pig, are considered to be the worst enemies.

Some Bhutanese temples have unusual shapes. For example: Duntse Lhakhang in the Paro valley, which looks like a chorten. Built around 1433, it is in the spirit of the mandala.

The fittings and decoration of these buildings are rich. Craftsmen as well as builders, used their skills to display remarkable work. Founders of dzongs and monasteries are generally remembered, yet the architects, workmen and artists who helped to build them were not even recorded.

Artistic creation is not a form of personal expression in Bhutan, but the reflection of a shared state of mind. Through an act of faith, each individual gives of his best for the common good. All buildings are a living testimony to the talents of countless men and womenasons, carpenters, joiners, painters, sculptors and blacksmiths stretching back over the centuries.

### **THIMPHU HIGHLIGHTS**

Thimphu lies in a beautiful, wooded valley. It is the only world capital without traffic lights. A set was installed some time ago, but when residents complained about it, it was taken down within days. Thimphu is full of charm and has a medieval feel. It is awash with brightly painted, elaborately decorated facades.

Thimphu is brimming with things to do and see that represent the Bhutanese culture in many forms. On the horizon, situated on a hill just above town, Trashi Chhoe Dzong (Fortress of the Glorious Religion) was completely renovated in the 1960s to become the symbol of the capital. It now houses the offices of the king and the central monk body. A visit to the National Institute for Zorig Chusum (the

painting school') is popular. The school offers traditional teachings of painting to children from all over Bhutan. There is a small shop that sells works done by the students at reasonable prices.

Back in town, the most visible religious structure is the National Memorial Chorten, containing numerous sacred religious paintings and tantric statues. For many, this is the focus of their daily worship. The Weekend Market, in the center of Thimphu, is ideal to experience villagers and Thimphu residents competing for the best bargains. Nearby, the Changlimithang Stadium is the national archery ground, where you can see competitors participating in the national sport with traditional garb, and entertaining rituals. The National Institute of Traditional Medicine is an interesting facility that uses over 300 different plants to make medicines distributed throughout the kingdom.

During the Thimphu tsechu, in autumn, all the hotels are completely booked. Also, you may have to revise your idea of 'top-end', many of Bhutan's hotels are only at the standard that India's were 20 years ago, but the service and facilities are generally good. No matter how simple your accommodation, your room will most likely be ornately decorated in Bhutanese style. At first you might wonder if you are in a monastery rather than your hotel room.

### **TREKKING AND RAFTING**

Rugged mountains, enchanting valleys, meandering rivers, crystal lakes, dense forests and the virginity of nature make Bhutan a trekking paradise; however, there is no equipment available in Bhutan, nowhere to rent a sleeping bag, so you'll need to bring your own.

Though rafting in Bhutan is in its infancy, those who have checked out the rivers conclude that the potential for some of the best rafting on earth can be found here. There are several companies offering river programs on rivers ranging from class 3 to 5. The outstanding ones are Mo Chhu, upstream of Punakha in eastern Bhutan, and the Ema Datsé Canyon on the Mangde Chhu in central Bhutan.

### **HISTORY**

Bhutan's early history is obscure. The country may have been inhabited as early as 2,000 BC, but not much is known about it until Tantric Buddhism was introduced in the 8th century AD.

The country's political history is intimately tied to its religious history and relations among the various monastic schools and monasteries. The consolidation of Bhutan began 300 years ago. Ngawang Namgyal, a lama from Tibet, defeated three Tibetan invasions, subjugated rival religious schools, codified an intricate and comprehensive system of and established himself as ruler. After his death, civil strife broke out, which eroded shabdungs' power. In 1885, the central authority recruited Chinese aid to crush the most powerful governors. This move was countered by a local Tongsa leader, Ugyen Wangchuck, who arranged for a British presence in the area. In 1907, after the shabdung's death, Ugyen became Bhutan's first hereditary king.

In 1910, King Ugyen and the British signed the Treaty of Punakha, which stated that British India would not interfere with Bhutan's internal affairs if the country accepted British advice in its external relations. Similar provisions were included in the 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty signed with independent India.

### **DEALING WITH "JET LAG"**

With the adventures of international travel come unavoidable inconveniences such as lost luggage or bouts of jet lag. In fact, 90% of long distance travelers experience a degree of jet lag. This term is used to describe that out-of-sorts feeling associated with flights across time zones. Symptoms include drowsiness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches, insomnia, nausea and swelling of the extremities.

The number of time zones crossed can increase the severity of symptoms you might experience. The internal body clock follows circadian rhythm which is controlled by the hypothalamus that processes nerve signals. That clock is designed for regular cycles of light and darkness. It may take several days for that rhythm to be restored, especially if you crossed more than one time zone. Other factors include cabin pressure, stale air, lack of humidity and your overall condition at the beginning of the trip.

Although jet lag cannot be completely avoided, there are simple things you can do that will minimize its affects.

#### **Try the following on your next trip:**

- Start your trip well-rested prior to departure. This will decrease the amount of sleep you have to catch up on when you arrive at your destination. When returning home, allow one day of rest before returning to work.
- If you arrive in the morning, plan to stay awake. If possible, wait until the local bedtime to go to sleep. Many swear that this is the key to how quickly they adapt to local conditions. You will sleep better and be less likely to have insomnia than if you nap on arrival.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Water and juices will help you stay hydrated. Seasoned travelers recommend carrying a bottle of drinking water and consuming eight ounces every hour.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine just before and during flights as their diuretic properties will promote dehydration. Alcohol can also have the affect of sleepiness or feeling sluggish.
- When you settle onboard, go ahead and reset your watch to the time zone to which you are headed. This helps you adjust to your destination's local time.
- As much as possible, create a dark environment during flight. Studies have shown that bright lights strongly affect individuals' body clocks. If necessary, try eye shades and earplugs to help block distractions to convince your body is nighttime. Also, close shades and turn off overhead lights to help you sleep if you have an early morning arrival time.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing and comfortable shoes that are not tight. This will help if you experience any swelling. Some travelers like to bring lightweight slippers for the plane.
- Look for opportunities to walk around during your flight. Do simple isometric exercises (contracting and relaxing as many muscle groups as you can) in your seat. These will improve circulation, reduce chances of swelling and help increase alertness.