

Bhutan Women-only Culture and Festival Tour 2013

Itinerary dates: October 15 - 26, 2013

Tour Leader: TBD

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Hike to **Tiger's Nest**, the country's most photographed monastery
- * Attend the **Jambay Lhakhang** tsechu (festival) – known as the sacred midnight naked dance
- * Take light hikes in the **peaceful beauty of the Himalayan foothills**
- * Visit stunning **Punakha Dzong** – considered the most beautiful monastery in Bhutan
- * Walk through the Gangtey Valley, where **black-necked cranes** migrate from the Tibetan plateau

The group will meet in Bangkok for the flight to Paro, Bhutan. A welcome dinner will be arranged the night prior to departure (October 14) for all who can attend. Flights leave Bangkok very early on the morning of the 15th (usually 5:30 am) so it's best to **arrive in Bangkok at least 24 hours prior to departure to Bhutan** in the event of flight delays.

ITINERARY

Day 1

October 15, 2013 – Arrive from Bangkok – Paro (Meals: L, D)

The plane flight into Paro is a **spectacular introduction** to the **brehtaking Himalayas**. In clear conditions, you'll have impressive views of the **highest peaks in the world** before descending into the Paro Valley. Your first experience will be breathing in the **fresh, clean air**. Once you've cleared customs and visa control, the group will be met by the in-country guide and taken to your hotel.

Following lunch, you'll tour **Rinpung Dzong** (monastery) and also spend some time strolling Paro's main street, lined with small shops. Later, if there is time, you'll see **Ta Dzong** a monastery converted into the **National Museum**. Here you'll see **traditional thangkas, fabrics, weaponry, armor, household objects** as well as **historic items**. Overnight at [Tenzinling Hotel](#) or similar in Paro.

Day 2

October 16, 2013 – Paro – Thimphu (Meals: B, L, D)

After breakfast, you'll depart for the capital, **Thimphu** (population 86,000; 7,520 feet), which is located approximately one hour away.

After lunch, you'll visit sights around this small city. This might include a nunnery, **handicraft emporium, handmade paper factory**, the **National Memorial Chorten**, the National Zoo (more like a preserve, the only animal there is the national animal, the extraordinary Takin) and **Trashy Chhoe Dzong**. Overnight at Hotel Riverview or similar in Thimphu.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** Though **Thimphu** is considered a bustling city compared to the rest of Bhutan, it is the **world's only capital without a traffic light!** It is also a great place to learn about the nation's thriving **arts and crafts**.

Day 3

October 17, 2013 – Thimphu – Punakha (Meals: B, L, D)

Following breakfast, you will leave for **Dochu La Pass** (10,000 feet), ascending steeply through pine and cedar forests with hanging lichen. The group will then take a short **downhill hike through the woods** and board your vehicle when you meet up with the road again. You'll then drive onward to the **Punakha Valley**. Lunch will be served at the hotel.

In the afternoon, the group will tour nearby **Punakha Dzong**. Dinner and overnight at Hotel Zangtopelri or similar in Punakha.



HIGHLIGHT! Punakha Dzong is likely the most **beautiful of all dzongs** in Bhutan. You will have a chance to meander through this complex of **architectural structures** which are home to **hundreds of monks** half of the year. You'll see the magnificent main temple that contains **massive Buddhas** at the altar as well as **thousands of small statues** placed in the walls.

Day 4

October 18, 2013 – Punakha – Trongsa (Meals: B, L, D)

Today after breakfast, you'll depart for the 5-hour ride to **Trongsa**. Along the way, you will cut through the **Black Mountains** on Bhutan's "Central Road." This highway essentially opened central Bhutan to the rest of the world.

You'll first stop in **Wangdue**, a small village and the district headquarters of Western Bhutan. The road then climbs through tropical vegetation to **Pele La Pass** (10,900 feet), surrounded by towering rhododendron and dwarf bamboo. You'll likely see **yak**, which often graze in this area and, if clear, you might see impressive **Mt. Jhomulhari** (24,140 feet). Coming down from the pass, you will continue on to Trongsa, where you will visit the striking **Trongsa Dzong**. Dinner and overnight at Hotel Yangkhil Resort or similar in Trongsa.

Day 5

October 19, 2013 – Trongsa – Bumthang Valley (Meals: B, L, D)

Following breakfast, you will head eastward to the **Bumthang Valley**, where it's believed Buddhism in Bhutan got its start. You will have time to see a number of sites including: **Kurjey Lhakhang** and **Jambay monasteries, Tamshing Gompa, Jakar Dzong** and possibly the **Swiss Farm**, where they make cheese, honey, beer and local fruit spirits. Overnight at Rinchenling Lodge or similar in Jakar (Bumthang Valley).



HIGHLIGHT! It's believed that Buddhism in Bhutan started in Bumthang. The valley is home to the two oldest temples in the Kingdom and a number of sacred sites. A spiritual vibe fills the air of this idyllic valley.

Day 6

October 20, 2013 – Bumthang – Festival Day (Meals: B, L, D)

In the morning, the group will attend more festival dances that are part of the **tsechu**. This will include the popular **mask dance** as well as many other performances by **traditional singers and dancers**. There will be **craftspeople** from around the country set up with booths to sell **jewelry, clothes, Buddhist treasures** and other souvenirs. On this day, you may also have time for more sightseeing around the Bumthang Valley including a **walk to a nearby village**.

After dinner, the group will attend **Jambay Lhakhang Drup**, where, very late, the sacred naked dance is performed by local men. (Yes, they are naked. No, photos are not allowed.) This is the beginning of the **tsechu** and this dance is performed in order to **purify sins** and to receive a good harvest. It's

believed to be **very good luck** to watch these dancers, giving yourself the chance to be absolved of a lifetime of sins (phew)! Overnight at Rinchhenling Lodge or similar in Jakar (Bumthang Valley).

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** The **midnight dance** on this night is quite a **secretive affair**. It's usually held in the **wee hours of the morning** when most tourists have gone to sleep. But, it is **WELL** worth it if you are able to stay awake 😊.

Day 7

October 21, 2013 – Bumthang – Ura – Bumthang (Meals: B, L, D)

Following breakfast, the group will drive to the **Ura Valley**, about 25 miles from Bumthang. The road traverses Ura Shelthang-la where, in clear weather, there is a magnificent view of Bhutan's highest peak, **Gangkar Puensum** (24,600 feet). The road then descends into the **Ura Valley**. The group will **hike down** through a **lush forest** and **through the village** of traditional homes. Overnight at Rinchhenling Lodge or similar in Jakar (Bumthang Valley).

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** The people of Ura mainly **raise sheep and yaks**, and the introduction of **potato farming** has brought a certain degree of **prosperity** to the people. This is an **ancient village** where you'll be able to meander through its narrow streets.

Day 8

October 22, 2013 – Bumthang – Gangtey (Meals: B, L, D)

Following breakfast, you will start the drive back toward **Paro**. You'll have a chance to stop at **Yotong La Pass** and continue on via Trongsa, to Pele La Pass, and then onward to the **Phoblika Valley** (10,000 feet), deemed the most beautiful valley in the Himalayas. There will be a lunch break along the way. Dinner and overnight at [Dewachen Hotel](#) or similar in Gangtey.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** The **Phoblika Valley** is the winter home to the endangered **black-necked cranes** which migrate from the **Tibetan Plateau**. While they are usually only here from November through March, sometimes you will find some early arrivals around this time.

Day 9

October 23, 2013 – Gangtey – Wangdue (Meals: B, L, D)

Following breakfast, you'll visit **Gangtey Gumpa**, which was built in the 17th century and renovated just a few years ago. From the gumpa, you'll **walk back to the hotel** along a path that cuts through a **beautiful forest** and then across the valley floor. Lunch will be served at the hotel.

In the afternoon, you'll drive about 2 hours to a riverside hotel near **Wangdue** (4,000 feet) and enjoy some leisure time before dinner. Dinner and overnight at [Dragon's Nest Hotel](#) or similar in Wangdue.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** You'll enjoy the morning's walk in the **Phoblika Valley** which is one of the easiest and most beautiful on the tour. This region is **breathtaking** and you'll likely see horses and cows meandering around the valley floor which is ringed by **low mountain ranges**.

Day 10

October 24, 2013 – Wangdue – Thimphu – Paro (Meals: B, L, D)

From Wangdue, you'll drive to **Thimphu** where you'll have lunch at a local restaurant and one last opportunity for **sightseeing and shopping** in the capital. You will then head to **Paro** where you'll have dinner and overnight at Hotel Riverview or similar in Thimphu.

Day 11

October 25, 2013 – Paro (Meals: B, L, D)

On this last full day in Bhutan, you'll get an early start in order to hike the 2+ hours to **Taktsang (Tiger's Nest)**, the country's **most photographed and well-known monastery**. You'll **tour the few temples** at the top and have time to enjoy the view from here. On the way down, you'll stop at the tea shop/cafe, located midway, where you'll see exceptional views of Tiger's Nest up above. You will then proceed down for lunch.

Upon returning to Paro, you may have time for **relaxing or going to town** for last-minute souvenir shopping. Final dinner and overnight at Hotel Riverview or similar in Thimphu.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** The hike up to and visiting **Tiger's Nest** could quite possibly be the highlight of your time in Bhutan! This iconic site, perched on the side of a mountain, is **revered by the Bhutanese** – and you'll soon see why.

Day 12

October 26, 2013 – Paro – Bangkok (Meals: B, L, D)

Following breakfast, you'll leave for the airport for the sad farewell to the Kingdom of Bhutan and your flight to Bangkok. Flights usually arrive into Bangkok late in the afternoon. Though you can connect with an international flight that night, you might consider staying in Bangkok for one night in case flights out of Paro are delayed (not uncommon).

**** Itinerary subject to change without notice.**