

Bhutan Women-only Culture and Yoga Tour

Itinerary dates: March 13 – 24, 2016

Tour Leader: Susan Weis-Bohlen

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Take optional daily **yoga classes**
- * Hike to **Tiger's Nest**, the country's most photographed monastery
- * Attend the **Paro Festival** – the country's most popular event featuring the unfurling of the country's largest thongdrel (banner)
- * Drive over **Himalayan mountain passes** (11,000+ feet)
- * Take light hikes in the **peaceful beauty of the Himalayan foothills**
- * Visit **Punakha Dzong** – considered the most beautiful monastery in Bhutan
- * Experience Bumthang, believed to be the **birthplace of Buddhism in Bhutan**
- * Learn about the Kingdom's approach to **Gross National Happiness**
- * Returning WanderTours participants **receive a 5% discount** on land costs
- * New for 2016 – **tips for in-country guides and drivers included in price**

The group will meet in Bangkok for the flight to Paro, Bhutan. For all who can attend, there will be a welcome dinner in Bangkok the night prior to departure, March 12. Flights leave Bangkok very early on the morning of March 13 (usually 5:30 a.m.) 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

Sunday, March 13, 2016 - Arrive in Paro, Bhutan – Thimphu

Meals: Lunch, Dinner

The flight into Paro on Bhutan's national carrier, Druk Air, is a befitting introduction to the spectacular beauty of the country. In clear weather, magnificent views of the world's highest peaks give way to the lush green Paro Valley as we land. Your first experience will be that of **breathing in the cool, clean fresh air**. After clearing customs and visa control, the group will be met by the local guide and driven to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital (population 86,000; elevation 7,520 feet) about 90 minutes away.

After lunch, we'll visit sights around Thimphu that may include a **nunnery**, the **National Memorial Chorten**, the **National Zoo** (more like a preserve, the only animal present is the national animal, the unique Takin), the **handicraft emporium**, the **handmade paper factory** and **Tashichho Dzong**.

Dinner and 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 find out about the nation's thriving arts and crafts scene.

Day 2

Monday, March 14, 2016 – Thimphu – Punakha

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we'll leave for **Dochu La Pass** (10,000 feet) where we'll have time to meander through the 108 chortens (small temples) and, on a clear day, take in views of the Himalayas. The drive climbs up through a forest of cedar and pine, their boughs dripping with lichen. From the pass, we'll take a **downhill walk through the woods**, intersecting with the road where we'll board the bus and drive farther east to the **Punakha Valley**.

If there's time today, we'll visit nearby **Punakha Dzong**, otherwise the visit will happen tomorrow.

Dinner and overnight at [Meri Puensum Hotel](#) or similar in Punakha.



HIGHLIGHT! Punakha Dzong is considered the **most beautiful of all the dzongs** in Bhutan.

You'll have time to look around the compound of buildings that house hundreds of monks in the winter months. You'll tour the impressive main temple that contains **huge Buddhas at the altar** as well as **thousands of small Buddha statues** along the walls. The Bhutanese guide will provide detailed information about the dzong's storied past and about the interior artwork.

Day 3

Tuesday, March 15, 2016 – Punakha – Trongsa

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll head out on the approximately five-hour ride (bring your iPod) to **Trongsa**. Along the way, we will cut through the **Black Mountains** on Bhutan's **Central Road**, completed just over 30 years ago. This highway essentially opened central Bhutan to the world.

Beyond the town of **Wangdue**, the road climbs through tropical vegetation to **Pele La Pass** at 10,900 feet, which is surrounded by towering **rhododendrons** and **dwarf bamboo**. You'll likely see **yak**, which often graze in this area and, if it's clear, you might see impressive **Mt. Jomolhari** (24,140 feet) to the west. Coming down from the pass, we will travel through an amazing gorge and then on to Trongsa, where we'll visit the striking **Trongsa Dzong**. This is one of the largest and most impressive dzongs in Bhutan, built high on a mountain spur next to a sheer drop overlooking the gorge of the Mangde Chhu (river).

Dinner and overnight at [Hotel Yangkhil Resort](#) or similar in Trongsa.

Day 4

Wednesday, March 16, 2016 – Trongsa – Bumthang Valley

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Today, we'll journey eastward to the **Bumthang Valley**, an area rich with fantastic sights to see. We'll visit **Kurjey Lhakhang** and **Jambay monasteries**, the **Tamshing Gompa**, the **Jakar Dzong** and possibly the **Swiss Farm**, which produces cheese, honey, beer and local fruit spirits.

Overnight at [Rinchhenling 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, creating a spiritual vibe that pervades the entire valley.

Day 5

Thursday, March 17, 2016 – Bumthang Valley – Tang Valley

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll set off for the **Tang Valley** about an hour and a half away. From there, we'll make the hour-long hike through small villages up to **Ogyen Choling Museum**, where we'll tour this remarkable building that provides rare insight into traditional life in Bhutan. After walking back down to the road, we'll enjoy a leisurely **picnic lunch** in a quiet spot along the river.

In the afternoon, we'll pay a visit to the **Pema Choling Nunnery** to see how the women there live. This is a very special opportunity to see where the nuns reside and how they run the nunnery, which is quite different than the monasteries where the monks live.

Dinner and overnight at [Rinchhenling Lodge](#) or similar in Jakar (Bumthang Valley).

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** The **road to the Tang Valley** is quite stunning with wonderful views at the top. A visit to the museum is a **unique opportunity** to see how the Bhutanese have lived for centuries.

Day 6

Friday, March 18, 2016 – Bumthang – Ura Valley

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Our next destination is the **Ura Valley**, located approximately 25 miles outside of Jakar. The road reaches the Shelthang La Pass, where, on clear days, there is a magnificent view of Bhutan's highest peak, **Gangkar Puensum**, stretching 24,600 feet into the sky. From there, we'll hike down through a lush forest and through a **village of traditional homes** to meet the bus.

Dinner and overnight at [Rinchhenling Lodge](#) or similar in Jakar (Bumthang Valley).

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** Ura Valley's main occupation is **raising sheep and yaks**, but the introduction of **potato farming** has brought a certain degree of prosperity to the people. You'll have a chance to wander through the streets and alleys of this village to see their homes.

Day 7

Saturday, March 19, 2016 – Bumthang – Gangtey

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we will start the **drive back to Paro**. Along the way, we'll stop at **Yotong La Pass** and continue on via Trongsa to Pele La Pass, and then to the **Phobjika Valley** (10,000 feet), considered to be 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 Phobjika Valley is the winter home to the endangered black-necked cranes that migrate from the Tibetan Plateau. While they are usually only here from November through March, sometimes you'll spot stragglers as late as April.

Day 8

Sunday, March 20, 2016 – Gangtey – Wangdue

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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

In the afternoon, we'll take a two-hour drive to a riverside hotel near Wangdue (4,000 feet).

Dinner and overnight at [Dragon's Nest Hotel](#) or similar in Wangdue.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** We'll enjoy a morning walk in the Phobjika Valley, which is one of the easiest on the tour. This region is breathtaking and you'll likely see horses and cows – and maybe even a crane or two! – along the valley floor, which is ringed by low mountain ranges.

Day 9

Monday, March 21, 2016 – Wangdue – Thimphu – Paro

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

From Wangdue, we'll drive to **Thimphu** for lunch and one last opportunity for **sightseeing and souvenir shopping** in the capital.

Then we'll head to Paro for dinner and overnight at the [Metta Resort](#) or similar in Paro.

Day 10

Tuesday, March 22, 2016 – Paro

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

We'll get an early start in order to **hike the two+ hours to Taktsang** (Tiger's Nest), the country's most photographed and well-known monastery. On most days, there are **monks here who will be happy to bless items** that you've carried with you (mala beads, prayers flags or other sacred items).

We'll tour the **temples** located at the top and you'll have time to simply enjoy the views from this perch.

On our way back down, we'll stop at the tea shop/cafe located midway, where we'll enjoy a few more **exceptional views of Tiger's Nest**. To cap it all off, we will then have a picnic lunch at the bottom of the hill.

Once we're back in Paro, you may have time for **relaxing or going to town** for some souvenir shopping.

Dinner and overnight at the [Metta Resort](#) or similar in Paro.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** The hike and visit to Tiger's Nest could quite possibly be the highlight of your time in Bhutan. It might even be the highlight of your life! It's that amazing.

Day 11

Wednesday, March 23, 2016 – Paro

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

We'll get up very early (VERY early) to attend the **Paro Festival**. Sometime in the wee morning hours (perhaps 3 a.m.) we'll depart for the Paro Dzong to watch the **unfurling of the thongdrel**, which takes a few hours. After the unfurling, we'll head back to the hotel to catch up on sleep or have breakfast, depending on the time.

The festival continues until the late morning and you may return to enjoy the day's festivities. You never know what you'll see – **the King was spotted during several of our visits to this festival**.

Alternately, you may choose to peruse the streets of Paro, visiting sights that you might have missed previously.

A special final night's dinner will be organized and then overnight at the [Metta Resort](#) or similar in Paro.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** It's considered good karma to attend the Paro Festival – be prepared to have a **lifetime of sins disappear** as you watch this event in the middle of the night.

Day 12

Thursday, March 24, 2016 – Paro – Bangkok

Meals: Breakfast

Following breakfast, you'll **leave for the airport** and bid farewell to the Kingdom of Bhutan. Your flight should arrive into Bangkok around 4:30 p.m. Though you may connect with an international flight that night, consider staying in Bangkok for one night in case flights out of Paro are delayed, which is not uncommon.

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