

Bhutan Women-only Culture and Festival Tour 2015

Itinerary dates: October 25 – November 5, 2015

Tour Leader: Joslin Fritz

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Hike to **Tiger's Nest**, the country's most photographed monastery
- * Attend two festivals including the **Jambay Lhakhang Drup 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 24) for all who can attend. Flights leave Bangkok very early on the morning of October 25th (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

Sunday, October 25, 2015 – Arrive from Bangkok – Paro – Thimphu

Meals: Lunch, Dinner

We'll immediately enjoy the magnificent beauty of the region as soon as we arrive in Bhutan. On a clear day, spectacular vistas of the Himalayas, the world's highest mountains, make way for the rich, green Paro Valley. Stepping off the plane, you'll be struck by the crisp, fresh air. We'll be met by our guide and driver after going through visa control and customs and then drive to **Thimphu**, Bhutan's capital (population 86,000; 7,520 feet) about 90 minutes away.

After lunch in Thimphu, we'll have a chance to visit the city's **weekend market**, filled with a wide variety of goods for both locals and tourists. Expect to see produce and meats for sale as well as souvenirs and clothes. Today we might also get a chance to see an archery tournament, which often take place at the local archery grounds.

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

Day 2

Monday, October 26, 2015 – Paro – Thimphu

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Today, we'll enjoy a full day of sightseeing in Thimphu with a chance to learn about the local culture, arts and religion by visiting a number of sights. This might include the **National Memorial Chorten**, the **handicraft emporium**, a **handmade paper factory** and the National Zoo (more like a preserve, the only animal there is the national animal, the extraordinary Takin).

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

★ **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

Tuesday, October 27, 2015 – Thimphu – Punakha

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we'll depart 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 our vehicle when we meet up with the road again. We'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 [Meri Puensum](#) or similar in Punakha.

★ **HIGHLIGHT!** **Punakha Dzong** is likely the most **beautiful of all dzongs** in Bhutan. We will have a chance to meander through this complex of **architectural structures** which are home to **hundreds of monks** half of the year. We'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

Wednesday, October 28, 2015 – Punakha – Trongsa

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

After breakfast, we'll depart for the five-hour ride to **Trongsa**. We'll cut through the **Black Mountains** on Bhutan's "Central Road." This highway essentially opened central Bhutan to the rest of the world just over 30 years ago.

Along the way, we'll go through **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. We'll likely see **yak**, which often graze in this area and, if clear, we might see impressive **Mt. Jomolhari** (24,140 feet). Coming down from the pass, we'll continue on to Trongsa, where we'll visit the striking Trongsa Dzong.

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

Day 5


Thursday, October 29, 2015 – Trongsa – Bumthang Valley

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we'll head eastward to the **Bumthang Valley**, where Buddhism in Bhutan got its start. Along the way, we'll stop for the **Prakhar Lhakhang Tsechu** (festival) in the small town of Chummi. This event will be quite special because it will be small and attended mostly by locals.

We'll have lunch at the festival and then head to the hotel in the afternoon.

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 as well as a number of sacred sites. A spiritual vibe fills the air of this idyllic valley.

Day 6

Friday, October 30, 2015 – Bumthang – Festival Day

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

In the morning, we will attend the **Jambay Lhakhang Tsechu**. This is held at one of the oldest dzongs in the country and will be a great chance to visit this sacred site. The many dances at this festival 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, we may also have time for sightseeing around the Bumthang Valley.

Overnight at Rinchenling Lodge or similar in Jakar (Bumthang Valley).

Day 7

Saturday, October 31, 2015 – Bumthang – Ura – Bumthang

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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**. We'll **hike down** through a **lush forest** and **through the village** of traditional homes. We'll then have a picnic lunch in the village and return to the hotel in the afternoon.

After dinner, we'll attend **Jambay Lhakhang Drup**, where, very late, the sacred naked dance is performed by local men very late at night. (Yes, they are naked. No, photos are not allowed.) This is the end 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 (pewh)!

Overnight at Rinchenling 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 8

Sunday, November 1, 2015 – Bumthang – Gangtey

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we'll start the drive back toward **Paro**. We'll have a chance to stop at **Yotong La Pass** and continue on via Trongsa, to Pele La Pass, and then onward to the **Phoblaka 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 **Phoblaka 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 there are some early arrivals around this time.

Day 9

Monday, November 2, 2015 – Gangtey – Wangdue

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Following breakfast, we'll visit **Gangtey Gompa**, which was built in the 17th century and renovated just a few years ago. From the gompa, we'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 back at the hotel.

In the afternoon, we'll drive about two hours to a riverside hotel near **Wangdue** (4,000 feet) and enjoy some leisure time before dinner.

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Lobesa 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 **brehtaking** and you'll likely see horses and cows meandering around the valley floor that's ringed by **low mountain ranges**.

Day 10

Tuesday, November 3, 2015 – Wangdue – Thimphu – Paro

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

From Wangdue, we'll drive onward to **Thimphu** where we'll have lunch at a local restaurant and one last opportunity for **sightseeing and shopping** in the capital. We will then head to Paro.

Dinner and overnight at Metta Hotel and Spa or similar in Paro.

Day 11

Wednesday, November 4, 2015 – Paro

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

On this last full day in Bhutan, we'll get an early start in order to hike the two+ hours to **Tiger's Nest (Taksang)**, the country's **most photographed and well-known monastery**. We'll **tour the few temples** at the top and have time to enjoy the view. On the way down, we'll stop at the tea shop/cafe, located midway, where we'll have lunch and have exceptional views of Tiger's Nest up above. Upon returning to Paro, we may have time for **relaxing or going to town** for last-minute souvenir shopping.

Final dinner and overnight at Metta Hotel and Spa or similar in Paro.

★ **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**Thursday, November 5, 2015 – Paro – Bangkok****Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner**

Following breakfast, we'll leave for the airport for our flight to Bangkok. Flights usually arrive into Bangkok late in the afternoon (4:30 p.m. or later). 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.**