

Introduction to the Himalayan Heartland (Paro and Thimphu valleys)

Day 01: Arrive Paro (altitude 2200 meters)



Fly into the inner Himalayas with Drukair, the national carrier. The green wall of hills known as *duars*-the gateways into Bhutan from the plains of India gradually rise higher as the plane flies north. Pallid rivers rush along the valleys, waterfalls plunge down forested mountainsides and, to the north, the great snowcapped peaks of the inner Himalayas rise up to the heavens. Farmhouses dot the hillsides on either side of the plane.

As the aircraft descends to the Paro valley, you will see Paro Dzong (fortress) on the hillside overlooking the Paro Chu (river), with Ta Dzong, formerly a watchtower and now the National Museum, above it. Your Far East Himalaya representative, will be waiting for you at the Paro airport. After completion of airport formalities, you will drive along the exquisite Paro valley to your hotel.

Afternoon is free for activities, or be at leisure. Meals would be served at your hotel or you may choose to eat from any hotels/restaurants recommended by Far East Himalaya. Overnight at your hotel, Paro.

Day 02: Paro sightseeing/visits and Paro to Thimphu-60 km, 1.5 hours/altitude 2350 meters



After breakfast in the hotel, drive to Drukgyel Dzong, a ruined fortress where Bhutanese warriors fought off Tibetan invaders centuries ago. The snowy dome of sacred Jhomolhari, "mountain goddess" can be seen in all her glory from the approach road to the Dzong.

Along the way, see the 7th century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the 108 temples built in the Himalayas by the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo. The building of this temple marks the introduction of Buddhism in Bhutan.

After lunch visit Ta Dzong, originally built as a watchtower, which now houses Bhutan's National Museum. The extensive collection includes antique *thangka* paintings, textiles, weapons & armor, household objects and a rich assortment of natural and historic artifacts.

Then walk down the trail to visit Rinpung Dzong ("fortress of the heap of jewels"), which has a long and fascinating history. Along the wooden galleries lining the inner courtyard are fine wall paintings illustrating Buddhist lore, such as the legend of the four friends, the old man of long life, the wheel of life, scenes from the life of Milarepa, Mount Sumeru and other cosmic *mandalas*.

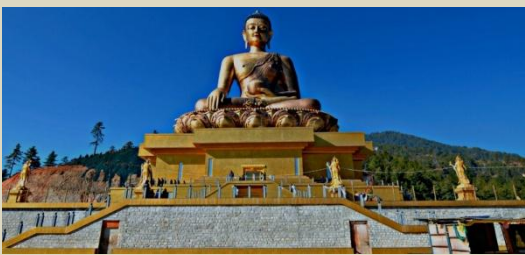


Later in the afternoon, proceed to Thimphu, the capital town of Bhutan. The road runs down through the Paro valley, to *chuzom* (Confluence) at the entrance to the valley, where the Paro and Thimphu rivers meet. Three chortens on the riverbank at this place, each in a different style, mark the confluence of the two rivers. Shortly before reaching Chuzom, you will see on your left Tachogang Lhakhang, "the temple of the excellent horse". It is a private temple, built in the 15th century, to honor the visit of *Balaha*, the excellent horse, a manifestation of *Chenrezig*-the compassionate Buddha. The road passes along a narrow valley with rocky cliffs on the left, then the valley opens out into farmland on the approach to Thimphu. Semtokha Dzong (fortress), "the place of profound tantric teaching", stands sentinel on a hillock a few

kilometers out of town. This dzong now houses the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies. On arrival to Thimphu, check into the hotel. Free time in the early evening for a stroll in the town before dinner.

Overnight at the hotel in Thimphu.

Day 03: Thimphu sightseeing/visits and Thimphu – Paro



After breakfast, sightseeing in Thimphu valley, including visits to the following: the National Library, housing an extensive collection of priceless Buddhist manuscripts; the National Institute of Traditional Medicine, where Bhutan's famed traditional herbal medicines are compounded and dispensed; the Institute for Zorig Chusum (commonly known as the Painting School) where students undergo a six-year training course in Bhutan's 13 traditional arts and crafts; the Folk Heritage Museum in the adjacent location showcases Bhutanese rural household settings; the National Library in the neighborhood houses a huge book, called "Giant visual odyssey

through the Kingdom of Bhutan", and was made by scientist Michael Hawley and is one of the eleven models available worldwide. It has a height of 1.52 meters and a length of 2.13 meters and weighs about 60 kilograms. In its 112 pages, the book offers stunning and high quality images of the Last Himalayan Kingdom, taken on four trips through Bhutan. The entire book requires 1 gallon of ink and 1 day to be printed.

After lunch, visit Tashichhodzong, "the fortress of the glorious religion". This is the center of government and religion, site of the monarch's throne room and seat of the *Je Khenpo* or Chief Abbot. Built in 1641 by the political and religious unifier of Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, it was reconstructed in the 1960s in traditional Bhutanese manner, without the aid of nails or architectural plans. Also visit the National Memorial *Chorten* (stupa), continuously circumambulated by faithful devotees, murmuring mantras and spinning their prayer wheels. Construction of this

landmark was the idea of Bhutan's third king, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck ("the father of modern Bhutan") who had wished to erect a monument to world peace and prosperity. Completed in 1974 after his untimely death, it serves both as a memorial to the Late King and as a monument to peace. Next, drive to a nearby hilltop to look around the statue of giant sitting Buddha overlooking Thimphu valley. The site is still being developed to establish retreat centers and other Buddhism activities. On the way back visit Bhutan's national animal-Takin (*budorcas taxicolor*), that normally lives in the wild alpine regions of Bhutan.

Then, visit the government-run Handicrafts Emporium and the local crafts bazaar, to browse through examples of Bhutan's fine traditional arts. Here you can buy hand-woven textiles, *thangkha* paintings, masks, ceramics, slate and woodcarvings, jewelry, and other interesting items made from local materials.

In the evening, drive to Paro. Farewell dinner with your trip host.

Day 04: Depart Paro

After early breakfast at the hotel, drive to the airport for flight to your onward destination. Your Far East Himalaya representative will help you with the exit formalities and then bid you farewell.