



Better Bhutan

Ten Days & Nine Nights

This is our best program for people who have a bit more time and who want to experience some of the less-visited places in Bhutan and spend more time in the country's spiritual heartland. Depending on when you travel, you will see at least one of Bhutan's spectacular festivals as well as some of the most unspoiled terrain on the planet. Our Grand Bhutan Tour uses car and driver and guide, so your time is your own. Even your meals are included. You have the option to spend one night in a local home to experience Bhutan much more intimately.



Day One: Spectacular Himalaya Views

Arrive in Paro after a spectacular flight that takes you deep into the Himalayas, affording awesome views of towering peaks, including the sacred Jumolhari and Jichu Drake peaks in Bhutan. You will be met on arrival and taken to your hotel.

In the afternoon you visit the Paro Dzong. It was built in 1646 and now houses government offices and religious institutions, as do all dzongs (forts) in the kingdom. You will cross a traditional wooden bridge along the way. Afterward you will visit Kyichu Lhakhang, the oldest temple in the country.

In the evening you can stroll through the Paro market and town.

Day Two: A Tiger's Nest

After breakfast we walk to Taktsang ("Tiger's Nest"), which is Bhutan's most famous monastery, perched on the edge of a steep cliff, about 900 meters above Paro Valley. The hike to reach the viewpoint to the monastery makes for a nice half-day excursion. (You can also travel on horse-back if you have physical limitations, although horses do not carry passengers downhill.)

You will have time for a look around Paro this afternoon. Although many of the buildings have been built in the last decade, they are all constructed and decorated the way buildings have been made here for centuries. You will find shops selling hardware and paint, textiles popular with locals for traditional garments, books, paintings and antiques. It's worth poking around.

If necessary we can shift Tiger's Nest to the last day of your visit. It is somewhat challenging and best left until you have adjusted to the altitude.

Day Three: A Capital City With No Traffic Lights

After breakfast you continue on your grand Bhutan tour with a drive to Thimphu, which is probably the world's smallest capital city, with only three traffic lights and a handful of paved streets. In the afternoon you visit the King's Memorial Chorten (built in memory of the third King of Bhutan who reigned from 1952-1972). A chorten is much the same as a stupa or chedi. Originally they were used as the final resting place of someone significant, or a relic of a saint.

You also visit Changgangkha Monastery, built in the 15th century. If it is open and you are up to climbing a long flight of stone steps you will be rewarded with sweeping views of the valley. The most important of the temple's statues is that of an eleven-headed manifestation of Lord Buddha that has 1,000 arms and 1,000 eyes.

Next, it's on to the Thimpu Dzong, which now houses government ministries, and Simtokha Dzong. The latter was built on a rocky hill into which an annoying demon was imprisoned in the seventeenth century.

Later, visit the takin reserve to see the national animal. The takin is an odd-looking beast that might result from the union of a goat and an antelope. The takin is revered for its resilience in harsh conditions (even though it is endangered) and is also a part of Bhutanese mythology.

You will also make quick visits to several other places, including the National Library (which houses ancient manuscripts), and the School of Arts and Crafts, which teaches thirteen different crafts and from weaving and embroidery to carpentry and blacksmithing. We will also squeeze in a stop at the main post office for Bhutan's collectable stamps.

Day Four: Get a Fertility Blessing

After lunch there is a short detour to Punakha, the former capital of Bhutan. Here you will visit the Punakha Dzong, which dates to 1637 and is considered one of the most beautiful in Bhutan.

On the way back from Punakha, you will stop at Metshina Village and take a 20-minute walk through the rice fields to Chimi Lhakhang, a fertility temple, where you may receive a special fertility blessing if you think you need one. This temple is dedicated to a saint who is popularly known as "the Divine Madman." Although he was not a monk, he taught a revolutionary alternative to orthodox Buddhism and is remembered for his sexual prowess. Many homes and temples in this region are decorated with flying phalluses as a symbol of fertility and as a gesture of respect for the Divine Madman.

Overnight in Wangduephodrang or Punakha.

Day Five: Into the Enchanted Forest

Today's excursion is to Phobjikha Valley, which takes you through dense forests of oak trees and rhododendrons. Once you arrive you will visit Gantey Gompa, a monastery with a golden roof. This is the only Nyingmapa (which means "ancient ones") monastery in this part of Bhutan. The Nyingmapas first established Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century.

The Phobjikha Valley is the home of the black-necked crane, which migrates in winter from Ladakh. The cranes use the golden roof as a beacon. Locals say the birds circle the temple three times before they land in the valley. Residents here use solar power since they are concerned that power lines might harm the cranes.

From there you'll head to Trongsa, the ancestral home of the royal family. The route is along a spectacular winding road, crossing 3,300-meter-high Pele La. You can browse through the Trongsa shops and town in the afternoon.

Alternative schedule: Spend the night in Phobjikha, which has a better variety of hotel and meal options, and make a stop in Trongsa on the way to Bumthang. Road work from 2014 through 2016 has cut a couple of hours off this route, so you still arrive in Bumthang early afternoon.

Day Six: A Massive Fortress & a Magic Carpet

In the morning you'll visit Trongsa Dzong, the masterpiece of Bhutanese architecture. This massive and impregnable fortress is built on many levels ascending a hill, so it can be seen from a great distance. You will also see Ta Dzong, the watchtower built to defend the dzong.

Weaving is a large cottage industry in Trongsa and among the best places in the country to buy textiles and carpets.

In the afternoon you'll proceed to Bumthang, a region of four lush rural valleys surrounded by dense forest.

Along the way you will stop at a yethra (textile weaving) factory, where the yethras are designed with patterns unique to Bumthang, and you can even watch some of the weavers at their looms.

After lunch you will visit Jakar Dzong, the "fortress of the white bird," that sits regally on a ridge overlooking the Chamkhar valley near Jakar town. This imposing Dzong was built on the ruins of a 15th century monastery.

You can spend the evening strolling through Bumthang town. Two nights in Bumthang.

Day Seven: The Legacy of Guru Rinpoche & a Cheese Factory

Bumthang is considered the religious heartland of Bhutan because of the age and importance of the spiritual places here. The valleys are full of farms and orchards that produce an abundance of fruits, honey and grains.

There is quite a bit to see in Bumthang so we set out after an early breakfast. Many of the places you visit will be connected to Guru Rinpoche, who traveled from what is now Tibet to Bhutan in the 8th century. Today he is considered a

Buddhist saint and often referred to as "the second Buddha." As a result of his visit Buddhism began to flourish throughout Bhutan.

You will also see Jambey Lhakhang, the oldest (8th century) monastery in the country and the venue for one of Bhutan's most colorful festivals, which includes the peculiar "Penis Ceremony." The remains of Bhutan's first three kings are interred here. It is also the place where Guru Rinpoche left his "body print" in a stone.

You will also visit two smaller temples—Tamshing Lhakhang, with its wall paintings, and Thangbi Monastery. These are connected by a suspension bridge over a river that provides a pleasant walk. If you like, you can also stop at the local Swiss cheese factory, owned by Swiss man who helped introduce dairy cattle to Bhutan decades ago and decided to stay.

Day Eight: Bumthang Market & Wangdue

You'll begin the day at the Bumthang market, and then drive to Wangduephodrang, where you can stroll through the town and visit the shops. The nearby villages are known for their slate and stone carvings and bamboo work.

Overnight in Wangduephodrang.

Alternative route: There have been three flights a week between Bumthang and Paro since early 2016. These increased to daily flights during high season. Flying eliminates the need to overnight in Wangduephodrang and allows you to add an extra night in Bumthang, which is well worth the time. Please realize that Drukair changes flight schedules (almost) constantly. Flights may not be daily during low season. However, we will look into this on a case-by-case basis for you. If you fly, you have time for the Tigers Nest hike and Paro sightseeing. You can add one more night in Bumthang if we take you directly to Thimpu on the day you arrive.

Day Nine: Back to Paro

Set out for Paro after breakfast. In the afternoon, you will go to a farmhouse and receive a cooking lesson in the farmhouse kitchen. If you like you can spend the night as a guest of the farm house, and take advantage of a hot stone bath. Otherwise, we have a comfy hotel room for you.

Day Ten: Return to Reality

Free time until you are taken to the airport for your departure flight. Darn.

Customizing This Trip

The sky is the limit when you consider customizing this program, although it cannot be easily shortened. If you do not have quite enough time but want to see all of these places, see the [eight day-seven night itinerary](#) on Better Bhutan's website.

Here are some ideas:

Add a night or two in Paro at the beginning or the end of your trip to make a day trip or overnight trip to the Haa Valley.

You can stay longer in Bumthang. An extra night will allow you to visit the Ura Valley, which is a trip back in time to see small villages with cobblestone streets, and the "Flaming Lake," which has historic, cultural and religious significance to Bhutanese people.

This itinerary can be done in reverse and we can make small adjustments to all you attend a festival if one is planned for the time you plan to travel.