

BHUTAN: Mastering the Buddha Nature Within

Trip facilitator: Dr. Sheri Rosenthal – Dec 7-18th, 2014

Many eastern classics and books of wisdom have referred to the Himalayas as the abode of the gods and home to the immortals. Since time immemorial, ascetics, scholars, philosophers and pilgrims have been drawn irresistibly to the remote Himalayan mountain kingdoms in their personal search for wisdom, inspiration, solitude and happiness. With the vanishing of the once-legendary kingdoms of Tibet, Sikkim and Ladakh, Bhutan remains the last Mahayana Buddhist country in the world. Bhutan is a spiritual nation and the influence of Buddhism is highly visible in every aspect of Bhutanese life.

Countless sacred monasteries, temples, Stupas, prayer flags and prayer wheels which dot the countryside provide a strong infrastructure and atmosphere for the living faith.

Red-robed monks preside over religious ceremonies and rituals which might have as much to do with celebrating weddings and births and the consecration of monasteries as with exorcising spirits from village homes, appeasing the rain gods, or simply welcoming a guest. On all auspicious days, Bhutanese families make pilgrimages to monasteries to offer prayers and butter lamps. You will take part in special religious ceremonies and rituals being performed by Buddhist monks, nuns and lamas who live their lives in isolation, devotion and meditation. This is truly a special journey for your inner self.



Dec. 4-6th The Journey Begins!

Most folks will be leaving December 4th or 5th and will meet in Bangkok December 6th in the evening. Depending on where you live, you may need to leave on December 4th to make the flight to Bangkok. When you take the transpacific flight from the west coast of the U.S. to Bangkok, you lose a day when you cross the international dateline. Don't worry. You'll get the day back when you fly home!



Those arriving on the 6th will stay overnight at the Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel (approximately \$170.00 USD for a double room – we

can match you with a roommate) near the new Bangkok airport (BKK) and wake up early for our flight on Druk airlines to Paro, Bhutan at ~7:00am.

Dec. 7th (-,l,d) Bangkok to Paro (altitude: 7,400 feet)

We'll gather in the hotel lobby in the early morning and, as a group, proceed to the airport to check in with Druk Air. If we are lucky, we'll have glorious views of the snowcapped Himalayas. On its way to Paro, **Druk Air flies over eight of the ten tallest peaks of the world including Mt. Everest and Kanchenjunga.** The remarkable and steep descent into the Paro Valley is an awe-inspiring beginning to our adventure. Already you can feel the pace of life slow down.



After visa formalities and collection of baggage, at the airport exit door, we'll meet our guide and the driver. We begin our adventure in Bhutan with a drive through the valley, past small farming villages to visit the ruins of Drukgyal Dzong (the fortress of Victorious Bhutanese), built in 1647 to commemorate Bhutan's victory over the Tibetan invaders led by Mongolian warlord, Gushri Khan in 1644. On a clear day, Mt. Jumolhari (24,000 ft), Bhutan's most sacred mountain peaks that marks the border between Bhutan and Tibet, can be seen from here. After Drukgyal Dzong, we'll check into our hotel where we'll spend the first night. After lunch, we'll have an orientation meeting and trip briefing.

Later in the afternoon, we will visit the Rinpung Dzong (the full name of the Paro Dzong), which means "the fortress of the heap of jewels." This complex houses the administrative and religious headquarters for the Paro district. A part of Bernardo Bertolucci's movie, "Little Buddha," was filmed inside this dzong. We will then have the rest of the afternoon relax and connect as a group.

Dec. 8th (b,l,d) Punakha (altitude: 4,500 feet)

This morning we'll travel to Punkaha (approx. 3 hours). The road winds through pine forests and small villages, and passes by Chortens (Stupas) and prayer flags before heading up to Dochula Pass (10,000'). Here we'll see 108 special Chortens (Stupa) surrounded by thousands of prayer flags, dedicated to the Kingdom's Peace and Gross National Happiness. The prayer flags on



mountain slopes, bridges and high passes, transmit prayers to the Gods and keep up a constant communication with the heavens. In good weather, one can view the entire range of the Bhutan Himalaya from the Pass.

We continue our drive through a beautiful Himalayan Mountain forest. This is also a good bird-watching area. Bhutan has a stunning 770 bird species, including many that are globally threatened. The country has been identified as one of the ten most important bio-diversity hot spots in the world (those places that together constitute less than two percent of the globe's surface area but contain more than 50 percent of its biodiversity). Its ecosystem harbors some of the most exotic species of the eastern Himalayas with over 2000 varieties of flowering plants including 50 species of rhododendron.

In the village of Lobesa, we'll enjoy a relatively easy hike to visit Chimmi Lhakhang (Divine Madman). This is a 16th temple dedicated to Drukpa Kuenley, who as a favorite saint of the Bhutanese people is known affectionately as "the Divine Madman." The temple is on a hillside in the middle of rice fields and is famous pilgrimage site for childless couples. This is an easy hike: approx. 45 minutes gradual up to the temple & 30 minutes back to the road.

Dec. 9th (b,l,d) Punakha

This morning, we'll enjoy a hike to Khamsum Yuley Namgyal Chorten (Stupa). This is a moderate hike: approx. 1 hour up to the temple & 45 minutes down back to the road. A visit here is a good introduction to Tantric Buddhism in all its complexities. It contains some of the best Tantric art in Bhutan, and a visit there will serve as a balance to the more traditional Buddhist statuary and wall painting visible at the Punakha Dzong. The shapes and forms of the Tantric statues may surprise most visitors.



The terrifying divinities are manifestations of peaceful gods, which assume these forms to subdue evil spirits that are hostile to Buddhist doctrine.

The nudity of most of the deities show that this world's conventions are of no importance on higher planes, and the persons being crushed by the wrathful deities are either spirits hostile to Buddhism or primordial negative concepts such as ignorance, jealousy and anger. In Tantric Buddhism, numerous statues and paintings are also in the form of sexual union, which represents the union of compassion and wisdom that permits the attainment of sublime state of enlightenment.

Later in the day, we will visit the Punakha Dzong, the “Palace of Great Happiness” built in 1647 by Shabdrung Nawang Namgyel, the man who unified Bhutan. The Dzong lies between the Po Chu (male river) and the Mo Chu (female river), and is the winter home of the Central Monk Body. When the Shabdrung arrived in Punakha, he set up a camp at the confluence of the two rivers and that very night had a dream in which he heard the prophecy of Guru Rinpoche. He then built a Dzong on that spot and placed the Rangjung Kharsapani there, the most sacred relic that he brought with him from his monastery in Tibet.



A devastating flash flood in 1994 washed away a major part of the Dzong. His Majesty the King personally supervised the reconstruction of the Dzong, a project that has occupied thousands of skilled craftsmen and builders during the past twelve years. The results of the restoration are amazing. You will be seeing the most magnificent architectural and artistic masterpiece in the Kingdom, just consecrated in an elaborate ceremony in May of 2003.

Dec. 10th Phobjikha (altitude: 9,000 feet)

After breakfast, we'll drive to Phobjikha (approx. 3 hours) enjoying magnificent views of small villages, terraced fields, diverse forests of exotic Himalayan plants, trees and wildflowers. As we climb higher up and above the cloud the forest gets more beautiful with big 30-40 feet rhododendron trees, and massive hemlock and fir trees. Near the Phobjikha Valley, we'll see yaks in fields of dwarf bamboo.



The hidden valley of Phobjikha is located in the Black Mountains National Park. Cirled by pine and rhododendron covered mountains, this is one of the most beautiful valleys in Bhutan. The rare Black Neck Cranes migrate from Tibet to Bhutan and use the swampy center of this valley as their winter residence from mid-November to mid-March. Considered a symbol of peace, black-necked cranes have been revered by Bhutanese people for centuries. Upon arrival in the Valley, we'll visit the Crane Information Center, run by a non-government nature organization, to learn more about the cranes.

Dec. 11th (b,l,d) Phobjikha Black Neck Crane Valley (altitude: 9,000 feet)

We'll spend the morning hiking, walking and seeing these rare and endangered cranes in their natural habitat. Later in the day, we'll also visit Gantey Gompa, one of the most important private monasteries in the country. Perched atop the ridge overlooking the valley, the Gompa is directed by Gantey Tulku, the ninth reincarnation (a "tulku" is a reincarnate) of Pema Lingpa. According to the Buddhist tradition and as a mark of their devotion, the cranes circle the monastery three times on their arrival in November and before they fly back to Tibet in March. We may also have a chance to visit with some of the monks who reside in the monastery.



Dec 12th Return to Wangdi/Punakha

After a leisurely breakfast, we'll travel back to Wangdi/Punakha Valley. We may have an opportunity to visit the ruins of the Wangdi Dzong. Built by the nation's founder, Zhabdrung, in the 17th Century, it was one of the most sacred Dzongs. A devastating fire, suspected to have started from an electric short circuit, destroyed the Dzong in June 2012.

Bhutan had only just submitted Wangdi Dzong for World Heritage List consideration in March 2012. While mourning the loss of one of the architectural wonders of the nation, for the people of Bhutan it was painful reminder of the Buddha teaching of Impermanence. We'll spend the afternoon at the hotel at leisure.

Dec. 13th (b,l,d) Druk Wangyal Festival

On 13th December, the heavens descend on earth. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, gods and goddesses, deities and demons, all come together to entertain the people who gather at 10,000 feet Dochula pass. The festival showcases many unique folk and mask dances including the story of Milarepa, one of the most inspiring Buddhist Saints who achieved enlightenment within a lifetime.



The festival was inspired, guided and supported by Her Majesty the Queen Mother in commemoration of His Majesty the Fourth King and the Armed Forces for their bravery and selfless services in protecting the peace, security and sovereignty of our nation. Later in the day, we'll return to Thimphu, the capital city.

Dec. 14th (b,l,d) Thimphu Special Prayer Ceremony (altitude 7,700 feet)

After breakfast, we'll drive to Thimphu—the only capital city in the world with no traffic lights! This morning, we'll visit "Kuensel Phodrang" to see the world's largest Buddha statue. It is located on a beautiful hill overlooking the entire Thimphu valley. The hill is covered with magnificent Himalayan blue pine.



Then we'll attend a special prayer ceremony with a Buddhist Lama (teacher) and monks and/or nuns. The ceremony offers prayers and blessings to benefit all sentient beings. Sharing a simple lunch with the monks and/or nuns who perform the prayer ceremony, we then have a rare chance to receive a special blessing and a brief introductory teaching on Buddhism from the Lama or Chant Master.

You may join many elderly people making the Kora (pilgrimage circuit). We may also visit few interesting handicraft shops, where they sell masks, beautiful hand-woven textiles, carpets, jewelry, Bhutanese wooden products, and other gift items.

For the rest of the day, we explore Bhutan's exotic capital city—a fascinating combination of traditional and contemporary life. A number of options include: the Farmer's weekend market; the handmade paper factory along with some interesting handicraft shops, where they sell masks, beautiful hand-woven textiles, carpets and jewelry; a chance to see Bhutanese Archery Game – Bhutan's national sport and an integral part of all festivities; and the Takin Preserve for a chance to see the Takin, Bhutan's national animal. There are also some very nice short day hikes.

Dec. 15th (b,l,d) Thimphu

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This evening, **we will have a farewell dinner of home cooked traditional Bhutanese foods** together with a special cultural program of mask dances, folk songs and dances.

Dec. 16th (b,l,d) Thimphu/Paro

We'll have the morning free for independent sightseeing, packing, or shopping. After lunch, we'll return to Paro for our last two nights in Bhutan. Upon arrival in Paro, we will visit the 7th century Kichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest and most sacred Buddhist temples in Bhutan. It was built in 659 by King Songtsen Gampo of Tibet. It holds down the left foot of an ogress so huge that she covers Bhutan and most of eastern Tibet.

Dec. 17th (b,l,d) Paro - Taktsang (Tiger's Nest Hike)

After breakfast, we'll hike to the magical monastery known as Taktsang (the "Tiger's Nest"). Taktsang is one of the most sacred pilgrimage sites in the Himalayan World. The monastery itself is perched on a granite cliff that drops 2,000 feet to the valley floor. The name is derived from a legend that Guru Rinpoche flew across the mountains to this spot on the back of a tigress, reaching a cave in which he meditated for three months, converting the people of Paro Valley to Buddhism during his stay.



The path starts with a gradual climb through a forest of oak and rhododendron. After crossing a small stream with two enchanting water-powered prayer wheels, the climb gets steeper arriving at a small chorten surrounded by prayer flags near a teahouse and a spectacular view

of Taktsang. That will be our lunch stop. Those who choose can hike further, all the way up, to visit the great temples and others can return after lunch at the teahouse.

Dec 18th Paro - Bangkok

Back to the airport to depart from the Land of the Thunder Dragon and return to Bangkok. Today we leave our hosts and make our way back to the airport and get ready for our flights home. We say our last goodbyes, hugs and kisses as we prepare to take our new dream of heaven back to our lives.

Dec 19th (-) Bangkok to Home

You will cross the dateline again, filled with the magic of Bhutan in your heart.

****Please note we need approximately two-to-three days to fly to Bhutan and one-to-two days to fly home. Make sure you account for these days in your scheduling of this journey.****

How to get to Bhutan:

If you take a flight leaving the USA on Weds December 5th from Los Angeles (for example) to Bangkok leaving at noon, you will arrive in Bangkok on December 6th at 11:00pm (having crossed the International Date Line). You will then overnight in Bangkok and together we will catch the Druk Airlines flight to Paro, Bhutan at ~5:50am landing in Bhutan at 9:10am the morning of the 7th when our journey begins.

Flying home you will catch Druk airlines flight on December 18th leaving Paro at ~10:00am arriving in Bangkok at 5:00pm. You will overnight in Bangkok and catch the international flight in the morning of December 19th to Los Angeles arriving in the USA in the morning on December 19th (you get your day back here). **It's no problem coming from another country** – simply make sure you are in Bangkok the night of December 6th so you can meet the group at the Novatel.

These flights are currently pricing from the USA from \$1395.00 (with 1-2 stops) – \$1800.00 (for a non-stop flight). Some of you may not be taking this set of flights due your location or that you are using frequent flyer mileage (this is a great trip to use mileage on!). You will be responsible for letting us know your information so we can make sure you make the flight to Bhutan.

Also you may need to plan to pay for two overnights at our hotel in Bangkok. We did not include that in the trip price because not all folks will be needing an overnight in Bangkok

depending on where they are coming from. Some airlines you can use are Delta, EVA, China Air, Qatar Air, China Eastern, Air Japan, Cathay Pacific, and Korean Air.

Feel free to make your own flights, but please confirm them with us before booking! If you need help – no worries, Ales Struna is our travel guru – feel free to ring him at: 604-204-0444, 866-866-5566 or [email him](#) and it will be his pleasure to assist you!

Regarding Hiking:

There is quite a bit of walking/hiking on this trip – but it is not for the exercise or speed, as much as for the spiritual experience and challenge of what we can and cannot do. Level 3-5 activity rating (out of 5) due to elevation and the hike to Tiger's Nest temple.

Keep in Mind:

Travel to Bhutan requires patience and an open mind to cultural differences. Pack your curiosity and enthusiasm, and travel with an open mind. You will be richly rewarded. Bhutan is a place for adventure, Tantric Buddhist culture and unique way of life, with incredibly beautiful mountain landscape in the Himalayas. You will eat well. We provide superb meals even in the most remote areas. Our selected hotels and restaurants offer delicious Chinese, Continental, Bhutanese and Indian Cuisine buffet style with mostly vegetarian meals.

The actual schedule of spiritual teachings and what we will be doing day to day is not published so we can be in the moment. Every day will be a magical experience for all of us, so keep your heart and mind open to the experience life brings us. Due to the remote areas we are traveling to, weather, bad roads and other unseen obstacles may cause us to make changes in our itinerary.

On this journey our intent is to create sacred space where we can learn and share in group for the purpose of deepening our spiritual connections and practice. The power of our teachings (please make sure you align with the group leader's philosophy) and ceremonies comes from our combined energy and if group process does not interest you, then this trip would not be your best choice.

Please note: This itinerary is subject to change!

For more information come on over to the website:

<http://www.sherirosenthal.com/spiritual-journey-to-bhutan>