

## Trip Review



# Bhutan Temple Festivals

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I traveled with ten JOURNEYS travelers on our Temple Festivals of Bhutan trip. This non-trekking, culturally oriented program took us to Paro, Thimphu, Trongsa, Bumthang and Punakha areas of the country and included two major Tsechus (festivals) at Thimphu and Jakar.

Visiting Bhutan is not an easy thing to do. As a Himalayan kingdom with a very clearly defined development policy few things happen haphazardly and admission of foreigners is clearly in that category. While welcoming and friendly, Bhutan wants to keep careful track of all visitors and make sure their visits specifically provide the country with economic benefits. We submitted visa applications with paid trip deposits, which allowed us to confirm our air reservations and be admitted to the country on arrival. Plans for our trip started more than a year previous. We have worked with Karchung of Lhomen Tours for many years to provide treks and cultural visits for our clients. This trip was planned specifically to include two major temple festivals as cornerstone events. Temple festival dates are determined by astrologers who consult a variety of sources in choosing dates.

Our arrival was relatively uneventful. Our names were on the list. Clearing customs and claiming our luggage was quite simple. Soon we were situated in the noble dzong-like Druk Hotel overlooking the terraces of golden, ripening rice of the Paro Valley. While we caution people not to expect luxury in Bhutan, most of the time you will have reliable electricity, hot water, tidy rooms and clean linens. Here and there you might even catch a glimpse of satellite TV newly legalized in Bhutan. There is never a shortage of water in Bhutan.



All meals are included in our Bhutan trips and most are served buffet style with unlimited portions. Bhutanese like their own food richly enhanced with potent green and red-hot chilies. You will learn to go easy on the occasional keema datsi offering even though it is toned down to Western tastes. There was always an option of local beer with a meal.



As the group coordinator I was pleased that every member of the group willingly or unwillingly managed to arrive in time for early starts. In Bhutan the driving distances can be long. The earlier you start each day the more time you have for stops enroute or time to explore on arrival. While we always hoped for clear weather, typically the sky was partly cloudy in the mornings and a rain shower teased us some time later in the day.

Bhutan receives a monsoon dose of moisture from July through early September, but unless you are trekking, the rain any time of year is unlikely to disrupt your experience. In fact, the low clouds forming and disappearing like great wet ghosts in the steep forested valleys created an extraordinarily interesting and changing landscape. We visited two great tsechu's or temple festivals. The first, in Thimphu, is one of the largest in the country and easily the most important social and religious events of the year for the people who

reside in the capital city. These tsechus are dress up events. Bhutanese, by law must wear their national dress in public, but at the temple festivals the "go", a long loose robe gathered and tied to about knee length and bunched at the waist is tied with a colorful sash. Tourists are asked not to wear shorts or t-shirts.

The festivals are a truly amazing pageant of devotion, drama, dance, story telling and ritual gathering. The Thimphu Tsechu took place in the vast courtyard of the largest "dzong" or fortress-temple in the country. The festivals last several days and many local people attend every day for the 7-8 hour duration of the event. There are, however, highlights involving more drama, movement or articulated rhythms and your guide is a key to helping you arrive, depart and return at the tactical best times. Our guide, Sangay, had a real knack for timing and seemed to deliver us to and from these events at the most opportune times.

There is no special seating and you may be watching in hot sun, light rain or thronging crowds. The Bhutanese seemed infinitely poised, patient and relaxed sitting cross-legged. Bring drinking water and sun crème. You may want a strong flash and telephoto lens for your camera. Video cameras are especially appropriate. There was no extra charge for admission or photography. It was a great place to watch people. There were thousands, all of them dressed in their best clothes. The setting of the towering stone dzong with the high lamas and abbot looking out of wood lattice windows at the events below seemed to sanctify the events. The lama dancers were extraordinarily skilled as they whirled and leaped dressed in billowing gold and red costumes and wearing huge, ferocious masks. They were barefoot performing on an irregular stone slab surfaced courtyard, yet I never saw a performer slip or fall. I was told they practice for many hours of many days for their long dances. They apparently are fully within a meditative trance for the performance. There were also clowns teasing the crowd and the performers. Drums and trumpets echoed loudly in the high-stone walled compound. A small cadre of uniformed police seemed to find it easy to keep order. There were hundreds of little children and almost no crying. Each of the three days we went back to the Thimphu Tsechu was well worthwhile. We typically spent a few hours at the tsechu and they visited other sites of interest around Thimphu during the balance of the day.



After you arrive in Bhutan by air, everywhere else you travel requires walking or driving. The roads are narrow but traffic is light and drivers are courteous. We enjoyed leaving Thimphu in our small bus headed for central Bhutan. Just a short distance from Thimphu we were in virgin forest. I was constantly impressed how well Bhutan has protected her natural heritage and accessible pristine nature is to the largest city.

Illegal woodcutting does not occur! We were fortunate that the clouds and showers from the previous night cleared as we reached the Dochu La, a high pass on the road. Snowy Himalayas were painted across the horizon. The summits were distant, but the steep wild terrain between us and them added to the wilderness feeling of the setting. Strings of prayer flags crisscrossed the road at the pass.



There was a surprisingly well-stocked and reasonably priced little restaurant and tourist shop at the top of the pass. On our return trip this provided a popular spot for acquiring remembrances of the trip.

Our next stop was Trongsa with several stops for views and photos along the way. At one point we asked our driver to leave us out on the road and we walked a couple of kilometers through the forest. Traffic was very light. The Trongsa Dzong is like a fairy tale castle perched on a cliff high above the Mangde Chu, a whitewater river. For some of our group, the simple Sherubling Tourist Lodge in Trongsa provided a favorite night of the trip. We sampled locally brewed Red Panda Beer and enjoyed an especially delicious buffet dinner.

We visited the watch tower above the dzong and later the dzong itself marveling at how amazingly little had changed in the 450 years or so that the area has been settled. There is an enduring order here burnished with the patina of almost half a millennium. This is the center of Bhutan geographically, culturally and historically and we felt a special sense of being in a sacred place.

The next day we headed for Bumthang Valley farther west in Central Bhutan. Once again we climbed through virgin forest, over Yotong La (3425m) and eventually into the broad Choskhor Valley. The appearance of flat fields and gently rolling terrain was a surprise. This area has also been settled for a long time and the many massive farmhouses and densely clustered settlement was quite impressive. We reached Jakar and found our lodging at a newly built guesthouse, our home for three nights. There was much to do in this area. The most impressive experience was attending the first unveiling of a giant Thankha or religious embroidery at the relatively new Lhodra Karchung Monastery above the city. The huge Thankha was about 50 ft high and 40 ft wide. It was exquisitely sewn and embroidered. The unveiling ceremony includes much music, chanting, offering and ceremonial activity involving scores of monks in golden and orange robes. There were a few other tourists, but clearly this was a local event of the highest order and everyone in attendance was clearly in awe at this initiation event.



We also visited another tsechu at Tangbi Monastery. We had the sense that this entire valley had been consecrated by the residence of such luminary Buddhist masters as Pema Lingpa, Guru Rimpoche, and Thanglang Gyalpo. Locals love to tell the stories and legends of the miracles these saints performed. The monasteries still contain original artifacts, paintings and structures dating to the era of colorful, highly metaphysical events that peaked about 500 years ago. The tsechu at Tangbi was more folksy and informal, but no less serious. There was a feeling of a medieval fare with gambling, archery, impromptu food and beverage stalls and lots of kids, dogs and pigeons paying no attention to the ceremonial sanctity of the dancing and chanting.



We arrived just as the event was starting. Two bonfires in very close proximity were lit and soon produced twin conflagrations of flame, smoke and heat. The local people rushed between the fires as an act of purification. It seemed a bit frightening and dangerous as so many people sought the purification of the most intense flames and thickest smoke. A line of lamas played drums and horns and costumed dancers enhanced the ritual of smoke and fire. A couple of our group members even plunged through the hellish gateway and lived to smile about it.



While in Bumthang I really appreciated our guide Sangay. He was archetypically sincere, earnest and authoritative. Any request was met with satisfaction. Any question was capably and intelligently answered in perfect English. Sangay had a remarkable sense of timing that permitted us to arrive at exactly the right time to not wait long for things to start or linger after the best parts were over. I marveled at how many things we were able to include each day without rushing and without feeling exhausted.



We never missed a meal or an itinerary element, but still had time to add spontaneous and impromptu elements to the trip and to invite local visitors to our meals. Of course, part of the credit had to go to the group itself which respected the need to accept the guide's suggestions for start times and time allocation, but after the first two days, it was clear Sangay knew exactly what it would take to make a perfect trip.

We also visited the towering Jakar Dzong, the Swiss cheese/cider/beer/honey factory, a school and Membarsto Gorge where Pema Lingpa jumped into a cold, deep, dark lake with a torch, recovered a fabled treasure and surfaced from his dive with his torch still burning. All in a day's work for a great Bhutanese Terton or sacred treasure finder. Somehow, in Bhutan everyone remained enthusiastic even as the monasteries and temples kept coming. Sangay's insight and the uniqueness of each site always inspired us. The Punakha Dzong was a zinger! Built at the confluence of two rivers, it is

probably the most grandiose of all monasteries. Severely damaged in a flood in 1994, it is now being reconstructed. Observing the actual construction of enormous Buddhist images, seeing the wood carvers and ritual painters added dimension of contemporary vitality to our appreciation of the country's enduring spiritual heritage. Realizing that Bhutan is a materially poor country and also appreciating the cost of rebuilding the great Punakha monastery on such a scale really helped me put the role of religion in Bhutanese society in a context.

While culture, dzong architecture, festivals, legends and storytelling were continuing themes of the trip, we spent time observing nature and discussing ecology and natural resources as well. In Punakha we spent some time birding along the river and quickly found the White-bellied Heron, Ibisbill, River Lapwing, White-throated Kingfisher, Eurasian Kestrel, and common sandpiper. Actually, spring is a better time for birding, but the large extent of natural habitat means there are always birds and other wildlife around. One of the most spectacular birds, the large, colorful Red-billed Blue Magpie was especially numerous. It was a bit too early in the year to see the Black-necked Cranes, which migrate from northern Asia to winter in a few particular valleys of Bhutan. We did not see Bhutan's most mysterious animal, the Takin, in the wild, but we paid a visit to a large forested compound in Thimphu where a herd is held captive. I concluded my stay in Bhutan reflecting on surprising experiences.



First, I felt a real sense of living and exploring in a society that has values very different from our own. Bhutan openly states its political goals as "maximizing gross national happiness." Rather than being pre-occupied with merely raising income or spending on large development projects, Bhutan has taken a measured and cautious approach to preserving the well being that already exists and incrementally offering people assistance toward a higher quality of life. Such things are architectural controls, strict enforcement of forest protection laws, investment in primary and secondary education and a careful review of national development priorities all seem to create a social and cultural stability.

Second, I was very impressed that we could go back in time in the sense that ancient traditions carry a direct and vivid lineage to the present. We were guests of a lama who was a direct descendent of one of the famous Tertons of the 16th Century. His household has changed very little over the years. The sense of a link with primal things is reinforced by the vast extent of virgin forests. One can easily imagine looking across numerous landscapes of Bhutan and believing the view might have been exactly the same when the earliest settlers came to this land from Tibet many centuries ago.



Third, I enjoyed the gentle hospitality of the Bhutanese. Life is surely as much a struggle for Bhutanese as for anyone, but the people we met were not preoccupied with goals or failures. The importance of life seems expressed by one's conduct in the present. We talked of plans and the past, but somehow the past easily disappears in myths and the future is in the sacred custody of the future Buddha and powers beyond control. What matters is the continuing now and the respectful, attentive observance of the tasks of the moment is the definition of sincerity. Finally, I spent my last hours in Bhutan reflecting on the privilege of being in a place like this. I wanted to return before I left. I sensed the world waiting at the next touch down point of my Druk flight and before it flooded in on me, I wanted to savor this sense of a timeless place, friendly people and pure natural environment.

