

BIG FIVE[®]

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

Destination Information Guide

Bhutan



The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip.

1551 SE PALM COURT, STUART, FL 34994
772 287 7995 / FAX: 772 287 5990 / 800 BIG FIVE (800 244 3483)
WWW.BIGFIVE.COM & WWW.GALAPAGOS.COM EMAIL: INFO@BIGFIVE.COM

[View Bhutan Tours](#)

Welcome to the World of Big Five!

Big Five Tours & Expeditions is pleased to welcome you on this exciting adventure. We take great care to insure that your travel dreams and expectations are well met. Our distinctive journeys allow you to experience the finest aspects each destination has to offer. We also aim to provide you with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the places you'll visit and the people you'll meet.



Thimphu, Bhutan Elevation: 7544 feet Latitude: 27 32N Longitude: 089 43E

Average Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	56.5	40.7	45.5	50.3	56.4	64	67.6	61.1	68.7	66.3	61.1	52.6	44.1

Average High Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Years on Record:	
°F	66.7	54.1	57.9	61.5	68	72.5	75.9	66	77	73.6	71.4	64.2	58.1	

Average Low Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Years on Record:	
°F	46.4	27.3	33.1	39	44.8	55.6	59.4	56.1	60.4	59	50.7	41	30	

Paro, Bhutan

Latitude: 27 23N Longitude: 089 31E

Average Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Years on Record:	
°F	54.3	35.2	45.4	45.6	52	62.7	67.6	69.5	68	63.6	55.5	45.8	40.6	

Average High Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Years on Record:	
°F	65.5	48.9	56.1	58.1	63.7	74.3	77.7	80.2	77.5	74.1	65.7	57	52.2	

Average Low Temperature

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Years on Record:	
°F	43.1	21.6	34.7	33.1	40.3	51.1	57.4	58.8	58.5	53.1	45.3	34.5	28.9	

[View Bhutan Tours](#)

WEATHER

Bhutan's climate varies widely from the tropical southern border areas to the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas. At the same latitude as Miami and Cairo, its climate depends largely on elevation. It bears the brunt of the monsoon, receiving more rainfall than other Himalayan regions, sometimes up to 18 feet per year.

Monsoon season: between June and August with temperature normally between 8-12 degrees 46-70 F. Temperatures drop dramatically with increases in altitude. Days: 50 F, with clear skies and sunshine. Nights: cold and require heavy wool clothing, particularly in winter. If you go in winter, be prepared *because most hotels do not have central heating.*

Generally October, November and April to mid-June are the best times to visit as rainfall is at a minimum and temperatures are conducive to active days of sightseeing. The foothills are also pleasant during winter.

TIME ZONE

Time Zone: GMT + 6 (11 hours ahead of Eastern Standard.)

PASSPORT/ VISA REQUIREMENTS

Passports: For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least two blank pages is necessary.

Visas: Your visa for Bhutan will be issued when you arrive. The visa cost is currently \$20US payable in cash only. Fees are subject to change without notice.

Important: Please look at your passport before you travel to insure that:

- Your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.
- Bring two passport size photos in order to process your Bhutan visa upon arrival.

Please note: Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

Once you have gone through Customs and Immigration and collected your luggage, you exit the airport. Our representative will meet you and will transfer you to your hotel. We recommend changing money at airports, hotels or local banks.

Departure Tax: Currently NU300, about \$13US. Fees are subject to change without notice.

CUSTOMS INTO BHUTAN

Duty Free: The following goods may be taken into Bhutan by travelers aged 17 years or older without incurring customs duty: 400 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 150g of tobacco; 2 liters of alcohol; 250 ml of perfume.

Prohibited items: firearms, narcotics, plants, gold and silver bullion and obsolete currency. Export of antiques, religious objects, manuscripts, images and anthropological materials is strictly prohibited and closely monitored by the Bhutanese authorities.

Note: Cameras, video cameras, cellular phones, and all other electronic equipment for personal use must be registered with the authorities on arrival and will be checked by customs on departure.

U.S. CUSTOMS

Your personal exemption is \$800. There are also limits on the amount of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products you may include in your duty-free personal exemption.

For more information, you can either contact the U.S. Customs Service at PO Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044, or visit the Customs & Border Protection website at www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml.

HEALTH

Currently, no official health certificates are required of travelers coming from U.S. and Canada. International travelers should be in generally good health. Talk with your personal physician about any shots or boosters recommended depending on your personal

health profile and your itinerary. Tetanus and polio vaccines should be up to date.

Yellow Fever: Yellow fever inoculation may be required if one of the following applies:

- If you are coming from any area other than the United States, Europe, or Canada.
- If you are visiting more than one country; coming from or passing through an infected area.

Protection against malaria, typhoid, tetanus, hepatitis A and B is strongly recommended. Wash hands often with soap and water. Don't handle any animals (especially monkeys, dogs, and cats). Swimming in salt water is usually safer than fresh water.

Altitude sickness: In places of altitudes above 8,000 feet, you have to be aware of altitude sickness, which can cause shortness of breath, racing pulse, headache, loss of appetite, extreme fatigue and nausea.

Visitors should take time to acclimatize and avoid doing too much strenuous exercise on the first day. Most symptoms develop the first day at high altitude, though, occasionally, travelers have delayed reactions. The best advice is to rest on your first day in the highlands. Drink plenty of liquids, avoid alcohol and heavy foods. Talk to your physician about your risks and possible remedies.

Please Note: If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Prescription medicines should always be carried in their original containers in your carry-on luggage. Likewise, if you wear prescription glasses or contact lenses, it is advisable to bring an extra pair and cleaning fluid.

Health insurance is strongly advised during any foreign travel. Please check the latest regulations with your local health office or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299), or their main

telephone number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. Or, visit the CDC Internet home page at <http://www.cdc.gov>.

CLOTHING

*For general clothing information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials. See pre-departure information for general packing check list.*

Bhutan's climate varies widely from the tropical southern border areas to the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas so clothing choices are based on itinerary. In the foothills, you need lightweight cottons, linens and waterproof gear. Light sweaters and jackets for the evenings should be enough. The upland areas require heavier items for evenings, particularly during the winter months. Of course, in the mountains in winter, you need substantially warmer clothing.

Laundry: Laundry can be done at the major hotels for additional fees. There are no laundry facilities in remote areas.

LUGGAGE

*For general baggage information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials.*

MONEY

1 Ngultrum (NU) = 100 chetrum (Ch). The Ngultrum is pegged to the Indian Rupee (also accepted as legal tender). Notes are in denominations of NU500, 100, 50, 20, 10, 5, 2, and 1. Coins are in denominations on NU1, and 100, 50, 25, 10, and 5 chetrum. U.S.

U.S. dollars are widely accepted throughout the kingdom.

Currency Exchange: Leading foreign currencies are accepted but travelers checks are preferred, and receive a better exchange rate. Major hotels in Thimphu and Phuntsholing, and the Olathang Hotel in Paro, will also exchange foreign currency.

Credit / Debit Cards and ATM: Most cards have limited acceptability. American Express and Diners Club have very limited acceptability. Check with your credit or debit

card companies for merchants that accept these cards

Travelers check: These can be exchanged in any branch of the Bank of Bhutan or at all BTCL hotels. Travelers are advised to take traveler's checks in US dollars.

Currency Restrictions: None, but foreign currency must be declared on arrival.

LANGUAGE

Language: Dzongkha is the official language. Many dialects are spoken because of the physical isolation of many villages. Sharchop Kha, from eastern Bhutan, is the most widely spoken. Nepali is common in the south of the country. English has been the language of educational instruction since 1964 and is widely spoken.

ELECTRICITY

Bhutan current is 220 volts AC, 50 Hz.

FOOD & DRINK

Food and waterborne diseases are the number one cause of illness in travelers. Travelers' diarrhea can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or parasites, which are found throughout the region and can contaminate food or water.

Do not drink tap water at all. Drink only purified bottle water. Bottled water is readily available, and some hotels provide it complimentary. Carry a bottle with you throughout the day. Always drink bottled mineral water and soft drinks (diet soft drinks are not always available). Use bottled water to brush teeth and clean contacts. Do not use ice. Don't purchase food from street vendors.

Stay away from dairy products unless you know they have been pasteurized. Avoid any raw foods, except in recommended restaurants and hotels, where you may do so if you wish. Always choose cooked food.

Sudden dietary changes, especially on the first day or two, may result in digestive problems, often leading to headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Please be careful.

Local Specialties: Restaurants are relatively scarce and most tourists eat in their hotels. Meals are often buffet-style and mostly vegetarian. Cheese is a very popular ingredient in dishes and the most popular

cheeses are dartsi (cow's milk cheese), sometimes served in a dish with red chilies, and yak cheese. Rice is ubiquitous, sometimes flavored with saffron. The most popular drink is souza (Bhutanese tea).

If you wish, your guide can arrange dinner at a local restaurant but beware: traditional Bhutanese food always features chilies and the ema datse made with large, green hot chilies in a cheese sauce. Though there is plenty of white rice, Bhutanese prefer a local, slightly nutty, red variety. At high altitudes, wheat is the staple. Several Tibetan-style dishes are common, including momos (dumplings) and thukpa (noodles). Pork fat is popular in the wilds because of its high energy content - visitors find it almost inedible because it's usually stale. Bhutan has no slaughterhouses and only a few cold storage facilities. Even the keenest carnivores should consider going veggie for their stay.

TIPPING

Tipping isn't widely practiced. Some staff may act embarrassed, but they will appreciate the gesture. Tipping is solely at your discretion, of course. Your professional, licensed guide and driver, work very hard to ensure that you receive the best BIG FIVE service, tour quality, and satisfaction. If you wish to reward them for their work, we suggest the following:

- \$5-\$10 per person per day for services rendered by any licensed guide/ naturalist.
- \$2-\$4 per person per day for services rendered by driver.
- \$6 -\$8 per person, per day for trekking guides.

SHOPPING

Markets are held regularly, generally on Saturday and Sunday, and are a rich source of local clothing and jewelry. The handicraft emporium on the main street in the capital is open daily except Sunday, and offers a magnificent assortment of hand-woven and handcrafted goods. The Motithang Hotel in Thimphu has a souvenir shop. Silversmiths and goldsmiths in the Thimphu Valley are able to make handcrafted articles to order. Shop Hours: Mon & Weds– Sun 9am–8pm (closed on Tues).

Arts and crafts: All Bhutanese art, dance, drama and music have roots in Buddhism and have a purpose as opposed to contemporary art, which is symbolic and impersonal at times. Arts, ceremonies and festivals of Bhutan are still practiced and performed because they continue to have religious and spiritual and cultural significance. Inspired by a close relationship with nature and its gods, and by their country's extraordinary scenery, Bhutanese craftsmen have preserved the ancient skills of their ancestors through work in bronze, iron, silver, clay, and wood.

The Bhutanese consider commissioning paintings or sculptures to be pious. Next to its spectacular architecture, Bhutan painting is the most visible manifestation of Bhutanese art. It is defined in three forms: thangkhas, wall paintings, and statues. The country's classical dance is lama, which symbolizes destruction of evil spirits. The most important festival dances, celebrate the faith, legends, myths and history of the kingdom.

Among Bhutan's hidden treasures is a magical mosaic of rich, vibrant hues and patterns, in myriad weaves that represent the Dragon Kingdom.

SMOKING

We suggest that passengers refrain from smoking in public areas, sightseeing vehicles, and when aboard any cruise vessel while in the cabins, the dining area, or community areas. There are designated areas for smoking on cruise vessels. Please dispose of cigarette butts in the appropriate receptacles / ashtrays. Do not throw cigarette butts on the ground or overboard.

OVERVIEW OF BHUTAN

Bhutan, located in the eastern Himalayas, borders China to the north and India to the south, east and west. The altitude varies from 300m (1000 ft.) in the narrow lowland region to 7000m (22, 000 ft.) in the Himalayan plateau in the north. The foothills are tropical and home to deer, lions, leopards, and the rare golden monkey. The Inner Himalaya region is temperate; wildlife includes bear, boar and sambar. The area is rich in deciduous forests. Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, lies at a height of over 2400m (8000 ft.) in a fertile

valley. It resembles a large, widely dispersed village rather than a capital.

Bhutan's ecosystem, virtually intact because of centuries of isolation, has quite a variety of habitats and an array of animal and plant species. Under Bhutanese law, 60% of the kingdom will remain forested for all time. 72% of the country is covered in forest with more than 5500 species, including over 300 medicinal strains. There are 165 species of mammals and 770 species of birds have been recorded, including the rare and endangered black-necked crane. Over a quarter of the kingdom is in protected areas. A progressive conservation and development program has been established. National parks sustain important ecosystems and have not been developed as tourist attractions. In many cases you won't even be aware that you are entering or leaving a protected area.

Bhutanese dress: The national dress of Bhutan is distinctive and visible aspects of Dragon Kingdom's unique character are evident. Men wear Gho, a long robe similar to Tibetan Chhuba while women wear an ankle-length robe called a Kira. The Bhutanese textile is made from fine, hand-woven fabric, with the colorful distinctive patterns. Formal occasions, men wear a scarf called Kabney which indicates a person's rank. It is an important part of Bhutanese etiquette. In the same manner, women wear rachu over their left shoulder for formal occasions.

Festivals: Throughout the year, annual festivals known as "Tsechus" take place. These are festivals extolling the great deeds of Guru Padsambhava also known as Guru Rinpoche. Festivals are celebrated for several days, the occasion for dances of a religious context. Dancers in brilliant silk costumes act out legendary events, using horns, drums, and cymbals as they whirl and leap against a background of sky and mountains. Certain festivals end with the worship of a huge religious object and festival-goers believe that simply by viewing this thankha, they can be delivered from the cycle of reincarnation which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. For the Bhutanese people, religious festivals offer

an opportunity to become immersed in the meaning of their religion and gain much merit. They are also a social occasion for seeing people and being seen. People dress in their finest clothes and jewelry.

VISITING HOLY SITES

Please be aware that your shoes will have to be removed if you enter the sanctorum when visiting a temple, even it seems in ruins.

Visiting religious monuments, temples or monasteries requires respect. In some places, cloth overshoes may be provided for a small charge. All religions ask that you do not smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or speak in raised voices on the premises. Some structures are off-limits to those who do not practice the faith. Women should always be dressed properly (no bare shoulders, no shorts, no midriff exposure) and should cover their heads before entering a temple or monastery. If you have the opportunity to meet a rimpoche (head lama), or a respected monk, please do not turn your back on him when you leave. This is very impolite. Also remove your hat and lower an umbrella within the confines of a monastery.

Monasteries and temples: Monasteries and temples here are often found in valleys or jutting out of a cliff. Over the centuries, their construction has been overseen by saints or lamas. Like their Tibetan counterparts, the temples are called lha-khang, “home to the gods” and the monasteries gom-pa, “solitary place.” A temple will house only a few monks who maintain and clean it, but monasteries can house a community of more than 100 monks. Monasteries are primarily places of study. Teaching and training novices forms an important part of their work.

Around any religious building is a profusion of prayer flags, chortens and mani walls. So that monks and pilgrims can walk around the building and turn the prayer wheels that are fixed in the walls, there is usually a small paved pathway around the perimeter. **Many unthinking tourists commit an unforgivable**

sacrilege when they visit a Buddhist monastery. *When you spin a prayer wheel, you **MUST** follow this rule: as you circumambulate the interior and exterior of a stupa, mani wall or monastery, you must move in a **clockwise direction**.* Inside a monastery, interior cushions and chairs are reserved for lamas (monks). Sit on the steps outside or on the floor.

Holy places are built from stone or rammed mud, with half-timbering and shingle roofs. Inside they are very different from domestic houses. They are richly decorated with vividly colored designs and symbols. The walls are painted with images of Buddhist divinities and of saints and lamas who helped spread the doctrine of the Enlightened One. Inside the monasteries, chapels may be lhakhangs, which are dedicated to the protective spirits, often portrayed in their most fearsome and angry forms. These esoteric images often surprise visitors because of their violent nature. They represent the defenders of religion and destroyers of enemies throughout the world. But it is believed that these enemies live inside men's hearts. Desire, anger and ignorance, symbolized by the snake and pig, are considered the worst enemies.

TREKKING AND RAFTING

Rugged mountains, enchanting valleys, meandering rivers, crystal lakes, dense forests and the virginity of nature make Bhutan a trekking paradise; however, there is no equipment available in Bhutan, nowhere to rent a sleeping bag, so you'll need to bring your own. Though rafting in Bhutan is in its infancy, those who have checked out the rivers conclude that the potential for some of the best rafting on earth can be found here. There are several companies offering river programs on rivers ranging from class 3 to 5. The outstanding companies are Mo Chhu, upstream of Punakha in eastern Bhutan, and the Ema Datse Canyon on the Mangde Chhu in central Bhutan.

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc.. Longitude Books at <http://www.longitudebooks.com> has an extensive collection of books, searchable by country.

BHUTAN: LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

by John Berthold, H. E. Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho (Foreword by)

In Bhutan, progress is measured in terms of “Gross National Happiness” and Thimphu, the capital city, has no traffic lights. This mesmerizing book captures the beauties of this remote kingdom, the only independent country to support Buddhism as the official state religion. Readers are transported to ancient fortresses and temples, colorful festivals, and religious ceremonies, as well as to isolated communities along the roof of the world. Featuring photographs taken over the course of three years, the book guides readers through areas normally off-limits to Western visitors.

A PAINTER'S YEAR IN THE FORESTS OF BHUTAN

by A. K. Hellum

A Painter's year in the forests of Bhutan records one man's journey into the little-known culture of Bhutan. Gorgeously illustrated with paintings of more than 100 rarely seen Bhutanese plants, this sensitive volume captures the beauty of a largely untouched land and its people. When A.K. Hellum traveled to Bhutan to consult on a forest management project, he left a wiser man. His gently meandering narrative pauses to meditate on the mysteries of the ordinary as revealed in the natural world. Dr. Hellum gives us words and images to enjoy again and again. A Painter's Year in the Forests of Bhutan is a lyrical feast for the imagination.

BEYOND THE SKY AND THE EARTH: A JOURNEY INTO BHUTAN

by Jamie Zeppa

In the tradition of Iron and Silk and Touch the Dragon, Jamie Zeppa's memoir of her years in Bhutan is the story of a young woman's self-discovery in a foreign land. It is also the exciting debut of a new voice in travel writing. When she left for the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan in 1988, Zeppa was committing herself to two years of teaching and a daunting new experience. A week on a Caribbean beach had been her only previous trip outside Canada.

Bhutan was on the other side of the world, one of the most isolated countries in the world known as the last Shangri-La, where little had changed in centuries and visits by foreigners were restricted. Clinging to her bags full of chocolate, hair conditioner and Immodium, she began the biggest challenge of her life, with no idea she would fall in love with the country and with a Bhutanese man, end up spending nine years in Bhutan, and begin a literary career with her account of this transformative journey.

BHUTAN: HIMALAYAN MOUNTAIN KINGDOM

by Francoise Pommaret

On the rooftop of the world, shoe-horned into the Grand Himalayas, Bhutan—or Thunder Dragon—is a fiercely independent kingdom. Isolated, charming, peaceful and religious, the Bhutanese are a pragmatic, sensitive people who take from the West what will benefit their country and leave the rest. Only 4,000 tourists will visit the kingdom in any one year and they are strictly monitored by a government that cares deeply for its people, environment and heritage. The countryside is pristine, the lifestyle and culture have been preserved for centuries, and the love of life is abundant among the people. Few outsiders know Bhutan as intimately as Françoise Pommaret; her guidebook takes you on an incredible journey of discovery and adventure; her love of the people and the place shines through; her in-depth knowledge helps aid our understanding of why this unique land has long remained one of Asia's deepest mysteries and best-kept secrets.

BHUTAN: LAND OF SPIRITUALITY AND MODERNIZATION: ROLE OF WATER IN DAILY LIFE

by Dieter Zurcher, Kunzang Choden

Water is the medium through which the Bhutanese culture is explained, celebrated, and contextualized in this in-depth journey into the heart of Bhutan's central resource. Vibrant photographs display stunning native glacial and wetland ecosystems, ingenious wooden and chain bridges, traditional irrigation systems, and modern hydroelectric projects.