

BIG FIVE®

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

Destination Information Guide

Bhutan



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Welcome to the World of Big Five!

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

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

Years on Record:

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°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

Years on Record:

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°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

Years on Record:

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°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

Years on Record:

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°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

Years on Record:

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°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

WEATHER

The southern part of Bhutan is tropical, and in general the eastern region of the country is warmer than the central valleys. However, bear in mind that the higher the altitude, the cooler the weather, and that with a brisk wind blowing down off the mountains, even a low-lying valley can become quite chilly. The central valleys of Punakha, Mongar, Wangduephodrang, Trashigang and Lhuentse enjoy a semi-tropical climate with cool winters, while Paro, Thimphu, Trongsa and Bumthang have a much harsher climate, with summer monsoon rains and winter snowfalls, which may block passes leading into the central valleys for days at a time.

Winter in Bhutan (mid-November till mid-March) is dry and sunny for the most part with daytime temperatures of 16-18C (60-65F). The spring season (mid March to mid June) offers warmer temperatures gradually warming to 27-29C (80-84F). The monsoon usually arrives in mid-June, with light rain falling mainly in the afternoons and evenings. At the end of September, after the last of the big rains, autumn suddenly arrives and is a magnificent season for trekking until November. 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.

TIME ZONE

Time Zone: GMT + 6 (11 hours ahead of Eastern Standard.) There is only one time zone throughout the country.

PASSPORT/ VISA REQUIREMENTS

PASSPORTS: For International travel, U.S. and Canadian passports must be **valid for at least six months** from date of departure, containing at least 3 blank pages are necessary.

VISAS: Many countries require travelers to obtain visas prior to arrival. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Travisa to process required visas. You will find the necessary form from Travisa's website at:

www.travisa.com. Please use account code JP1551, and follow the directions.

Important: Even if you do not need a visa prior

to departure, please check your passport well in advance of departure to insure:

- 1) It is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa/entry stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

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

Note: Remember to carry with you in a safe place photocopies of all important documents in the event your passport or other documents are lost or stolen. Also, it's a good idea to have a passport photo with you. As a tourist, you will need to produce your passport when booking in at hotels, changing money or travelers' checks and prove your identity whenever requested by a policeman.

***AS OF SEPTEMBER 2011:** Effective September 1, 2011, the Bhutan Department of Immigration will accept **only valid passport copies (passport page with datasheet and picture)** to be granted entry. Passport-size photographs will not be accepted.

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: The amount is local Nu 800, collected in advance at the time tickets are issued. Tax is included on the tickets. No need to pay at the time of departure.

CUSTOMS INTO BHUTAN

Duty Free: The following goods may be taken into Bhutan by travelers aged 17 years or older without incurring customs duty: 200 cigarettes; 1 liters of alcohol; 250 ml of perfume. Smoking is prohibited in public places and cigarettes may not be bought or sold within the country. Visitors may bring in 200 cigarettes for their own use, on payment of import duty of 200%.

Note: Cameras, videos, mobile telephones and all other electronic equipment for personal use must be registered with the authorities on arrival and will be checked by customs on departure. Import of plants/soil is subject to quarantine.

All tobacco will be subject to a 200% custom tax on arrival.

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.

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

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. Currently, no official health certificates are required of travelers coming from U.S. and Canada. However it is advisable to have tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis A shots.

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.

Precautions: Avoid drinking un-boiled water or ice cubes, amoebae and giardia are quite common. People prone to car sickness should bring appropriate medicine as the winding roads on the mountains have plenty of curves and turns. Anti-malarial medication is also

recommended for all travelers who will be visiting rural areas of districts bordering India.

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, 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 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 number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. Or, visit the CDC Internet home page at 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. It's advisable to dress in layers. For protection against cold, layered clothing is better than one or two thick garments. Clothing should preferably be made from natural materials, which allow the body to breathe. 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.

NOTE: Please keep in mind the culture you are visiting. Bhutanese are offended by skimpy, tight-fitting clothes, and shorts. Women are advised to wear below the knee skirts or fairly loose trousers. Do not wear sleeveless T shirts (single, vests) as outer garments. Dress modestly and respectfully for visits to monasteries, dzongs and other religious institutions. Hats and caps are to be removed before entering the premises. Shoes should suite your itinerary. Light comfortable street shoes for sightseeing and hiking boots for serious treks. **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. Tourists are advised to carry their money in the form of travelers checks (preferably American Express) with some cash (US dollars would be best), which might be used for incidental purchases/expenses. Visa and American Express credit cards are accepted in some places. There are bank branches in all major towns.

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.

COMMUNICATION

Language: Dzongkha is the official language. Many dialects are spoken because of the physical isolation of many villages. Dzongkha, "the language of the dzong," belongs to the Tibetan linguistic family. Originally spoken only in western Bhutan, Dzongkha is now Bhutan's national language. 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 in the main towns.

Internet cafes are more widespread in western part of Bhutan and IDD calling booths can be found even in the remote far east of the country. IDD calls may be made and received at most accommodations. At least in Thimphu, hotel internet access is available. Our guides carry satellite phones on the Laya and Lunana treks, where groups are away from regular means of communication for extended periods.

ELECTRICITY

220/240 volts, with round hole two-pin and three-pin power outlets. In Thimphu, electrical appliance shops stock adapter plugs, but they are unlikely to be available elsewhere.

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. Always choose cooked food. Sudden dietary changes, especially on the first day or two, may result in digestive problems. Please be careful. **Local Specialties:** Bhutanese delicacies are rich with spicy chilies and cheese. Restaurants are relatively scarce and most tourists eat in their hotels. Hotels and lodges offer Chinese,

continental, Bhutanese and Indian cuisine. Meals are often buffet-style and mostly vegetarian. Rice is ubiquitous, sometimes flavored with saffron. 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. For trekking groups, trained cooks make every effort to accommodate individual dietary preferences. Please give us advance notice about any special dietary requirements so that we can make arrangements.

TIPPING

Tipping should be done at your discretion and as a reward for good or exceptional service.

For general tipping guidelines please refer to: www.cntraveler.com/travel-tips/travel-etiquette/2008/12/Etiquette-101-Tipping-Guide

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. All Bhutanese art, dance, drama and music have roots in Buddhism and have a purpose as opposed to contemporary art. 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. The buying and selling of antiques is strictly forbidden. **Shop Hours:** Mon & Weds– Sun 9am–8pm (closed on Tues).

Photography in Bhutan: The natural scenery is extraordinary as well as the local people, their houses and shops. *Always* ask permission before photographing anyone. Also, note that photography in shrine rooms of dzongs, monasteries and religious institutions is generally not permitted. Outdoor photography is usually permitted, but when visiting such places, please check with your guide before taking photographs.

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.

A NOTE ABOUT ACCOMMODATIONS IN BHUTAN:

It is important to note that we reserve the 'best available' in every area, however, most hotels in Bhutan are 2-3 star and likely not be up to western standards. A few luxury 5-star resorts are available at Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Gangtey, Bumthang. Standard accommodations all offer the necessary facilities. Generally, hotels in western Bhutan are better appointed, while accommodation establishments in the central and eastern part of the country are more modest, with few amenities. Away from towns and villages, there are purpose-built cabins on some of the main trekking routes.

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.

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 *thangka*, 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 occasions.

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 tourists unintentionally commit an unforgivable sacrilege when they visit a Buddhist monastery.** *When you spin a prayer wheel, you **MUST** follow this rule: as you move around 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 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

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Many comprehensive and readily available guides are produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. Barnes and Noble, www.barnesandnoble.com, and Longitude Books, www.longitudebooks.com, have collections 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.

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 Francoise Pommaret; her guidebook takes you on an incredible journey of discovery and adventure; her

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 Concludes, the potential for some of the best rafting on earth can be found here. River rapids range from Class 3 to Class 5.

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 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.

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.