PACK LIGHTLY

THE KINGDOM THAT CHARGES YOU TO KEEP IT THIS WAY

Bhutan

What the mandatory daily fee really buys, the Tiger's Nest climb step by step, and how to plan a guided trip that does not feel like one.



p. 31 The daily fee, the room, the guide: a real week costed out

p. 22 Tiger's Nest, the climb hour by hour and what to expect

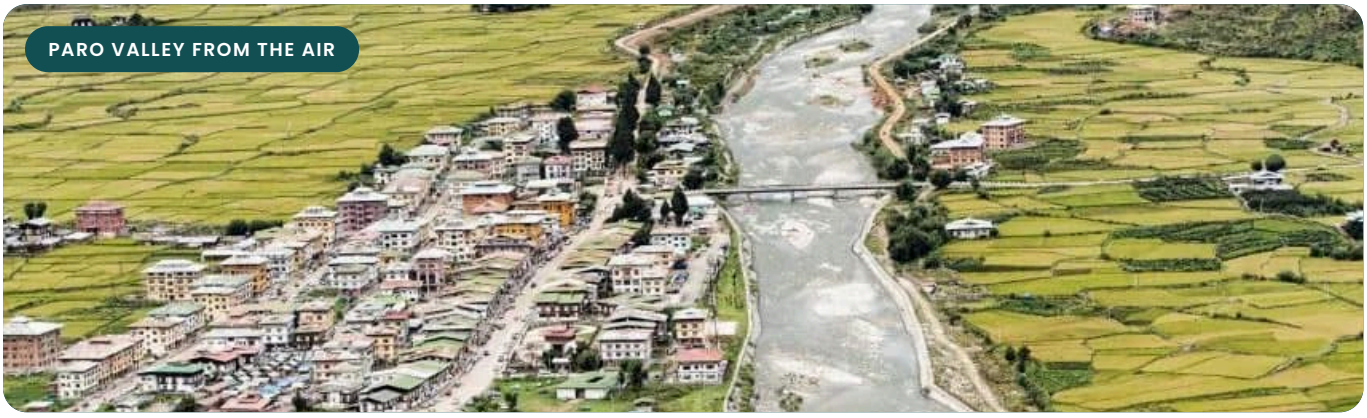
p. 11 Gross National Happiness as policy, not a slogan

47 PAGES USD + NGULTRUM SDF 100 USD/NIGHT EDITION 2026.06

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

what a Bhutan trip is, what it costs, and who it is genuinely for


PARO VALLEY FROM THE AIR

Bhutan is not a place you backpack. It is guided, paced, and expensive on purpose, and the price is the policy: a mandatory Sustainable Development Fee of 100 USD per night sits on top of your room, food, guide and transport. That fee is the real gate, not the visa stamp. In exchange you get a Himalayan Buddhist kingdom that has chosen low-volume tourism, measures progress as Gross National Happiness, and keeps 60 percent of its land under forest by constitution. This guide leads with the economics most others bury, then makes the case for who should still go.

The shape of a trip

Almost every first visit runs the western valleys: fly into Paro, then Thimphu, Punakha, and Phobjikha, over five to ten days. The single east-west highway makes the country slow. Short distances take all day, so depth beats coverage.

What a day costs

The realistic floor is around 230 USD a day all-in for a budget guided trip, roughly 400 mid-range, captured 2026. The SDF alone is 100 of that, before a single meal. The full math is broken out on page 31.

Sort before you fly

You cannot enter independently: book a licensed Bhutanese operator or hotel to process the visa and SDF first. Only Drukair and Bhutan Airlines fly into Paro. Page 33 lists what to lock in, and in what order.


PUNAKHA DZONG


MASKED TSECHU DANCER

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01 The country 06

02 Where to go 09

03 What to do 21

04 The fee, routes and itineraries 29

05 When to go 36

06 Practical 39

07 Safe and smart 44

08 Tools, print cards, sources 48

QUICK JUMPS

The daily fee and permits, costed out 31

Tiger's Nest, the climb in full 22

Gross National Happiness, explained 11

Your trip on one page

7 days, western valleys · from ~230 USD/day all-in · best Mar-May and Oct-Nov

If you read nothing else, this is the trip. A first visit runs the four western valleys: fly into Paro, loop through Thimphu, Punakha, and Phobjikha, then back to Paro for the Tiger's Nest climb. The roads are slow and mountainous, so plan a week minimum. Budget from the all-in figures below, which already include the Sustainable Development Fee. Book a licensed operator before anything else; without one there is no visa and no entry.

THE ROUTE

Paro day 1-2 — 1.5h drive → **Thimphu** day 3 — 3h over Dochula → **Punakha** day 4-5 — 5h drive → **Paro + Taktsang** day 6-7

ALL-IN COST PER DAY

Budget	230 USD
Mid-range	400 USD
Luxury	1,500 USD

BOOK FIRST

01	A licensed operator or hotel, to process visa + SDF	Visa page
02	Flights to a gateway, then the Paro hop	Aviasales
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

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

best: clear views, blooms or festivals · shoulder: cold or variable · summer monsoon, wet and grey

Bhutan at a glance

scores 0-100 · bars are Bhutan, ticks are the South Asia average

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure	35	
Safety	90	
Budget friendly	20	
Nature	90	
Food and drinks	55	
Culture	95	

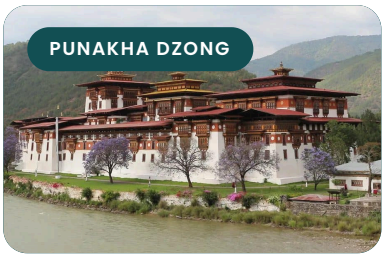
Budget, all-in	230 USD/day
Mid-range	400 USD/day
Luxury	1,500 USD/day

CULTURE NATURE ADVENTURE WELLNESS

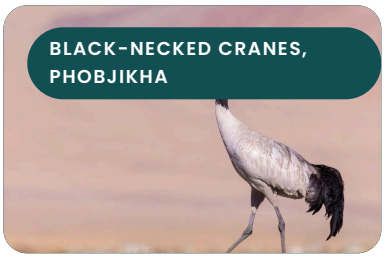
source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06 · baseline South Asia avg

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













photos: Wikimedia Commons

01

The country

A Buddhist kingdom that prices its own visitors to stay rare, measures itself by happiness, and writes its forest cover into the constitution. Read this before you judge the bill.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What Bhutan is, and the fee model 07

Gross National Happiness, explained 11

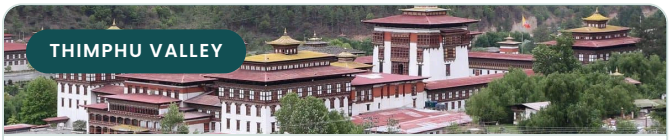
What Bhutan is

~780,000 people · landlocked Himalaya · guided, paid, rare

A Buddhist kingdom of roughly 780,000 people wedged between India and Tibet, ruled by a popular king who handed real power to an elected parliament in 2008. It is the size of Switzerland, mostly vertical, and the only country on earth that is carbon-negative: its forests absorb more than the whole nation emits. Tourism here is a deliberate choice, not an industry left to grow. Since 2022 you can travel independently of a packaged tour, but you still cannot arrive on your own. You book a licensed Bhutanese operator or hotel, who processes your visa and collects the Sustainable Development Fee of 100 USD per night before you land. That fee is the country's whole tourism philosophy in one line: high value, low volume, and the money goes back into free healthcare, free education, and conservation.

CAPITAL	POPULATION	CURRENCY	DAILY SDF
Thimphu	**~780k**	**BTN**	**100 USD**
no traffic lights	Vajrayana Buddhist	pegged 1:1 to INR	per night, on top

THE THREE THINGS THAT MAKE IT SINGULAR



The fee that keeps it rare

SDF · 100 USD per night

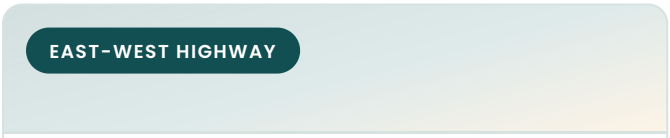
A mandatory daily levy on every visitor, halved from 200 in 2023 and held there through 2027. Children pay less and under-fives nothing. It funds the things the country gives its own people for free.



Happiness as state policy

Gross National Happiness

Not a tourism slogan but a measured government framework with four pillars, used to screen real policy. It shows up as a dress code, a tobacco ban, and a 60 percent forest rule. The next page unpacks it.



One slow mountain road

the east-west highway

A single national highway threads the country along switchback ridges. Map distances lie here: a 120-kilometre hop can swallow a whole day. Plan fewer valleys and stay longer in each.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

Culture-first traveller
Dzongs, tsechu festivals, and a guide who explains them. The reason most people come.

Trekker
Tiger's Nest as the warm-up, the Druk Path or Jomolhari as the main event.

Couple on a milestone trip
A week of comfortable lodges, slow valleys, and the once-in-a-decade splurge.

Not for: the backpacker
No dorm scene, no hop-on buses, no improvising. The daily fee rules it out.

The land, the borders, and why it costs what it costs

south to north in 170 km · the economics of staying rare



HIMALAYAN PEAKS, NORTHERN BHUTAN

Bhutan rises from subtropical plains on the Indian border to 7,000-metre Himalayan peaks in under 170 kilometres. That vertical squeeze gives it three climate bands stacked on top of each other: hot lowland jungle in the south, the temperate valleys of the centre where almost all travel happens, and a high alpine north that is closed permission territory and home to unclimbed sacred peaks. The country is landlocked between two giants, India to the south and Tibet to the north, and most travellers reach it through India or one of the regional gateways into Paro.

The fee model follows from the geography and the politics. A small kingdom in a fragile mountain environment decided early that mass tourism would wreck the thing people come for. So it priced access instead of capping numbers outright. The Sustainable Development Fee is the lever: set it high enough and the volume self-limits, while the revenue offsets the carbon and funds the conservation. You are paying to keep Bhutan the way the brochure photo shows it.

↑

The high north is restricted. Sacred peaks like Gangkhar Puensum, the world's highest unclimbed mountain, are off-limits to climbers by law.

←

Most trips never leave the temperate central valleys around 2,200 to 3,100m. That is where the dzongs, towns, and the famous treks sit.

Carbon-negative, by constitution

Forest cover may never drop below 60 percent. It currently sits above 70, and the forests absorb more carbon than the country emits.

Free healthcare and schooling

Citizens pay nothing for either. A chunk of the SDF and hydropower revenue from India funds the gap.

Late to open, slow on purpose

The first tourists arrived only in 1974. Television and the internet came in 1999. The pace is policy, not backwardness.

Hydropower pays the bills

Selling clean Himalayan hydroelectricity to India is the economic engine. Tourism is the smaller, carefully limited second.

GO DEEPER

Where the country sits and how the valleys connect in the map and geography page, and the protected backbone in the national parks rundown.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Gross National Happiness, the policy behind the slogan

four pillars · how it shows up on the ground

Gross National Happiness is the phrase every brochure repeats and almost none explains. It is a real governing framework, coined by the fourth king in the 1970s and built into the constitution, that asks whether a policy improves wellbeing rather than only output. A national survey measures it across nine domains, and a screening tool can block laws that score badly. It is not about everyone smiling. It is about weighting culture, environment, and community alongside the economy when the state decides what to do. The four pillars below are the load-bearing structure, and each one leaves a visible mark on your trip.

THE FOUR PILLARS

One, sustainable and equitable development, growth that does not leave people or regions behind. Two, environmental conservation, the source of the 60 percent forest rule and the carbon-negative status. Three, preservation of culture, which keeps the dzong architecture, the dress, and the festivals alive. Four, good governance, the move to democracy and the screening of policy against wellbeing. Tourism policy itself runs through this filter, which is exactly why the country prices for low volume.

WHY IT IS NOT JUST TALK

The framework has teeth a slogan would not. Bhutan banned the sale of tobacco for years and still tightly controls it. It capped its own tourist numbers through pricing rather than chasing arrivals. It turned down faster, dirtier growth more than once. You can disagree with the trade-offs, but they are real choices made against the grain of what a poor country is told to do. That is what makes the place worth understanding rather than only photographing.

HOW IT SHOWS UP ON YOUR TRIP

CAPITAL WITH NO TRAFFIC LIGHTS

Thimphu, on hand signals

A signal was installed once and removed by public demand. A white-gloved officer in a pavilion still directs traffic. It reads as small until you realise it was a choice.

NATIONAL DRESS IN PUBLIC LIFE

The gho and the kira

Men wear the gho, women the kira, required in offices, schools, and dzongs. You will see it everywhere, not staged for visitors. You dress modestly to match.

GREEN WRITTEN INTO LAW

60 percent forest, forever

The constitution fixes a permanent floor on forest cover. The result is the green, near-empty valleys you came to see, protected by something stronger than goodwill.

READ ON Traditions, religion, and the etiquette that follows from all this in the culture write-up, and the dress expectations spelled out in the dress code page.

02

Where to go

The western valleys are the realistic first trip. Five places, one slow road between them, and a reason to stay longer in each than the map suggests.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The western valleys, mapped	11
Paro	12
Thimphu	13
Punakha	14
Phobjikha and Gangtey	15
Bumthang, the spiritual heartland	16
The valleys, matched to what you want	17

The western valleys: your first trip

Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Phobjikha · one road, a week minimum

Bhutan has dramatic eastern valleys and a wild south, but a first trip almost never goes there, and it should not. The east is days of mountain road away, and the payoff is for repeat visitors. The four western valleys hold the headline sights, the best dzongs, the Tiger's Nest, and the smoothest logistics, all linked by the one stretch of highway that is genuinely good. Add Bumthang in the centre if you have ten days or more. The mistake everyone makes is trying to cover too much, then spending the trip in the car.

PARO	THIMPHU	PUNAKHA	PHOBJIKHA
2,200m	2,330m	1,200m	2,900m
airport + Taktsang	capital, 1.5h on	warm, the great dzong	crane valley

THE DRIVE TIMES THAT DECIDE YOUR PLAN

Paro to Thimphu

About 1.5 hours on the country's best road, along the river. The easy leg.

Thimphu to Punakha

Roughly 3 hours over the Dochula pass at 3,100m, with the whole Himalaya on a clear day.

Punakha to Phobjikha

Around 3 hours climbing into the glacial valley. Cold, remote, worth it for the cranes.

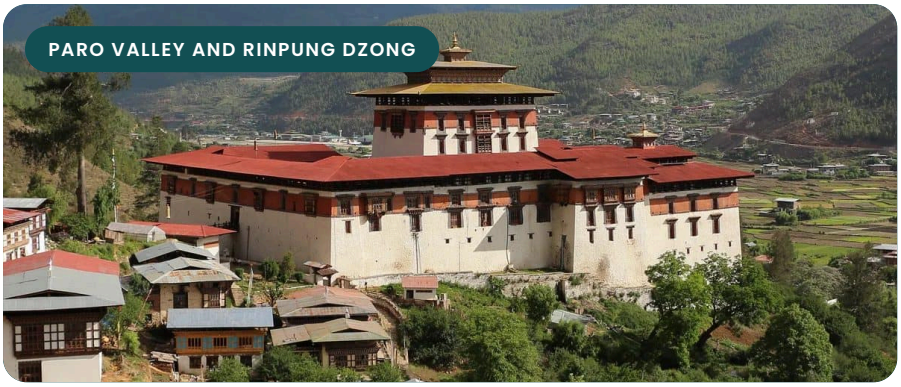
Onward to Bumthang

Another full day east over two passes. Only with ten days or more, or a domestic flight.

MORE ON THE SITE The valleys ranked in the most beautiful places rundown, and the quieter corners in the Bumthang and Haa spots write-up.

Paro

the gateway · 2 nights · airport, valley, and Taktsang


PARO VALLEY AND RINPUNG DZONG

Paro is where you land and where the trip ends, and it earns more than the night most itineraries give it. The valley is a broad green floor of rice paddies and farmhouses under terraced hills, with the white-walled Rinpung Dzong above the river and the country's only international airport tucked into the valley like a secret. Spend the first day here letting the altitude settle and walking the dzong and the old wooden cantilever bridge, not racing straight to the famous climb.

Save the Tiger's Nest for the end of the trip, when you are acclimatised and fit from a week of valleys. Beyond Taktsang, Paro holds the ruined Drukgyel Dzong with Jomolhari behind it on a clear morning, the National Museum in the round watchtower above the dzong, and a main street of traditional shopfronts that is the easiest browsing in the country. It is the gentlest landing Bhutan offers.

Land, then rest. Paro sits at 2,200m. Take the first afternoon slow so the Tiger's Nest climb later in the week is a pleasure, not a struggle.

The Paro landing is one of the trickiest in the world. Only a handful of certified pilots fly it. Take a window seat for the valley approach.

Rinpung Dzong

The fortress-monastery above the river, crossed by a traditional covered bridge. The valley's anchor.

National Museum (Ta Dzong)

The round watchtower above the dzong, the best primer on Bhutanese art and history before you go deeper.

Drukgyel Dzong

A restored ruin at the valley head, with Jomolhari rising behind it on a clear morning.

Tiger's Nest trailhead

The start of the climb to Taktsang, ten minutes from town. The full page on it is page 22.

KEEP READING

Ten picks for the valley in the Paro page, and the climb itself ranked among the religious landmarks rundown.

Thimphu

the capital · 1 to 2 nights · the only city, and a small one


BUDDHA DORDENMA, THIMPHU

Thimphu is the only city in the country and still feels like a large town, the famous capital with no traffic lights where an officer in white gloves waves the cars through. It is where the modern and the traditional sit side by side: a clutch of cafes and a weekend market against the great Tashichho Dzong that houses the government and the throne room. One night is enough for most, two if you want to slow down and shop for textiles and handicrafts at honest prices.

The headline is the Buddha Dordenma, a 51-metre gilded Buddha on a ridge above the city, visible for miles and worth the short drive up for the view back over the valley. Below it, the city rewards wandering: the Memorial Chorten where locals circle and pray through the day, the takin preserve for the country's odd national animal, and the National Institute for Zorig Chusum where students learn the thirteen traditional arts. It is the trip's one urban breath before the valleys take over again.

Tashichho Dzong opens to visitors only after office hours and on weekends, since it is a working seat of government. Your guide times it.

The weekend market by the river is the best single stop for food, textiles, and a feel for daily life. Go Saturday morning.

Buddha Dordenma

A 51-metre gilded Buddha on the ridge, with the best overview of the city and valley below.

Memorial Chorten

The white stupa where locals circumambulate all day. The most living religious site in town.

Tashichho Dzong

The riverside fortress holding the government and the throne room, lit gold at dusk.

Takin preserve

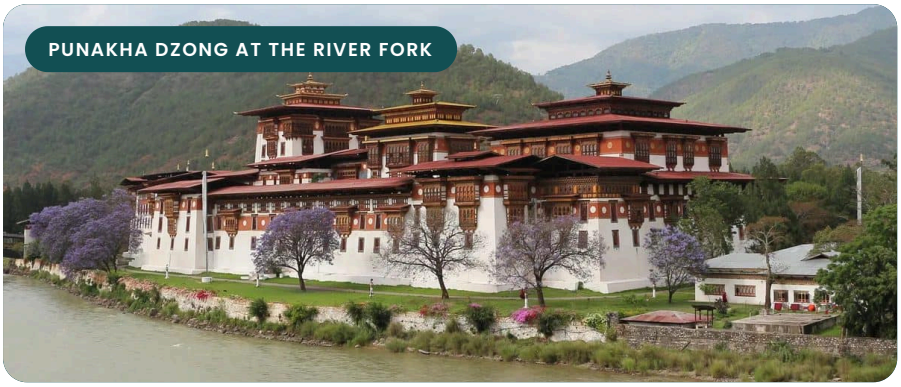
The strange national animal, half goat, half antelope, in a forested enclosure above town.

THE LONG VERSION

Ten things to do in the capital in the Thimphu page, and the country's wildlife including the takin in the wildlife write-up.

Punakha

the old capital · 2 nights · warm valley, the finest dzong



PUNAKHA DZONG AT THE RIVER FORK

Punakha is the warm, low valley most people quietly rank as their favourite, and the Punakha Dzong is the single most beautiful building in the country. It stands at the fork where two rivers meet, the Pho Chhu and the Mo Chhu, a long white-and-ochre fortress reached over an arched wooden bridge, framed by purple jacaranda when they bloom in spring. It was the old capital and is still the winter seat of the country's chief abbot, and the interior courtyards are the grandest you will walk.

The valley rewards two nights. The walk to the Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten climbs through rice terraces to a hilltop temple with a wide valley view, an easy hour each way. The Chimi Lhakhang, the fertility temple linked to the "Divine Madman," sits across the paddies and explains the phallus paintings you will have noticed on village walls. Down at 1,200 metres, Punakha is the one place on a western loop where you can sit outside in shirtsleeves.

Cross the Dochula pass on the way in. On a clear morning the eastern Himalaya line up behind 108 chortens. Cloud often wins, so go early.

The phallus symbols on houses are a blessing tied to the Chimi Lhakhang, not a joke. Your guide will explain the Divine Madman story.

Punakha Dzong

The finest building in Bhutan, at the river fork. Allow a slow hour for the courtyards and the temple inside.

Khamsum Yulley Chorten

An hour's walk up through rice terraces to a hilltop temple and the best valley view.

Chimi Lhakhang

The fertility temple across the paddies, an easy stroll and the origin of the village paintings.

The suspension bridge

One of the country's longest, strung with prayer flags over the Pho Chhu. A short, photogenic walk.

ON THE WEBSITE Nine picks for the valley in the Punakha page, and the dzong's place among the country's sacred sites in the religious landmarks rundown.

Phobjikha and Gangtey

the glacial valley · 1 to 2 nights · cranes Nov to Feb


PHOBJIKHA GLACIAL VALLEY

Cranes are present roughly November to February only. Come outside that window for the walk and the quiet, not the birds.

It is cold up here even in spring. Pack a proper layer and expect wood-stove heating, not central warmth, in the valley lodges.

Phobjikha is the wide, treeless glacial valley that feels furthest from anywhere, a U-shaped bowl of meadow and marsh at 2,900 metres where the Gangtey Goenpa monastery sits on a low spur above it all. It is the winter home of the black-necked crane: a few hundred of these rare birds migrate down from the Tibetan plateau between late October and February, and the valley protects them so carefully that power lines were laid underground to keep the flight paths clear. The cranes are the reason to time a visit here, and there is a small festival in their honour in November.

Outside crane season it is still the most peaceful stop on the loop. The Gangtey Nature Trail is a gentle two-hour walk down through the valley from the monastery to the wetland and the crane centre, the best easy hike in western Bhutan. Nights are cold and the lodges lean on wood stoves and hot stone baths. One night does it, two if the silence suits you.

Gangtey Goenpa

The 17th-century monastery on the spur above the valley, the spiritual centre of the bowl.

Gangtey Nature Trail

A gentle two-hour walk from the monastery down to the wetland. The easy hike of the trip.

Black-Necked Crane Centre

A small information centre and hide at the marsh edge, best in the early morning in winter.

A hot stone bath

The valley's lodges do the traditional river-stone soak well. The perfect end to a cold day.

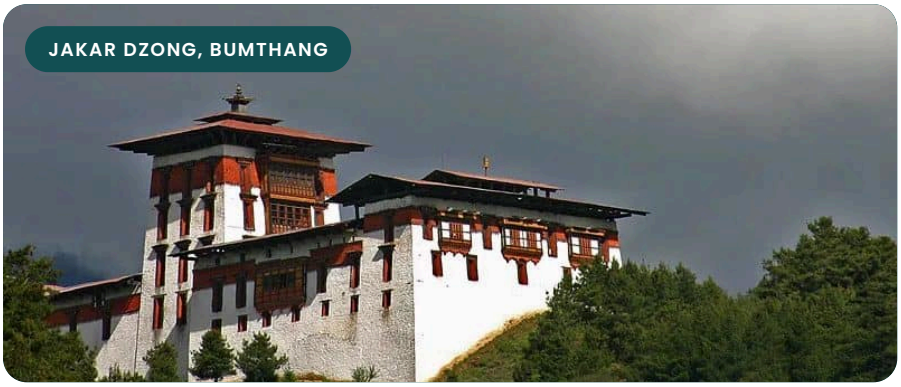
MORE DETAIL

Eight picks for the valley in the Phobjikha page, and the crane among the country's species in the wildlife rundown.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Bumthang, the spiritual heartland

central Bhutan · for trips of 10 days plus · the oldest temples



Bumthang is four broad valleys in the centre of the country and the place Bhutanese consider their spiritual cradle, where Buddhism first took hold and the oldest temples still stand. Reaching it means a full day east from Phobjikha over two high passes, or a short domestic flight into Bathpalathang, which is why it belongs on a ten-day trip and not a week. The reward is a gentler, more rural Bhutan: apple orchards, buckwheat fields, a famous Swiss-founded cheese and brewery, and temples that predate almost everything in the west.

The Jambay Lhakhang and Kurjey Lhakhang are the headline temples, the first said to be among the oldest in the country and the second built around a rock bearing an imprint of Guru Rinpoche. Jakar Dzong watches over the main valley, and the Burning Lake, a deep river pool tied to a treasure-finding saint, is the strangest and most local of the sights. Bumthang also throws the Jambay Lhakhang Drup, one of the country's most striking festivals, with a midnight naked fire dance.

Fly one leg if you add Bumthang. The domestic hop saves a hard day on the road. The flying page is page 35.

Try the local apple cider and the cheese from the Swiss-founded farm. Both are Bumthang specialties you will not find elsewhere.

Jambay and Kurjey Lhakhang

Two of the oldest and most sacred temples in the country, an easy pair to visit together in the main valley.

Jakar Dzong

The "castle of the white bird" on a ridge above Jakar town, watching over the whole Bumthang valley.

Mebar Tsho, the Burning Lake

A deep, prayer-flag-draped river pool tied to the treasure-finder Pema Lingpa. Quiet and deeply local.

WORTH A READ Seven picks for the valley in the Jakar page, and the wider central detour in the Bumthang and Haa spots rundown.

The valleys, matched to what you want

five valleys plus the central detour · pick the column, read down

The western valleys are close enough that you will likely see most of them, so the question is where to add a night rather than which to skip. This matrix replaces a page of comparison: decide what you most want from the trip, then read down the column. Each valley also sits at a different altitude, which matters for both comfort and weather, so the height is in the second column.

VALLEY	ALTITUDE	DZONGS	HIKING	QUIET	WARMTH
Paro	2,200m	●●●	●●●	●○○	●●○
Thimphu	2,330m	●●○	●○○	●○○	●●○
Punakha	1,200m	●●●	●●○	●●○	●●●
Phobjikha	2,900m	●○○	●●○	●●●	●○○
Bumthang	2,600m	●●○	●●○	●●●	●●○

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly Bhutan cluster, 2026-06

A week covers Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, and the Tiger's Nest comfortably. Add Phobjikha at eight days, Bumthang only at ten plus.

Punakha is the warm valley, Phobjikha the cold one. Pack for both. The altitude swing in a single loop is over 1,700 metres.

SEE ALSO The valleys ranked in the most beautiful places rundown, and the quieter corners in the Bumthang and Haa spots write-up.

03

What to do

The climb to Tiger's Nest, the longer treks, the dzongs, the masked festivals, and the small rituals (a hot stone bath, a round of archery) that make a trip Bhutanese.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Tiger's Nest, the climb in full 19

The Druk Path and Jomolhari treks 20

Dzongs: reading the architecture 21

Tsechu festivals and mask dances 22

Hot stone baths, archery, and the table 23

Where to stay and what to book 24

Tiger's Nest, the climb in full

Paro Taktsang · 900m of ascent · 4 to 6 hours round trip



Paro Taktsang is the image of Bhutan and the one climb almost everyone does: a white monastery glued to a sheer cliff 900 metres above the Paro valley, where Guru Rinpoche is said to have flown in on the back of a tigress and meditated in a cave. The walk to it is the country's signature half-day, and it is more achievable than the cliff-edge photos suggest. It is a steady forest climb on a wide path, not a scramble, but the altitude and the gain are real. Save it for the end of your trip, when a week in the valleys has acclimatised you.

Start early, by 8am, to beat both the heat and the crowds. The path climbs through blue pine and prayer flags to a cafeteria viewpoint at the halfway mark, the classic photo spot, then on to a final descent and climb across a waterfall gorge by stone staircase to the monastery itself. Allow four to six hours round trip at a comfortable pace. Ponies can carry you up the first half but not down, and not the final stairs, so most people walk. Phones and bags are checked at the entrance; the inner shrines are photography-free and deeply active.

Go on day six or seven, not day one. The trailhead is at 2,600m and the monastery at 3,120m. A week of valleys first makes it far easier.

Wear broken-in hiking shoes and carry water and a layer. Weather turns fast at altitude, and the stone steps near the top are slick when wet.

No photos inside the shrines. Bags and cameras are stored at the entrance. The monastery is a living site, not a viewpoint.

STAGE 1, THE FOREST

Trailhead to cafeteria

A steady 90-minute climb through pine to the halfway cafeteria and the postcard viewpoint. Ponies available on this stretch.

STAGE 2, THE GORGE

Viewpoint to the stairs

A near-level traverse to the top viewpoint, then a steep stone descent into the waterfall gorge facing the monastery.

STAGE 3, THE MONASTERY

The final climb in

Up the last staircase across the gorge to the shrines themselves. Bags checked, shoes off, no cameras. The reward for the whole trip.

DIG IN

Taktsang in context with the country's sacred sites in the religious landmarks page, and what to wear for the climb in the packing list.

The Druk Path and Jomolhari treks

for trekkers · 3 to 9 days · high passes and base camps

HIGH CAMP, JOMOLHARI TREK

If the Tiger's Nest is the warm-up, Bhutan's multi-day treks are the main event, and they see a fraction of the crowds that Nepal's do. The Druk Path is the accessible classic: a three-to-four-day high route between Paro and Thimphu over alpine lakes and ridgelines above 4,000 metres, doable without serious mountaineering experience but a genuine altitude trek. It is the best way to taste Bhutan's wilderness on a normal-length trip, since it bookends neatly with the western valleys.

The Jomolhari trek is the ambitious one, a six-to-nine-day route to base camp under the sacred 7,300-metre Jomolhari on the Tibetan border, crossing passes near 4,900 metres through yak pasture and remote villages. It needs fitness, acclimatisation, and a proper buffer for weather. Both run on the spring and autumn windows only; the high passes are snowbound in winter and the monsoon makes summer a washout. All trekking here is guided and crewed, which on a serious route is a safety feature, not just a rule.

⚠

Both treks sleep above 4,000m. That is altitude-sickness territory: read the altitude page on page 44 and never climb through worsening symptoms.

Spring and autumn only. The Druk Path and Jomolhari both close in the snowbound winter and the wet summer monsoon.

Druk Path, 3–4 days

Paro to Thimphu over alpine lakes above 4,000m. The accessible high trek, no technical skill needed.

Jomolhari, 6–9 days

To base camp under a sacred 7,300m peak, crossing 4,900m passes. The serious one, for fit, acclimatised trekkers.

Sacred peaks, off-limits

Summiting is banned out of respect. You trek to base camps and passes, never to the tops. The mountains stay the gods' alone.

THE FULL PICTURE

The sacred peaks and trekking routes in the mountains write-up, and the protected ranges they cross in the national parks rundown.

Dzongs: how to read the architecture

fortress, monastery, and seat of government in one building

RINPUNG DZONG COURTYARD

Built without nails or blueprints. The interlocking timber joinery and the inward-sloping walls are the craft to look for up close.

Always move clockwise around a shrine, chorten, or mani wall, the same direction the pilgrims walk. Your guide will steer you.

The dzong is the building that defines Bhutan, and once you can read one, the country opens up. Each is a fortress, a monastery, and the seat of the district government all at once: massive sloping white walls, a central tower called the utse, and a courtyard or two that split the religious half from the administrative. They were built from the 17th century onward to defend the valleys and unify the country, raised without nails or written plans, and they still run as working seats of power. The monks live and worship on one side; the district officials work on the other.

Visiting one is the cultural core of a trip, so a little fluency helps. The murals in the entrance porch almost always show the same set of guardians and the wheel of life. Inner temples ask for bare feet, covered shoulders and knees, and no photography. Move clockwise around shrines and chortens, the way pilgrims do. Punakha is the masterpiece, Paro the most photogenic, and Thimphu's Tashichho the grandest in scale. Time at least one visit to coincide with a tsechu, when the courtyard fills with masked dancers.

Punakha Dzong

The masterpiece, at the river fork. The grandest courtyards and the most beautiful setting in the country.

Rinpung Dzong, Paro

The most photogenic, reached over a covered bridge and home to the valley's spring tsechu.

Tashichho Dzong, Thimphu

The grandest in scale, holding the throne room and government. Visit after office hours only.

The utse, the central tower

The fortified heart of every dzong, dividing the monastic body from the administrative. Look for it first.

GO DEEPER All twenty-one major sacred sites with visiting notes in the religious landmarks page, and the traditions behind them in the culture write-up.

Tsechu festivals and mask dances

the reason to plan a trip around a date



CHAM MASK DANCE, TSECHU

A tsechu is the single best thing to time a Bhutan trip around. These are religious festivals held in dzong courtyards across the country, where monks and laymen perform cham, masked dances that act out Buddhist teachings and the deeds of Guru Rinpoche over several days. The valley empties into the dzong in its finest gho and kira, families picnic on the steps, and the dances build to the unveiling of a giant appliqued thongdrol, a sacred scroll said to wash away sin just by being seen. It is not a show staged for tourists. You are a guest at a community's most important week.

The Paro tsechu in spring and the Thimphu tshechu in autumn are the largest and easiest to attend, both within the western loop. Bumthang's Jambay Lhakhang Drup adds a midnight naked fire dance that is among the most extraordinary sights in the country. Dates follow the lunar calendar and move each year, so confirm them before you book flights, and book early: the best operators and lodges fill for festival weeks well ahead.

Tsechu dates are lunar and shift every year. Verify the exact dates for your travel year before locking anything in. The calendar is on page 38.

Dress your best and sit where your guide places you. Do not block the dance ground for a photo, and stand for the thongdrol unveiling.

Paro Tsechu

Spring, in the Rinpung Dzong. The most visited festival, ending with a dawn thongdrol unveiling.

Thimphu Tshechu

Autumn, in the capital's dzong courtyard. The largest crowd and the easiest to slot into a loop.

Jambay Lhakhang Drup

Bumthang, autumn. Famous for the mewang fire ceremony and a midnight naked dance. The wild card.

The cham mask dances

The masked dances at the heart of every tsechu, each one enacting a teaching. Your guide narrates them.

READ ON

Exact festival and holiday dates in the public holidays calendar, and the customs around them in the culture rundown.

The hot stone bath, archery, and the table

three small rituals that make a trip Bhutanese

MORE ON THE SITE

The full menu with prices in the food and drinks rundown, and the customs around eating and sport in the culture write-up.

photos: Wikimedia Commons



ARCHERS AT A THIMPHU RANGE

Where to stay, and how booking works here

your operator usually books the rooms · prices per night, double

Bhutan does not work like the rest of the region. Your licensed operator or hotel typically bundles the rooms, the guide, the driver and the daily fee into one quote, so you rarely book a bed yourself. Still, it pays to know what a valley charges before you accept a package, and where a longer stay or an upgrade is worth it. Use the live maps below to sanity-check what your operator quotes, then push for the areas that suit you. The going rates run from simple guesthouses to the global luxury lodges that made Bhutan a milestone trip name.

Beyond the dzongs and the grand, three things make a trip feel Bhutanese rather than only scenic. The first is the dotsho, a

The third is the food, which is plainer and hotter than its neighbours and built around one rule: chilli is a vegetable here, not a spice. The national

WHAT TO DO

Chilli is the point, not a garnish. Ask for it dialled down if you need to. "Kewa datshi" (potato and cheese) is the mild fallback.

Book the hot stone bath a day ahead. Heating it takes hours, so lodges need notice, especially in the cold valleys.

Paro

guesthouse **from 60 USD** mid **120 USD** luxury **1,000+ USD**

Stay in the valley near the dzong for the Tiger's Nest and the airport, not on the highway. Compare what the valley is charging on the live Paro map before you sign off a package, and check the wider range on Booking.com.

Punakha

guesthouse **from 55 USD** mid **110 USD** luxury **1,200+ USD**

The warm valley rewards a riverside lodge with a view of the dzong or the rice terraces. See what is open on the night you want with the live Punakha map, and weigh the lodges against simpler rooms on Booking.com.



EMA DATSHI



PHAKSHA PAA

Thimphu and Phobjikha

guesthouse **from 50 USD** mid **100 USD** luxury **900+ USD**

In the capital sleep central for the market and the dzong. In Phobjikha take a valley lodge with a stove and a hot stone bath, not a roadside room. Pull up the live Thimphu map to compare, then book through Booking.com or your operator.



SUJA BUTTER TEA



JASHA MARU

Hotels and lodges across the western valleys, from simple guesthouses to the flagship luxury camps, in one place.

Find Stays on Booking.com

USD 0.40-1 · everywhere

USD 2.40-4.80 · everywhere

Ask your operator exactly which hotels are in the quote, by name. The gap between a basic guesthouse and a 3-star is the easiest upgrade to negotiate.

The SDF and the guide are the same whatever room you pick, so a hotel upgrade is the cheapest way to lift the trip. The full math is on page 31.

04

The fee and routes

The number every other guide buries, costed out in full. Then the route on a real map, and the western-valley itineraries for five, seven, and ten days.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The daily fee and permits, costed out 26

Pick your trip 27

The route on a real map 28

The 7-day western valleys 29

The 10-day and festival-timed routes 30

The daily fee and permits, costed out

what the SDF is, what it funds, and what a real week costs

Here is the number every other guide buries. The Sustainable Development Fee is 100 USD per person per night, mandatory, on top of everything else. It was cut from 200 in 2023 and is held at 100 through 2027. Children aged 6 to 12 pay half, and under-fives nothing. It is not a tax you can dodge or a package you can skip: your operator collects it with your visa, and without it there is no entry. The table below shows what it stacks onto, and the realistic floor it builds.

LINE ITEM	WHAT IT COVERS	PER DAY (BUDGET)
Sustainable Development Fee	Mandatory levy, funds healthcare, schooling, conservation	USD 100
Hotel, double room	Simple guesthouse to 3-star, per person sharing	USD 40-70
Licensed guide	Required on most sightseeing, often shared in a group	USD 30-40
Driver and vehicle	The slow mountain roads, fuel included	USD 30-40
Meals	Three local meals, often half-board at the hotel	USD 15-25
One-off e-visa	Flat 40 USD application, not per night	USD 40 once

rates: pack-lightly Bhutan cost research + visa dataset, captured 2026-05 · indicative per person

WHAT A REAL WEEK WORKS OUT TO

Add the lines up and a budget guided day lands around 230 USD per person, of which the SDF is 100 before a single meal. That makes a seven-night western-valley trip roughly 1,600 USD per person on the ground, plus your international flights and the 40 USD visa. Mid-range, with better lodges and a private guide, runs nearer 400 a day. The famous luxury camps push past 1,500. Two things lower the per-head number: travelling as a pair or a small group splits the guide and vehicle, and the SDF discount applies to children. Nothing lowers the SDF itself.

Model your own dates, group size and room level, with the daily fee built in, in the free budget calculator.

Open the Budget Calculator

KEEP READING How the fee and the visa fit together in the visa page, and what 200 USD a day actually covers in the travel cost breakdown.

Pick your trip

how long you have decides the route · all-in totals per person

In Bhutan, time is the only real variable. The road is slow, so the number of days you have decides how many valleys you can reach far more than your budget does. Every total below already includes the daily fee, the guide, the driver, and the rooms, per person sharing, and assumes the spring or autumn window. Find your row, then read the matching itinerary on the next pages.

COUPLE · 5D · THE TASTER

Paro and Thimphu, the Tiger's Nest

~1,150 USD pp · mid lodges

- Paro 2n: valley + dzong
- Thimphu 1n: capital
- Paro 1n: Taktsang climb

COUPLE · 7D · THE CLASSIC

The western valleys loop

~1,600 USD pp · mid lodges

- Paro 2 · Thimphu 1
- Punakha 2 over Dochula
- Paro 1: Tiger's Nest

COUPLE · 10D · THE FULL WEST

Add Phobjikha and Bumthang

~2,300 USD pp · mid lodges

- Paro, Thimphu, Punakha
- Phobjikha 1 · Bumthang 2
- Fly one leg, climb to finish

TREKKER · 9D · THE HIGH ROUTE

Western valleys + Druk Path

~2,100 USD pp · camped trek

- Paro + Thimphu, acclimatise
- Druk Path trek 4n camping
- Punakha + Taktsang to finish

FESTIVAL · 7D · TIMED TRIP

The loop, built around a tsechu

~1,700 USD pp · book early

- Time Paro or Thimphu tsechu
- Two festival days in the dzong
- Valleys + climb around it

SOLO · 7D · SMALL GROUP

Join a set-departure tour

~1,500 USD pp · shared guide

- Same western loop
- Guide and van split 4-8 ways
- The cheapest way to see it solo

THE LONG VERSION

The full day-by-day in the 7-day itinerary, the shorter run in the 3-day plan, and the long version in the 14-day route.

The route on a real map

Paro to Thimphu to Punakha to Phobjikha, then back to climb

The western loop in one picture. You fly into Paro, drive the good road to Thimphu, then climb over the Dochula pass to warm Punakha, push on to the high crane valley of Phobjikha, and double back to Paro to finish on the Tiger's Nest. The whole loop is a single thread of mountain highway, which is exactly why distances feel longer than the map suggests. Your operator arranges the driver and vehicle for every leg.



WHAT EACH LEG TAKES

Paro to Thimphu car, river road · 1.5h **incl. package**	**Thimphu to Punakha** car over Dochula · 3h **incl. package**	**Punakha to Phobjikha** car, climbing · 3h **incl. package**
Phobjikha to Paro car, long day · 6h **incl. package**	**Paro to Bumthang** domestic flight · 30m **~110 USD**	**Hub city to Paro** Drukair or Bhutan Air **~250+ USD**

drive times: pack-lightly road research, 2026 · flight fares indicative one-way

The 7-day western valleys

the classic loop · Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, and back to climb

The route that suits a first trip best: enough time to acclimatise, see the three headline valleys and the finest dzong, and finish strong on the Tiger's Nest. Your operator handles the visa, the SDF, the rooms, and the driver. All you decide is the pace and where to add a night.

1	**Arrive Paro** PBH · 2,200m	Land on the spectacular valley approach. Settle in, walk Rinpung Dzong and the old bridge, and let the altitude sink in. Early night.
2	**Paro valley** on foot + car	The National Museum, Drukgyel Dzong with Jomolhari behind it, and a walk through the farmhouses. A gentle acclimatisation day.
3	**Drive to Thimphu** 1.5h · capital	The short river road to the capital. Buddha Dordenma, the Memorial Chorten, the takin, and the weekend market if the timing lands.
4	**Over Dochula to Punakha** 3h · 1,200m	Cross the pass and its 108 chortens, with the Himalaya behind on a clear morning. Down to warm Punakha and the great dzong at the river fork.
5	**Punakha valley** easy walks	The Khamsum Yulley Chorten walk through rice terraces, the Chimi Lhakhang across the paddies, and the long suspension bridge. The warm-valley day.
6	**Back to Paro** ~5h drive	The long leg back over the passes to Paro. Rest the legs, prepare the gear, and have an early dinner before the big climb tomorrow.
7	**Tiger's Nest, then home** 4-6h climb	Up to Taktsang at first light, the trip's reward after a week of acclimatising. Down by early afternoon, and fly out the next morning.

ON THE WEBSITE The detailed day-by-day in the 7-day itinerary page, and the shorter taster in the 3-day plan.

The 10-day, and timing it to a festival

add Phobjikha and Bumthang · or build the week around a tsechu

With ten days you reach the crane valley and the spiritual heartland of Bumthang, flying one leg to save a hard day on the road. With any length, the single best upgrade is timing: land the trip on a tsechu and two days in the dzong courtyard become the memory you keep.

THE 10-DAY EXTENSION

Run the seven-day loop, but after Punakha climb on to Phobjikha for a night in the glacial valley and the crane walk. From there, fly from Bumthang's Bathpalathang airfield or drive the long road east to spend two nights among the oldest temples in the country: Jambay and Kurjey Lhakhang, Jakar Dzong, and the Burning Lake. Fly back to Paro for the Tiger's Nest finale. The flight leg is the difference between a relaxed trip and two days lost to the road.

BUILDING IT AROUND A TSECHU

Pick your festival first, then plan the valleys around it. The Paro tsechu in spring and the Thimphu tshechu in autumn slot straight into the western loop: give the festival two full days, arrive in the valley the evening before, and keep the rest of the route flexible. Book a year ahead, because the good operators and lodges sell out for festival weeks. Confirm the lunar dates for your exact travel year before you touch a flight.

THE SHAPE OF A 10-DAY LOOP

DAYS 1-5

Paro, Thimphu, Punakha

The western core, exactly as the seven-day loop, with the dzongs and the warm valley. Acclimatising as you go.

DAYS 6-8

Phobjikha, then Bumthang

A night in the crane valley, then fly or drive east to the oldest temples and the gentler, rural centre.

DAYS 9-10

Back to Paro and the climb

Fly back west, rest, and finish on the Tiger's Nest at full acclimatisation. The strongest possible last day.

MORE DETAIL The full long route in the 14-day itinerary, and the festival dates to plan around in the public holidays calendar.

05

When to go

Spring for the blooms and clear valleys, autumn for the festivals and the sharpest mountain views. The two windows that work, and the calendar that decides between them.

IN THIS CHAPTER

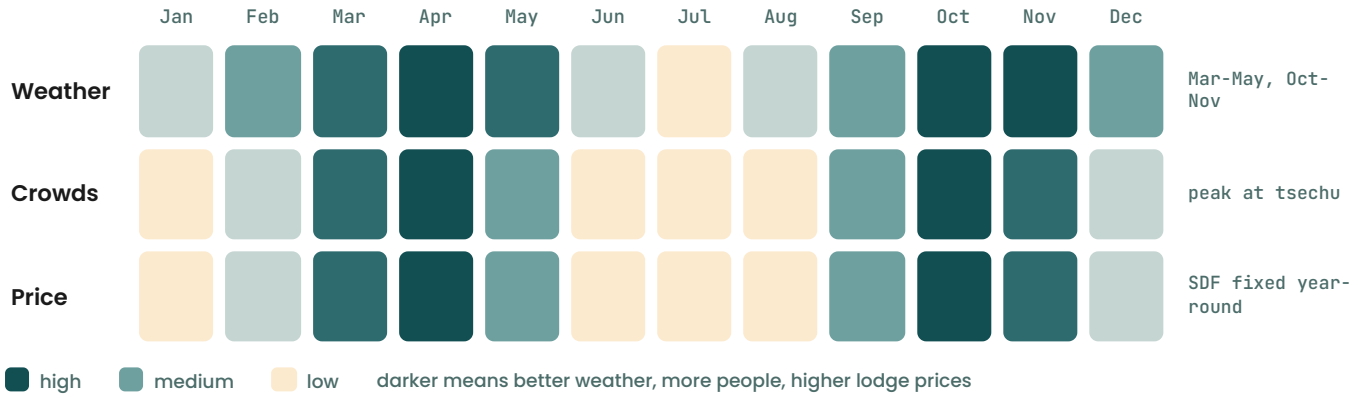
Weather, crowds, price by month 32

The tsechu calendar 33

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · spring and autumn are the two windows

Bhutan has two clear seasons worth travelling in and two to avoid. Spring, March to May, brings rhododendron blooms across the hills and warm, green valleys. Autumn, October to November, gives the crispest mountain views of the year and the biggest festivals. The summer monsoon from June to August is wet, grey, and leech-prone, with the passes prone to landslides. Deep winter is cold and clear in the west but bitter in the high valleys, with some passes closed. The crane season in Phobjikha runs November to February, the one reason to brave the cold.



source: best-travel-time research + country-comparison · captured 2026-05

The SDF does not change with the season, but lodge prices do. Travelling in the shoulder months trims the room cost, not the fee.

Avoid June to August. The monsoon clouds the views, swells the rivers, and brings landslides and leeches to the passes.

WORTH A READ

The month-by-month weather logic in the best time to visit breakdown, and the holiday dates in the public holidays calendar.

The tsechu calendar

three to build a trip around, three to know about

Festivals here run in two directions: the top row is worth planning a whole trip around, the bottom row is good to know so the dates do not surprise you. All of them follow the lunar calendar and move every year, so the months below are a guide, not a promise. Confirm the exact dates for your travel year, then book early; lodges and the best guides fill fast for the big tsechus.

MAR / APR

Paro Tsechu

The spring headline, in the Rinpung Dzong. Days of cham mask dances ending with a dawn unveiling of a giant thongdrol scroll. The easiest big festival to attend.

SEP / OCT

Thimphu Tshechu

The autumn counterpart, in the capital's dzong. The largest crowds, the grandest setting, and a natural anchor for a western-valley loop in clear-view season.

OCT / NOV

Jambay Lhakhang Drup

Bumthang's autumn festival, famous for the mewang fire ceremony and a midnight naked dance. The most extraordinary, and the hardest to reach.

NOV

Black-Necked Crane Festival

A small celebration in Phobjikha as the cranes arrive, with masked dances on the Gangtey monastery grounds. Lovely if your dates already pass through.

FEB / MAR

Losar (New Year)

The Bhutanese new year. A family holiday more than a spectacle, with some closures. Atmospheric, but not a festival you travel specifically to see.

FEB

Punakha Drubchen and Tshechu

A dramatic re-enactment of a 17th-century battle followed by a tsechu, in the country's most beautiful dzong. Cold but quiet, and growing in draw.

Every date here is lunar and moves each year. Verify the exact days for your year with your operator before you book flights.

Book a festival trip up to a year out. The big tsechus draw the most visitors of the year, and the good lodges sell out first.

SEE ALSO Exact festival and holiday dates per year in the public holidays calendar, and the customs behind them in the culture rundown.

06

Practical

Booking the operator, the trickiest flight in the world, money that is really rupees, an eSIM, and packing for a valley that swings 1,700 metres in altitude.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order 35

The Paro flight and getting around 36

Money, eSIM, and packing 37

What a day costs 38

Book in this order

the operator first, because it gates everything else

Bhutan flips the usual order. You cannot book flights or a visa until you have an operator, because they process the visa and collect the daily fee on your behalf. So the operator comes first, and the rest follows naturally. There is no entry without that first step, so do not leave it late, especially for a festival trip.

3 mo before

A licensed operator or hotel

The one booking that unlocks the rest. They quote the package, process your visa, and collect the SDF. Compare a few on itinerary, included hotels, and whether the guide is private or shared.

How the visa and operator work

8 wk before

Flights to a gateway

You reach Bhutan through a regional hub, then take Drukair or Bhutan Airlines into Paro. Book the international legs early, then let your operator confirm the Paro hop, which only those two carriers fly.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk before

Insurance and the visa fee

Buy travel insurance with strong medical and high-altitude evacuation cover; a helicopter off a trek is not cheap. Your operator submits the e-visa application; the flat 40 USD fee is separate from the daily SDF.

Compare travel insurance

1 wk before

eSIM and cash

Install an eSIM before departure for coverage in the towns. Carry US dollars or Indian rupees to change, since cards are unreliable outside Thimphu and Paro and ATMs are scarce.

Set up a Saily eSIM

Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival. Check it now; the visa is processed by your operator, not on arrival.

Do not skimp on insurance. Trek evacuation and altitude care in the Himalaya are exactly the costs a cheap policy excludes.

06

The Paro flight, and getting around

two airlines only · one highway · a driver does the rest

Getting in and getting around are both simpler and slower than you expect. Only two carriers fly into Paro, Drukair and Bhutan Airlines, and the approach is one of the most demanding in commercial aviation: a steep, hand-flown descent between 5,000-metre ridges into a short valley runway, certified to a handful of pilots and flown in daylight only. Inside the country, your operator provides a driver and vehicle for every leg, so you never drive yourself. The east-west highway is the only real road, and it is slow going.

LEG	HOW	TIME / COST
Hub city to Paro	**Drukair or Bhutan Airlines, daylight only**	~250+ USD one-way
Paro to Thimphu	**Operator car, the good river road**	1.5h, in package
Thimphu to Punakha	**Operator car over Dochula pass**	3h, in package
West to Bumthang	**Domestic flight to Bathpalathang**	30m, ~110 USD
Within a valley	**Your driver and guide, on call**	in package

fares and times: pack-lightly road and flight research, captured 2026 · indicative

WHY THE DISTANCES EAT THE DAY

The east-west highway threads ridge after ridge in switchbacks, climbing and dropping over passes above 3,000 metres between valleys. A leg that looks like 80 kilometres on the map can take three hours of careful mountain driving, and roadworks or weather slow it further. This is the single reason to plan fewer valleys and stay longer in each: the more places you try to reach, the more of the trip you spend in the car. A domestic flight to Bumthang is the one shortcut worth taking on a longer loop.

DIG IN The domestic network in the flying Bhutan's mountain routes page, the cheapest way in via the flight ticket tips, and the road rules in the traffic and roads page.

Money, connectivity, and packing for altitude

cash is king · the eSIM that works · layers for a 1,700m swing

MONEY

The currency is the ngultrum, pegged one-to-one to the Indian rupee, and rupees are accepted everywhere. Carry US dollars or rupees to change. Cards work in the better Thimphu and Paro hotels but fail elsewhere, and ATMs are scarce and unreliable. Since your operator has prepaid the big costs, cash is mostly for tips, drinks, and handicrafts. Bring more small notes than you think.

CONNECTIVITY

An eSIM gives you data in the towns and along the main valleys, patchy to nonexistent on the high passes and treks. Install it before you fly and it activates on landing. Local SIMs from TashiCell or B-Mobile are an alternative but mean a stop and paperwork. Wi-fi in lodges is slow. Treat the trip as a chance to be offline more than you are used to.

PACKING

A western loop swings from 1,200 metres in Punakha to 3,100 on Dochula, so layers beat a single warm coat. Bring broken-in hiking shoes for the Tiger's Nest, a windproof shell, a fleece, sun protection for the high UV, and modest clothing that covers shoulders and knees for the dzongs. A reusable bottle, and a head torch for the lodges.

Generate a full Bhutan packing list for your dates and trek plans, sized for the altitude swing, in the free tool.

Open the Packing List Generator

Carry small US dollar and rupee notes. Outside the two main towns, cash is the only reliable payment, and change for big notes is scarce.

The high-altitude sun burns fast. Pack a brimmed hat, strong sunscreen, and sunglasses even when the valley air feels cool.

THE FULL PICTURE

The currency detail in the currency page, the network options in the SIM and eSIM page, and the full kit in the packing list.

What a day costs

three travel styles · the daily fee built into every line

The daily budget hides in the package quote, so here it is itemised: the mandatory fee, the bed, the guide and driver shared, three meals, and the extras you actually pay cash for. Three real versions of the same guided day, per person, in US dollars. The SDF line is the same in all three.

A DAY IN BHUTAN

* budget *

Sustainable Dev Fee	100.00
guesthouse, sharing	50.00
guide, group share	20.00
driver + vehicle, share	25.00
three local meals	15.00
tips + water	5.00
ara or a souvenir	5.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~230 USD**

cost research · 2026-05

A DAY IN BHUTAN

* mid-range *

Sustainable Dev Fee	100.00
3-star lodge, sharing	120.00
private guide	40.00
private car + driver	50.00
meals + hotel dinner	50.00
hot stone bath	25.00
tips + extras	15.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~400 USD**

cost research · 2026-05

A DAY IN BHUTAN

* luxury *

Sustainable Dev Fee	100.00
flagship lodge suite	1,150.00
private guide	incl.
private car + driver	incl.
all meals, full board	incl.
spa + private experiences	150.00
tips	100.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~1,500 USD**

cost research · 2026-05

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and room level, with the daily fee built in.

Open the Budget Calculator

The fee, the guide, and the driver barely move between tiers. Almost the entire jump from budget to luxury is the room.

Travel as a pair or a small group to split the guide and vehicle. It is the only lever, since the SDF is per head and fixed.

07

Safe and smart

One of the safest countries you can visit, with one real risk: altitude. The guided-everything reality, what is and is not allowed, and how to behave in a dzong.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Altitude, and the guided reality 40

Etiquette: the dzong rules 41

Emergency numbers and phrases 42

Altitude, and the guided reality

crime is near zero · the real risks are thin air and the road

Bhutan is one of the safest countries you can travel in. Violent crime against visitors is close to nonexistent, scams are rare, and the guided structure means you are rarely on your own to get into trouble. The genuine risks are environmental: the altitude on the passes and treks, and the mountain roads. Knowing how both work, and leaning on the guide who is there precisely for this, covers almost everything that can actually go wrong.

ALTITUDE, THE ONE REAL HAZARD

The western valleys sit around 2,200 to 3,100 metres, high enough that some people feel mild altitude sickness: headache, poor sleep, breathlessness. It usually settles in a day or two if you rest and hydrate. On the high treks, above 4,000 metres, it becomes serious, and the rule is absolute: if symptoms worsen, descend. Climb slowly, never sleep much higher than the day before, and tell your guide the moment you feel off. Confusion or breathlessness at rest is an emergency, not a tough patch.

THE GUIDED-EVERYTHING REALITY

You will have a guide for almost all sightseeing and a driver for every leg. This is not bureaucracy, it is the model, and it is part of why the country feels so safe and so legible. The trade-off is independence: you cannot wander off on a whim or improvise a side trip. Treat the guide as the asset they are. They read the weather, spot early altitude trouble, get you into dzongs at the right hour, and translate a culture that would otherwise stay closed. A good guide makes the trip.

READ THE ALTITUDE SYMPTOMS

MILD, WATCH IT

Headache, poor sleep

Common above 3,000m. Rest at the same height, drink water, ease off. If it clears you carry on; if it worsens you go down.

SERIOUS, DESCEND

Confusion, loss of balance

On a high trek, drowsiness or stumbling means fluid on the brain. A medical emergency. Descend at once and call for evacuation.

SERIOUS, DESCEND

Breathless at rest

A wet cough and breathlessness sitting still mean fluid on the lungs. Also an emergency. Get down and get a helicopter if you can.

07

GO DEEPER The full safety picture in the safety breakdown, the health prep in the vaccinations page, and where to get care in the hospitals and pharmacies page.

Etiquette: the dzong rules

first four are load-bearing · last four save you face

Eight things that matter, most of them about respect in sacred and official spaces. The first four cause real offense if you ignore them; the last four mostly cost you face. Your guide will steer you, but knowing them ahead means you read as a guest, not a tourist.

DO

Cover shoulders and knees in dzongs

Long trousers or a skirt, sleeves over the shoulder. Some inner temples ask you to remove hats and shoes at the door.

DO NOT

Photograph inside temples

Inner shrines are off-limits to cameras, including the Tiger's Nest interior. Ask before shooting monks or worshippers anywhere.

DO

Walk clockwise around sacred things

Chortens, mani walls, prayer wheels, and shrine rooms: always pass them with your right shoulder inward, the way pilgrims do.

DO NOT

Point your feet at an altar or person

Feet are the lowest, least respectful part of the body. Tuck them away when seated in a temple, never stretch them toward a shrine.

DO

Accept and give with both hands

Money, gifts, a cup of tea: two hands, or the right with the left touching the wrist. A small thing that reads as real respect.

DO NOT

Touch a monk or a sacred object

Do not touch religious statues, paintings, or a monk's robes, and do not climb on ruins or chortens for a photo.

DO

Ask before smoking, and tip the crew

Tobacco is tightly controlled and smoking in public is restricted. At the end, a fair tip for the guide and driver is expected and warmly received.

DO NOT

Criticise the king or the monarchy

The king is genuinely beloved here. Keep any political opinions to yourself; it reads as deeply rude, and you will not change a mind.

When in doubt, copy your guide and the locals. Stand when they stand at a tsechu, remove your hat when they do, and move slowly.

Dress for the dzongs every day, since you will visit one most days. A light layer that covers the shoulders saves carrying a separate outfit.

07

READ ON Traditions, religion, and the full etiquette context in the culture write-up, and what to wear where in the dress code page.

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now · a few Dzongkha words go a long way

POLICE
113
nationwide

AMBULANCE
112
nationwide

FIRE
110
nationwide

TOURISM SUPPORT
your operator
first point of call

JDW HOSPITAL
Thimphu
the main referral hospital

YOUR GUIDE
on call
save the number on day one

EIGHT DZONGKHA PHRASES THAT OPEN DOORS

ENGLISH	DZONGKHA (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	kuzu zangpo la	the warm, polite greeting
Thank you	kadrin che la	"la" adds respect
Yes / No	ing / men	simple and universal
How much?	gadem chi mo?	for the handicraft stalls
Delicious	zhimbe du	your host will beam
Where is the toilet?	chhabsang ga te mo?	point and ask
Sorry / excuse me	gongdag	polite apology
It is beautiful	jaga du	for the valleys and dzongs

Save your guide's number and your lodge details on the first day. They are your fastest help long before any hotline.

These phrases print as a wallet card on page 44; cut it out and keep it with your room key for the trip.

07

pack-lightly.com

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, a cut-out card for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 44

Print cards: cut, fold, take 45

Sources and methodology 46

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Bhutan data this guide was built from, with the daily fee already factored into the budget figures.



Trip Budget Calculator

Bhutan: ~230 USD/day budget, SDF included.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Best Time to Travel

Best: Mar-May and Oct-Nov. Month-by-month for 140+ countries.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/



Packing List Generator

Layers for a 1,700m altitude swing, plus trek kit.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/packing-list-generator/



What to Eat and Drink

Ema datshi from 1.80 USD, plus the rest of the menu.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the card lives in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

DZONGKHA · ESSENTIALS

Hello	kuzu zangpo la
Thank you	kadrin che la
Yes / No	ing / men
How much?	gadem chi mo?
Delicious	zhimbe du
Where is toilet?	chhabsang ga te mo?
Sorry	gongdag
It is beautiful	jaga du

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EMERGENCY · BHUTAN

Police	113
Ambulance	112
Fire	110
Main hospital	JDW, Thimphu
SDF per night	100 USD

My operator: _____

My guide: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Bhutan hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/bhutan/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the lodge.

Write your operator and guide's contact on the back on day one. They are the people who actually solve a problem here.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, with a research focus on the Himalaya and the realities of guided, permit-based travel. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if the daily fee or a price moves, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Sustainable Development Fee and visa policy: Bhutan's official Department of Tourism portal (bhutan.travel), the 2023 SDF reduction to 100 USD, retrieved 2026-05-15.
2. Lodge and hotel pricing: Booking.com snapshot 2026-05-14 across Paro, Thimphu, and Punakha, cross-checked with operator package quotes.
3. Currency: the ngultrum peg to the Indian rupee, ECB reference rates, 2026-05-25.
4. Climate and best-travel-time: Open-Meteo multi-year averages for the western valleys, captured 2026-05-17.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Pack Lightly Bhutan cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-10: visa · travel cost · safety · best travel time · culture

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Cost figures combine the published SDF with live lodge pricing and operator quotes, stamped with their capture date where they appear. Bhutan's budget and months tool datasets are placeholder-zero, so all figures here come from the dedicated research above, not the auto-synced tool feed.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: the eastern valleys and the deep south, which suit repeat visitors, and the full multi-week trekking logistics.

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Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.