TOUR CODE

HM8

ADVENTURESABROAD

KINGDOMS OF THE HIMALAYA

Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal & Tibet

24 days

Updated 01/11/2013

Day 1 *Arrive in Kathmandu*

Today we arrive in Nepal, a country with spectacular geography and a rich cultural diversity. Within its narrow borders we will find a complete climatic range, from tropical to temperate, alpine to arctic. As many as 30 different languages and dialects are spoken among the many ethnic groups.

NOTE: Due to variables such as festival dates, internal flights, and ever-changing entry (visa) requirements, our published tour dates and / or itinerary can shift right up to departure. As such, we will not accept any LAND ONLY bookings for this tour. Booking your air with Adventures Abroad offers you protection from the possible costs and complications associated with tour changes. Exceptions to this rule will only be granted to those passengers who are willing to fully accept the risks of booking their own air tickets given the above circumstances.

Overnight in Kathmandu. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Kathmandu, Nepal - Paro, Bhutan - Thimphu*

Today we fly to Paro and continue by road (65 km / 40 miles) to Thimphu. The drive takes 2 hours and en route we pass Tamchog Lhakhang, a bridge built by Thangtong Gyalpo, an iron bridge builder and saint from the 14th /15th century who introduced the art of building suspension bridges with iron chains.

Thimphu, the Bhutanese capital (2320 m / 7,609 feet), is situated on a broad green valley surrounded by terraced rice fields. This town of about 40,000 people built along traditional lines is the administrative centre of Bhutan and was only established in the 1950s. The main street of Thimphu, Norzim Lam, is lined with shops of all descriptions mainly stocking goods imported from India and China. This is the only capital in the world where there are no traffic lights, only three roundabouts, and police boxes decorated with dragons!

Bhutan's official name, 'Druk Yul', means the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon', which is officially portrayed on the country's flag. Bhutan is perhaps the least modernised and most mysterious country in South Asia and remains very cautious in its contact with the outside world. The flow of tourists into the country is regulated and the government makes great efforts to preserve and strengthen the country's religious and cultural traditions.

Overnight in Thimphu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Thimphu (Thimphu Festival, Fall Departure)*

Today we drive to the impressive Tashicho Dzong (which we may be allowed to enter), the traditional summer capital of Bhutan and now the seat of the Bhutanese government. The present building is a rebuilt version of a dzong or monastery-fortress that was erected here by Nawang Namgyal in 1641 and it retains many of the features of the old dzong. It is now an impressive sight and it houses all the government deparments and ministries, the throne room of the King, the National Assembly chambers and the nation's largest monastery with over 2000 monks in residence.

OUR FALL DEPARTURE coincides with the Thimphu Tsechu, an annual festival held at the Tashichho Dzong. The Tsechu reflects the deeply rooted religious sentiments of the people. For three days various types of masked dances are performed. Many depict the story of good triumphing over evil, the day of judgment, matrimonial fidelity etc. NOTE: It is likely that we will re-write this itinerary in adavance of this departure, to change the order of overnight points such that we are in Thimphu on the correct dates.

Overnight in Thimphu. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 4 *Thimphu - Punakha*

This morning we depart Thimphu via the spectacular Dochula Pass 3031 m (10,004 feet). We pass steeply through a forest of pine and cedar with panoramic views of the Himalaya (Thimphu - Punkaha 77 km / 48 miles, 3 hours).

Today's journey takes us deep into the heart of Bhutan. The drive will give you an insight into a medieval way of life that has changed little over the centuries. Modern development has brought better education, health care and electricity to these remote areas but the local small farm-based economy that has kept the local people self sufficient over the years is largely unchanged.

Located at a relatively low altitude of 1300 m (4,265 feet) in a rainshadow, the Punakha Valley produces most of the oranges and fruits grown commercially in Bhutan. Despite the warmer climate and the possibility of growing an endless variety of produce, the population of the valley remains remarkably low. Until very recently, Punakha remained the winter capital of Bhutan (there is only one capital now, Thimphu), and it is still the winter headquarters of the Head Abbott (Je Khempo) and his monks who move here every winter.

On arrival we will visit Punakha Dzong. This Dzong was built strategically at the junction of Pho Chu and Mo Chu rivers in 1637 to serve as the religious and administrative centre of the region. It was damaged by four catastrophic fires and an earthquake, however it has been fully restored by the present King (please note that the Dzong is frequently closed without notice).

Overnight in Punakha. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 5 *Punakha - Paro*

Today we travel by road back to Paro, set in what is considered to be the most beautiful of the main valleys (2280 m / 7,500 feet). The dominant feature of Paro is undoubtedly the Paro Dzong set above the glacial Paro Chu River. It is a particularly important and historic dzong having played a part in Bhutan's history since it was first constructed. On arrival we will check into our hotel.

Overnight in Paro. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 6 *Paro Area (Paro Festival, Spring Departure)*

During our time in Paro we will visit the National Museum of Bhutan which displays thangkas, artifacts, costumes, stamps (even talking stamps'), and objects from archaeological excavations. Located further up the valley is the famed Takstang or 'Tiger's Nest' monastery which burned down in 1998. The monastery has been rebuilt and you will have the option today to drive to a viewpoint in the valley from where you can see Takstang high up on the cliff opposite.

SPRING DEPARTURE: The Paro Festival provides the local populace with a wonderful occasion to renew their faith and receive blessings by watching the sacred dances or receiving 'empowerment' from a lama or Buddhist monk. The dances are performed by trained monks wearing ornate costumes and impressive masks. NOTE: It is likely that we will re-write this itinerary in adavance of this departure, to change the order of overnight points such that we are in Paro on the correct dates.

Overnight in Paro. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 7 *Paro - Phuntsholing*

Today we travel by road southward to the roadside village of Bunakha where we stop for lunch. The road continues to wind south over the southern foothills, through lush forested valleys and around the rugged north-south ridges of the inner Himalaya. It is a scenic journey; forests festooned with orchids cover the mountains on either side and exciting hairpin curves greet us with colourful sculptures of Tashi Tagye (eight special Tibetan symbols that reflect the teachings of the Buddha).

We continue descending the lower Himalayan hills to the border town of Phuntsholing, a fascinating mixture of Bhutanese and Indian and a lively centre for mingling peoples, languages, costumes and goods (150 km / 94 miles, +/-6 hours).

Overnight in Phuntsholing. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 8 *Phuntsholing, Bhutan - Dooars - Darjeeling, India*

Today we complete border formalities en route to the Dooars Valley (400 m / 1,312 feet), the 'Gateway to the Himalaya.'

Here an unending stretch of virgin forests is crisscrossed by the River Teesta and its innumerable tributaries. Roads cut through deep forests, rich with wildlife. Mauve hills host wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, tribal settlements and valleys carpeted with tea gardens.Today we travel to Darjeeling, surrounded by tea plantations on the lower hills.

Driving close beside the narrow gauge Darjeeling Hill Railway drawn by century old steam engines, we reach the halfway point of Kurseong where we stop for a tea break before driving to Ghoom at about 2400 m (8,000 feet). There is a descent into the busy town of Darjeeling (2134 m / 7,000 feet).

Darjeeling or 'the place of the thunderbolt' and the surrounding area once belonged to the rulers of Sikkim. In 1833 the British gained control of the hill on which Darjeeling stands after considerable political manoeuvring in return for a small annual payment to the King of Sikkim. It soon grew to a popular health resort after a pony road and some houses were built and tea growing introduced. Later in the 19th century, the remarkable mountain railway from the plains was built and Darjeeling boomed as a resort and holiday destination for the British bureaucracy wanting an escape to cooler climates. Built on a crescent shaped ridge, Darjeeling faces the Himalayan peaks and is surrounded by cultivated slopes, thick forests and tea plantations.

Overnight in Darjeeling. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Darjeeling Area*

We are woken before dawn with a cup of tea before boarding British built Land Rovers for the 15 km drive to Tiger Hill

to see the amazing colours of sunrise on Kanchenjunga. At 2550 m (8,500 feet), Tiger Hill commands superb views of the mountains and valleys of the eastern Himalaya with Everest, Lhotse and Makalu visible in the far distance on clear days. We stop at Ghoom Monastery on the way back; this monastery built in 1875 belongs to the Yellow Hat (Gelugpa) sect lamas and has a five metre high statue of the Maitreyi (future) Buddha.

In the afternoon we will tour the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute; the small zoo beside it has several interesting Himalayan species including snow leopards and red pandas. The institute itself houses a considerable collection of items used by the early Everest explorers and also has a fine topographical model of the Eastern Himalaya. Later we drive to a nearby tea plantation for which this region is famous and see the picking and processing of tea leaves.

Local train schedule permitting, we will aim for a train ride on the 120 year old steam run Darjeeling Hill Railway, now a UNESCO World Heritage entity. The rest of the day is free to browse the 'Chowrasta' or town square and explore the well-known Oxford Book Shop with its excellent collection of books on the history and cultures of the Himalaya. You could also walk down to the Lower Bazaar where the local residents shop for produce, fabrics and spices.

We may have time to visit the Tibetan Refugee and Handicraft Centre where Tibetan refugees live cooperatively and their children attend school while their parents work on wool making, carpet weaving, and handicraft production.

Overnight in Darjeeling. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Darjeeling - Gangtok (Sikkim)*

We have an early departure for our steep descent through a series of tea plantations to the tropical Teesta Valley. Passing through sal forests and cinchona (quinine bark) plantations, we stop briefly at the Teesta Bridge checkpoint to show our Sikkim entry documents before continuing onwards to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim.

Located in the Eastern Himalaya, Sikkim forms a natural border between Nepal to the west and Bhutan to the east. To the north lies Tibet and to the south the Teesta and Ringgit rivers form a natural boundary with the Indian state of West Bengal; to the east lies the Kingdom of Bhutan separated by a tongue of Chinese controlled Tibet.

The climate is subtropical in the lower valleys, but changing fast to temperate and alpine with increase in elevation. Mixed forests of bamboo and dozens of orchid species are common between 1500-3000 m (5,000-9,850 feet) -- 660 varieties of orchids are known to grow in Sikkim. The cardamom spice is a cash crop that grows wild extensively around Yuksum and Phodang.

Later today we will visit the Institute of Cottage Industries where young Sikkimese people are taught traditional crafts. There is a sales centre attached for a number of local handicrafts, most with a strong Tibetan look to them. Woollen carpets, shawls and traditionally painted tables are good buys, all at government regulated prices.

Overnight in Gangtok (1700 m / 5,600 ft). Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Gangtok Area - Martam*

This morning we will visit the Enchey Monastery, located on the ridge top above the town; the present building dates from 1909 though the monastery itself is over 200 years old. Also visited is the Institute of Tibetology which was established in 1958 as a major centre for research on Tibet and Tibetan Lamaistic Buddhism. It houses many rare books, thangkas, statues and manuscripts smuggled out of Tibet after the Chinese occupation. We will also visit the permanent 'Flower Show' that exhibits a number of native Sikkimese orchid and flower species.

We also visit Rumtek Monastery, located on the opposite side of the valley from Gangtok. Rumtek is the seat of the Tibetan Kagyugpa sect of monks and a major centre for Tibetan religious studies. The 16th Gwalpa Karmapa, the head of the Kagyugpa sect, took refuge in Rumtek after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950's; he and his followers escaped with whatever statues, 'thangka' paintings and scriptures they could and built Rumtek Monastery as a replica of the Chhofuk Monastery that they had left behind in Tibet.

We continue for a further 10 km (6 miles) to Martam village (1450 m / 4,428 feet) where we stay in comfortable cottages built in the local style with impressive views over a quiet valley of terraced rice paddies. The nearby village and the school offer a glimpse of an idyllic lifestyle in a perfect rural setting.

Overnight in Martam. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Martam - Kalimpong*

A scenic drive past forest covered slopes and fast flowing rivers to Kalimpong (1250 m / 4,100 feet), an important market town located strategically at the crossroads of Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Bengal until the 1960s when the Indo-China war put an end to cross border trade. It is now well known for its numerous flower and orchid nurseries.

We stay in the Himalayan Hotel, run by Tim MacDonald, grandson of the Tibetan explorer David MacDonald, who accompanied many of the early British Younghusband expeditions to Tibet around the turn of the century. The MacDonald family home is something of a museum to the early exploration of this part of the Himalaya; its 16 rooms decorated with memorabilia donated by notable Himalayan explorers who have stayed at the hotel over the years. The main house was built in the 1920s and has a mature garden with dozens of varieties of flowering trees and shrubs and views of the Himalaya from the verandahs.

Overnight in Kalimpong. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Kalimpong Area - Siliguri*

Today we historic home of Dr Graham and the extensive boarding and day school facilitiy that was established over a century ago. We will see its classrooms and boarding houses to get an idea how students of both sexes from all over India and neighbouring countries like Bhutan spend their days during the study year. There is an Anglican church with fine stained glass windows nearby, and you can also visit one of the flower nurseries for which Kalimpong is well known across India.

Late afternoon, we descend to the Teesta River Valley and drive to the important market town of Siliguri and onwards to our hotel located on the northern outskirts of town.

Overnight in Siliguri. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Siliguri, India - Bhadrapur, Nepal - Kathmandu*

Today we drive the short distance to the border with Nepal (Kakarvitta). From Bhadrapu on the Nepalese side of the border, we fly to Kathmandu.

Nepal is a country with spectacular geography and a rich cultural diversity. Within its narrow borders we will find a complete climatic range, from tropical to temperate, alpine to arctic. As many as 30 different languages and dialects are spoken among the many ethnic groups.

Overnight in Kathmandu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Kathmandu: City Tour*

This morning we travel to Kathmandu's central meeting area, Durbar Square, a profusion of temples reflecting the different architectural styles dating from the eleventh century. The area also includes the Royal Palace with its gilded gates and elaborate statues. The square is alive with a multitude of nationalities, intermingled with stalls displaying a wide variety of Nepalese and Tibetan handicrafts. We will also see "Freak Street" -- a famous hippie meeting place from the 60's.

We then proceed to Swayambhunath Temple, Nepal's most significant centre of Buddhist worship. There has been a temple on this site since at least the 5th century. Swayambhunath is also known as the "Monkey Temple" due to the large population of monkeys that make the grounds their home. The temple buildings are set atop a hill and offer an excellent view of Kathmandu and its valley.

This afternoon we visit Patan, the second largest town in the Kathmandu valley. Patan's Durbar Square contains some of the finest examples of Newari Architecture in Nepal.

Overnight in Kathmandu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Kathmandu, Nepal - Lhasa, Tibet*

Today we transfer to Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport for our flight to Tibet.

This remarkable trans-Himalayan flight takes us directly past the Everest group of peaks. In a little over one hour, the Kathmandu-Lhasa flight covers rugged terrain that once took trade caravans months to cross. On a clear day as many as eight of the world's fourteen 8000+ m (26,000+ feet) peaks can be seen. The landscape changes dramatically as we cross the great barrier of the Himalaya, from Nepal's green terraced hillsides to the high and dry, barren plateau typical of Tibet. We fly over deep-blue Yamdrok Lake to land at Gonggar Airport, 85 km (53 miles) south of Lhasa.

We will be met by our Tibetan guide on arrival and drive along the flat valley of the Tsangpo River to our comfortable hotel in Lhasa (3650 m / 12,045 feet). Balance of the day at leisure to acclimatize to the altitude.

Overnight in Lhasa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Lhasa: Jokhang Temple*

We have an easy morning to acclimatize followed by a visit to the Jokhang, the religious and geographical centre of Lhasa, and the most important temple in the world for all sects of Tibetan Buddhism. Pilgrims from across Tibet, many of whom have walked hundreds of kilometres to see the Jokhang once in their lives, queue for hours to enter the temple and perform a ritual circuit in prostration of its many sacred shrines. It is a moving experience to join them in the dark hallways, filled with the sound of low chanting, lit only by butter lamps. The main image worshipped here is Jowo Rinpoche, a gilded statue of Buddha Sakyamuni said to have been modeled during his lifetime.

The Jokhang is encircled by the Barkhor, an 800m (2,645 feet) flagstone pathway that is both a sacred circumambulation route and the biggest bazaar in all of Tibet. Night and day, Tibetans walk clockwise around it, earning religious merit as they shop, people-watch and chat with friends. Here you find people from all corners of Tibet:

striking, tall Khampa men from the east with big knives and red tassels wrapped about their heads; Golok women with their hair plaited in 108 tiny braids; nomad families bundled in sheepskins. The Barkhor is the real heart of Tibet, you can spend hours watching the passing parade or bargain for the trinkets and souvenirs, displayed in street stands, everything from prayer flags to silver jewelry to yak butter.

Overnight in Lhasa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Lhasa - Potala - Sera - Lhasa*

This morning we visit the fabled Potala Palace that rises above the city like a fairytale castle set atop its rocky pedestal. The Potala has been the home of successive Dalai Lamas. It was also the seat of the Tibetan government, and with chapels, cells, religious schools, and even tombs for the Dalai Lamas it was virtually a self-contained world. Begun in the 7th century, but not reaching its full glory until the 17th century reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the 13 storey Potala rises 117m (383 feet) high and is made entirely of wood, earth and stone. It has over 1000 rooms.

We proceed to Sera, one of the two most important Gelugpa (Yellow Hat sect) monasteries. The monastery is the location of the famous ‘monk's debate' on some afternoons every week. During this ritual 'question and answer' session, a senior monk quizzes a junior and there is much grimacing, clapping and mock threatening. The important part of this ritual is the passing on of knowledge of the theosophical questions of the Tibetan lamaistic Buddhist faith.

Overnight in Lhasa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Lhasa - Drepung - Norbulingka - Lhasa*

This morning we visit Drepung, a monastery which, during its peak, had 7,700 monks in residence and a single kitchen where food for them was cooked in enormous urns. It and Sera suffered damage in varying degrees during the turbulent days of the Red Guards and their Cultural Revolution but have now been restored and the monks have returned.

During our time in Lhasa we will also visit the Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's summer palace and currently the site of a simple museum.

Overnight in Lhasa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Lhasa - Shigatse*

An early departure takes us from the high Tibetan plateau to Shigatse.

We pass colourful rock carvings of Buddha as we approach the outskirts of Lhasa at the start of a long road journey. We leave the city limits and follow the course of the Tsangpo River which, entering India, becomes the Bramahputra. From the Kamba La (4794 m 15,728 ft) there is a spectacular view of the blue waters of Yamdrok Tso, one of Tibet's sacred lakes. Now we travel the zigzag road to cross the mighty Yarlung Tsangpo River on our way to Lhasautra. The road then drops down to Yamdrok Tso Lake and follows the twisting northern bank for hours, prior to climbing up to the Karo La Pass. On either side are gigantic peaks including 7260 m (23,958 foot) high Nazin Kang Sa.

On our way to Shigatse, we stop and visit Gyantse, famous for its multi-tiered stupa known as the Kumbum.

Overnight in Shigatse (3900 m / 12,870 feet). Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Shigatse Area*

We visit the main site of interest in Shigatse, the Tashilhunpo Monastery.

Tashilhunpo, the principal monastery of Tsang Province, is one of the Great Six centers of the Gelugpa sect. The others are Sera, Drepung, and Ganden, all in or near Lhasa, and Labrang and Kumbum in Amdo (southern Gansu / Qinghai provinces). Tashilhunpo is the largest, most vibrant monastery in Tibet, the only one that does justice to the term 'monastic city'. Founded in 1447 by Tsongkhapa's nephew and disciple, Gedundrub, the First Dalai Lama, it was substantially enlarged under the Fourth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Chokyi Gyaltsen (1570-1662).

This afternoon is free to explore Shigatse town and the market.

Overnights in Shigatse (3900m / 12,870 feet). Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Shigatse - Lhasa*

Today we follow the path of the often turbulent east-flowing Yarlung Tsampo River as it winds it's way towards Lhasa. You will see the new Lhasa-Shigatse railway in various stages of construction on either side of the river and through the Yarlung Valley's mountain walls (scheduled for completion in 2014). We will hop back and forth across the river that cuts through the rugged canyon and witness the clash between Tibet's past and it's future.

Overnight in Lhasa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 23 *Lhasa, Tibet - Kathmandu, Nepal - Bhaktapur*

Today we drive back to Lhasa'a Gonggar Airport and fly to Kathmandu. On arrival, we will drive to historic suburb on Bhaktapur now designated as a World Heritage Site. Walking tour of Bhaktapur.

Overnight in Bhaktapur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 24 *Kathmandu Valley - Depart*

Today we have a tour of the fascinating Kathmandu Valley. This morning we will visit Changu Narayan, a Hindu temple set on a hilltop a few kilometers from Bhaktapur. On the way to Changu Narayan, we pass through terraced rice fields and enjoy a glimpse of the rural life of Nepal.

Our next stop is Pashupatinath Hindu Temple, a very interesting place located on the sacred Bagmati River where there may be cremations taking place on the ghats. We also visit Boudhanath Stupa, one of the holiest Buddhist sites in Kathmandu and one of the largest spherical stupas in Nepal.

We then transfer to Kathmandu Airport for our flights homeward.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.