Tour Code
BT1

ADVENTURESABROAD

BHUTAN

Dzongs, Festivals & the Tiger's Nest

15 days

Created on: 17 Nov, 2026

Day 1 Arrival in Bangkok

Today we arrive in Bangkok, our assembly point for our tomorrow's flight to Paro.

Overnight at Bangkok Airport area hotel.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Bangkok, Thailand - Fly to Paro, Bhutan - Drive to Thimphu

This morning we fly to Paro via Druk Air.* The descent into Paro Valley ranks among the world's most dramatic airport approaches—the aircraft threads between Himalayan peaks before dropping into the narrow valley, terraced farmhouses and prayer flags visible on slopes below.

Crisp mountain air greets us at 2225 metres/7,300 feet elevation as we transfer by road to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, roughly one hour distant. The route follows the Paro Chhu downstream, crossing at Chuzom where three rivers converge. Here stand three chortens built in distinct styles—Bhutanese, Nepalese, and Tibetan—reflecting the cultural crossroads where these traditions meet. Across the valley, the Iron Bridge Builder Monastery clings to the opposite hillside, commemorating the 15th-century saint Thangtong Gyalpo who constructed iron chain bridges throughout the Himalayas.

Thimphu sits at 2320 metres/7,609 feet in a north-south valley flanked by forested ridges. The capital blends traditional architecture with contemporary development—small cafés and handicraft shops line main streets, yet construction remains bound by regulations requiring traditional Bhutanese design. The compact town centre invites independent exploration, easily navigated on foot.

* Please note the Druk Air flight commonly departs very early—typically between 5:00-6:00 am.

Overnight in Thimphu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Thimphu: City Sightseeing

This morning we visit the Buddha Dordenma, one of the world's largest Buddha statues overlooking Thimphu Valley from a southern hilltop. The 51-metre/169-foot bronze figure sits in meditation posture, its gold-painted surface gleaming above the capital. Completed in 2015, the statue fulfills an ancient prophecy about emanating blessings across the region.

At the Memorial Chorten, local Bhutanese of all ages circle the whitewashed stupa clockwise in continuous prayer, spinning prayer wheels and murmuring mantras. Built in 1974 to honour the third king, the chorten demonstrates how Buddhism permeates daily life—elderly with prayer beads, office workers on lunch breaks, families with children all pause here throughout the day.

We visit living museums documenting rural traditions: the Folk Heritage Museum and Simply Bhutan complex recreate farmhouse life through artifacts and demonstrations. At a weaving centre we observe traditional backstrap looms creating the intricate patterns that distinguish Bhutanese textiles. The National Library preserves religious manuscripts in Dzongkha and classical Tibetan, some centuries old, their loose pages wrapped in silk between wooden covers.

Tashichho Dzong dominates the valley's west bank—a fortress-monastery serving as Bhutan's administrative centre and summer residence of the monastic body. Rebuilt in the 1960s following fire damage, the complex maintains traditional architecture: whitewashed walls, red-painted upper sections, and elaborate wood carving. The king's offices occupy one section.

The Weekend Market operates Friday evening through Sunday, drawing villagers from surrounding valleys who sell dried chilies, yak butter, vegetables, textiles, and bamboo crafts—a lively exchange between rural producers and city residents.

We conclude at 12th-century Changangkha Monastery, perched on a ridge above central Thimphu. This guardian monastery protects the valley, and parents bring infants here for blessings. The courtyard offers views across the capital's expanding neighbourhoods.

Overnight in Thimphu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Thimpu - Phobjikha: Dochula Pass, Punakha & Wangdue Valleys

Leaving Thimphu, we climb toward Dochula Pass at 3100 metres/10,170 feet. The pass marks a sacred threshold, and 108 whitewashed chortens crown the summit alongside a monastery—structures built in 2005 to honour Bhutanese soldiers. Prayer flags stretch in every direction, their colours fading as wind carries printed mantras across the mountains. Travellers follow Bhutanese custom by hoisting their own flags to increase good fortune. On clear days, the panorama extends across the eastern Himalayas—an unbroken chain of peaks above 7000 metres including Gangkar Puensum, the world's highest unclimbed mountain.

Descending eastward, we continue to Phobjikha Valley at 3000 metres/9,843 feet, a bowl-shaped glacial valley on the western slopes of the Black Mountains. The valley sits within protected wilderness where black-necked cranes winter from late October to mid-February, migrating from the Tibetan Plateau. These rare birds hold sacred status in Bhutanese Buddhism, and the valley's designation as a protected area reflects both conservation priorities and spiritual significance. Phobjikha is considered a beyul—a hidden valley that serves as refuge from worldly turmoil according to Himalayan Buddhist tradition.

This afternoon we visit a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse where rural life continues at its ancestral pace. Families still maintain the ground-floor livestock quarters, first-floor living spaces, and upper-level storage for grain and fodder—a three-storey pattern refined over centuries for efficiency and warmth in high-altitude winters.

Overnight in Phobjikha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 Phobjikha: Gangtey Monastery

Gangtey Monastery dominates Phobjikha Valley from a small hill rising from the valley floor. The complex serves as the only Nyingmapa monastery west of the Black Mountains, its origins tracing to the 16th century when Pema Thinley predicted a monastery would be built here. His grandson fulfilled the prophecy, establishing Gangtey as a centre for the Nyingma school—Bhutan's oldest Buddhist tradition. Recent restoration has returned the monastery to its former glory, and resident monks maintain centuries-old practices of prayer and study. Visitors can observe morning and evening rituals, watching monks in their distinctive red robes conduct ceremonies unchanged for generations.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature operates the Black-Necked Crane Information Centre at the forest edge overlooking valley wetlands. The observation room provides high-powered telescopes for watching cranes during their winter residence, typically late October through mid-February, though migration patterns shift with weather. Display panels explain the natural and cultural significance of these birds—revered in Bhutan as manifestations of the deity Mahakala. The cranes' seasonal return marks an important annual event, celebrated with the Black-Necked Crane Festival each November.

We participate in morning or evening prayers at the monastery, joining monks as they chant ancient texts. The monastery also welcomes participants in hoisting lungta prayer flags—the most popular form featuring a wind horse carrying jewels. Bhutanese raise these flags to increase good fortune and ward off obstacles. Any donations made support the monastery's Buddhist school, providing food, books, and clothing for young monks.

This afternoon we hike through the valley and surrounding villages, experiencing the landscape that draws both cranes and contemplatives to this remote elevation.

Overnight in Phobjikha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Phobjikha - Bumthang: Trongsa & Chumey Valleys

Today's journey takes us to Bumthang Valley at 2800 metres/9,186 feet, passing through Trongsa where Bhutan's royal family originated. Trongsa Dzong commands the ridge above the roaring Mangde Chhu, perhaps the most dramatically sited fortress in Bhutan. The structure drops down the mountainside in multiple levels, its southern face often disappearing into cloud. Because this dzong straddles the only route between eastern and western Bhutan, the Trongsa Penlop effectively controlled all central and eastern territories. Every king has served as Trongsa Penlop before ascending the throne.

The renovated Ta Dzong watchtower now serves as a museum displaying royal regalia and historical artifacts. From Trongsa we continue through Chumey Valley, renowned for yathra weaving. We stop at a weaving centre where artisans create these distinctive woolen textiles using techniques unique to Bumthang, their colourful geometric patterns worked on traditional backstrap looms.

Bumthang represents Bhutan's spiritual heartland. Buddhism entered through this valley in the 8th century when Guru Padmasambhava was invited to subdue hostile spirits. The region comprises four valleys: Choekhor, Chumey, Tang, and Ura. Monasteries and temples dot the landscape, and the area remains deeply significant as the ancestral home of Pema Lingpa, the 15th-century Buddhist master whose descendants include the current royal dynasty.

This evening we visit Jambay Lhakhang and Kurjey Lhakhang. Jambay, reputedly built in 659 by Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo, contains three stone steps representing past, present, and future ages—when all three sink into earth, the current age ends. Kurjey's three temples occupy the sanctuary where Guru Rinpoche left his body imprint on rock. The spring above is believed to possess curative properties, making this one of Bhutan's most revered pilgrimage sites.

Overnight in Bumthang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Bumthang: Jakar Festival / Mebartsho & Tamshing Goemba

This morning we attend the Jakar Tshechu, one of Bhutan's most celebrated festivals. The tshechu—meaning "tenth day"—celebrates Guru Rinpoche's birthday, considered the most auspicious day in Bhutanese Buddhism.* The three-day festival unfolds within the massive Jakar Dzong, where mask dances and ritual performances continue from dawn through afternoon. Monks and villagers perform cham dances wearing elaborate costumes and painted wooden masks representing deities, demons, and sacred animals. These aren't theatrical performances but religious rituals believed to convey blessings and subdue evil forces.

The festival draws Bhutanese from across the country—families in finest traditional dress, nomads from remote valleys, monks in burgundy robes. Beyond the religious ceremonies, the tshechu serves as important social gathering where communities discuss concerns, arrange marriages, and reconnect with distant relatives. Vendors sell traditional foods, and the atmosphere blends devotion with celebration.

This afternoon we visit Mebartsho—the Burning Lake—a revered pilgrimage site in the Tang Valley. The name commemorates the 15th-century terton Pema Lingpa, a discoverer of sacred treasures. According to legend, Pema Lingpa declared that Guru Rinpoche had hidden treasures in the lake centuries earlier. Skeptical locals demanded proof. Pema Lingpa dove into the deep pool holding a burning butter lamp. After remaining underwater an impossible duration, he emerged holding a chest and scrolls—with the butter lamp still burning bright in his hand. The lake has been known as Mebartsho ever since.

* Please note the festival we attend can vary depending on annual dates, location, and logistics.

Overnight in Bumthang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Bumthang & Drangchel

Today we drive east through the valley, following back roads through picturesque villages and farmland where rural life continues at its traditional pace. The route reveals Bumthang's agricultural character—stone farmhouses surrounded by buckwheat fields, potato plots, and apple orchards. Unlike the rice-growing valleys at lower elevations, Bumthang's 2800-metre altitude supports different crops adapted to shorter growing seasons and cooler temperatures. Villages cluster around temples, their chorten-marked entrances blessing those who pass

through.

We visit Ugyen Choling Palace, now a museum offering insight into aristocratic life of the previous century. The palace belonged to a prominent Bumthang family whose influence extended through religious and political spheres. The beautifully maintained structure houses period furniture, religious artifacts, household items, and textiles that illustrate how elite families lived—separate from but deeply connected to the farming communities surrounding them. Religious chapels within the complex contain murals and statuary dating back centuries.

The museum's exhibits document broader themes of Bhutanese heritage: traditional architecture with its precise joinery and symbolic decoration, religious practices that governed daily rhythms, and the social structures that organized valley communities. Walking through the palace rooms provides context for understanding how Bhutan maintained cultural continuity even as neighbouring kingdoms fell to outside powers.

Overnight in Bumthang.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Bumthang - Punakha

Today we retrace our route westward toward Punakha at 1200 metres/3,937 feet, descending from Bumthang's high valleys toward the warmer Punakha-Wangdue region. The journey reverses yesterday's climb over Yotong La pass, offering different perspectives on landscapes we've already traversed. We stop at Chendebji Chorten, built in the 18th century in Nepalese style with its painted eyes gazing in four directions—a reminder of cultural exchange along Bhutan's historic trade routes.

Punakha served as Bhutan's capital and seat of government until the mid-1950s when administrative functions shifted to Thimphu. The valley remains politically significant as the winter residence of the Je Khenpo and the central monk body, who descend from Thimphu each October to escape harsh mountain cold.

We visit Punakha Dzong, arguably Bhutan's most magnificent fortress. The massive structure occupies an island where the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu—father and mother rivers—converge. Founded in 1637 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the dzong served as the seat of government for three centuries. Every Bhutanese king has been crowned here, linking the monarchy's legitimacy to this fortress's spiritual and political authority. The complex suffered repeated damage from fire, earthquakes, and floods over centuries, but extensive restoration has returned the dzong to its former grandeur. Carved woodwork, painted murals, and gilded metalwork demonstrate Bhutanese craftsmanship at its finest.

Overnight in Punakha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Punakha - Khamsum Yuelley Monastery

Punakha Valley spreads wide and fertile at 1200 metres elevation, the kingdom's rice basket where both red and white varieties grow along the riverbanks. The warmer temperatures here—substantially milder than Thimphu or Bumthang—support two annual crops in some fields. Ritsha village exemplifies traditional valley settlement: mud-walled houses with stone foundations, only two storeys high, each surrounded by gardens growing oranges, papayas, and organic vegetables alongside rice paddies.

This morning we visit Chimi Lhakhang, known as the Fertility Temple. The small monastery sits atop a hill blessed by Drukpa Kunley, the 15th-century "Divine Madman" whose unorthodox teaching methods included sexual encounters used as paths to enlightenment. The saint worked to spread Buddhist teachings through unconventional means, and the monastery built in his honour in 1499 attracts couples praying for children. The approach follows footpaths through rice fields and past the quaint village of Lobesa.

This afternoon we hike to Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten, built by the Queen Mother in the 1990s. The trail climbs through terraced paddies before winding up the hillside, about 1-2 hours total walking time depending on pace. The four-storey chorten displays rare architectural features—different levels honour distinct deities, and the structure combines elements from several Buddhist traditions. From the hilltop, views extend across Punakha Valley's patchwork of fields toward forested ridges and distant snowpeaks.

Overnight in Punakha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Punakha - Paro

Today we return toward Paro, retracing our route over Dochula Pass. The journey offers final views of the Punakha-Wangdue valleys before climbing back into the cooler elevations of the Thimphu region. We stop at Simtokha Dzong, Bhutan's oldest fortress-monastery, built in 1627 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal shortly after his arrival from Tibet. The dzong now houses a school for religious and cultural studies, its strategic position guarding the entrance to the Thimphu Valley unchanged for four centuries.

Paro Valley extends from the Tibetan border at Jomolhari south to Chuzom where the Thimphu and Punakha rivers meet. Before road construction in the 1960s, most trade entered Bhutan through Paro—from Tibet via Tremo La pass or from India through the southern Haa Valley. The valley floor's 2200-metre/7,218-foot elevation supports apple orchards and barley fields, while terraced paddies climb the lower slopes.

Paro town blends traditional architecture with contemporary shops, cafés, and galleries. The compact centre rewards wandering—handicraft stores sell textiles and carved wooden items, small restaurants offer momos and ema datshi, and the streets lead naturally to the traditional cantilever bridge spanning the Paro Chhu. Across the river, Ugyen Pelri Palace rises on a hillside surrounded by chortens. Near town, the archery field often hosts matches—Bhutan's national sport draws enthusiastic crowds, and archers in traditional dress compete with bamboo bows or modern compounds.

Overnight in Paro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Paro: Area Sightseeing

A short drive from town brings us to Kyichu Lhakhang, one of Bhutan's oldest and most sacred temples. Built in the 7th century, the monastery sits among rice paddies, its antiquity evident in the architectural style and spiritual atmosphere. The temple ranks equally holy with Lhasa's Jokhang Temple in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Adjacent stands Dumtse Lhakhang, built in Tibetan style—legend claims the entire structure flew here from Tibet, settling on its current foundation.

We visit the National Museum housed in the ancient Ta Dzong watchtower above Paro Dzong. The 17th-century circular structure provides panoramic views across the valley from its distinctive position. Opened in 1968, the museum's collection includes fine bronzes, thangka paintings, textiles, jewellery, and handicrafts documenting Bhutan's artistic heritage. The top floor chapel displays a "tree" depicting major figures from Tibetan Buddhism's four schools—Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug.

Note: At time of writing, earthquake repairs to the watchtower mean exhibits are temporarily housed in an adjacent building.

From the museum we walk down to Rinpung Dzong, the fortress-monastery serving as Paro's administrative headquarters and home to the district monk body. Built in 1644, the dzong exemplifies Bhutanese fortress architecture—massive whitewashed walls, traditional wooden cantilever construction throughout, and elaborate wall paintings depicting Buddhist teachings. The covered bridge across the Paro Chhu connects town to dzong, its wooden roof sheltering murals of Milarepa's life and teachings.

Overnight in Paro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Paro & Tiger's Nest Monastery

Today we hike to Taktsang Monastery—Tiger's Nest—Bhutan's most iconic site. The temple complex clings impossibly to a sheer cliff 900 metres/2,953 feet above the Paro Valley floor. According to legend, Guru Rinpoche flew here from Tibet on a tigress's back in the 8th century, meditating in a cave for three months to subdue demons preventing Buddhism's spread. The monastery built around that cave became a pilgrimage destination, rebuilt several times after fires—most recently following a devastating 1998 blaze.

The only access is by foot—no vehicles reach the monastery. Horses can be hired to carry riders partway up, though all visitors must walk the final steep approach. The round-trip averages 4-5 hours plus one hour touring the monastery. The trail climbs through blue pine and rhododendron forest, prayer flags marking the path as it switchbacks upward. Roughly two hours brings us to a cafeteria where the monastery comes into full view across a ravine—the perspective captured in countless photographs.

Those who wish can stop at this viewpoint, having achieved substantial elevation gain with excellent views. The final ascent drops into the gorge before climbing steeply via stone steps to the monastery entrance. Inside, dimly lit chapels contain the meditation cave, statues, murals, and the spiritual intensity that draws Bhutanese pilgrims despite the challenging approach. The setting alone—buildings perched on cliff ledges, prayer flags snapping in updrafts, mountains rising beyond—justifies the monastery's reputation.

By now your Tour Leader will know your capabilities. Please discuss your comfort level for this hike, which many travellers of average fitness characterize as challenging. Alternative activities exist for those choosing not to attempt the climb.

We descend by the same route, returning to Paro for our farewell dinner.

Overnight in Paro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Paro, Bhutan - Bangkok, Thailand

This morning we fly back to Bangkok where we include your hotel stay this evening near the airport. Your Tour Leader remains available to assist with airport transfers for onward journeys. Dinner is on your own.

Overnight in Bangkok airport hotel.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 15 Departure from Bangkok

Departure from Bangkok.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast