

# Off the beaten track in Bhutan

## Trek to the South East face of Gangkar Punsum



### Trip highlights

Explore the beautiful Phobjikha Valley.

Trek close to the base of Gangkar Punsum, the highest unclimbed peak in the world, on a fully supported 12 day trek following a spectacular trail through the Eastern Himalayas.

Visit ancient monasteries, Buddhist temples and a local primary school.



### Trip details

**Dates:** 6 October 2017, from Bangkok (See Notes)

**Duration:** 18 nights/ 19 days in Bhutan, including 11 nights camping and 7 nights in hotels, including luxury properties

**Trekking:** 12 days to the South East face of Gangkar Punsum

**Cost:** US \$ 7,250, excluding international flights

**Group size:** minimum of 6 and no more than 12

**Accompanied by:** Heather McNeice and Krista Waddell

## Trip Overview

This is not the typical introduction to either the sights or treks of Western Bhutan, followed by the majority of first-time visitors. While we will visit the important dzongs in Punakha and Paro and, a number of monasteries, including Gangtey, we will not spend time in the capital, Thimphu. Instead, we will take you to parts of Bhutan that most visitors will never see.

## Detailed itinerary

### Pre-departure day: meet in Bangkok

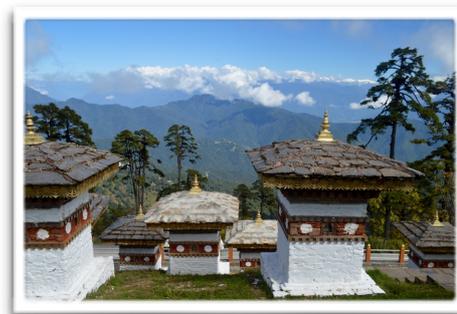
Fly to Bangkok where we recommend staying at the Novotel at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport, ready for an early morning departure to Bhutan the following day.

*Overnight Bangkok airport hotel.*

### Day 1: Fly to Paro, Bhutan, drive to Punakha Valley

We leave Bangkok to fly to Paro in western Bhutan, arriving mid-morning. We will be met at the airport by our Bhutanese guide for transfer to the Punakha Valley. The drive takes about four hours with a stop, en route, for lunch.

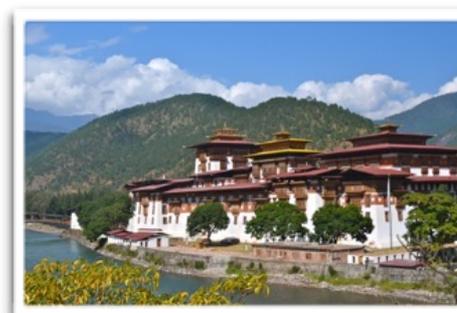
At the Dochu La pass we will visit the 108 chortens perched on a hillside and, cloud-cover permitting, enjoy the view over snow-capped Himalayan peaks. From the pass, the road descends through sub-tropical forest to the rice fields of the Punakha Valley. At an elevation of 1,250 m, this will be our lowest altitude in Bhutan.



*Overnight hotel: Uma by Como, Punakha*  
<http://www.comohotels.com/umapunakha/>

### Day 2: Punakha to Phobjikha Valley

After a leisurely breakfast overlooking the rice terraces, we will visit the impressive Punakha Dzong, (a fortress, housing both civic offices and a monastery) at the confluence of the Mother and Father rivers. The dzong is home to the remains of Bhutan's first ruler, Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal, and the winter residence of the monastic order's leader and his entourage of monks.



This afternoon's drive (about 3.5 hours) takes us east to the Black Mountains that divide Western and Central Bhutan. It is a short descent to the Phobjikha Valley, a wide, glacial valley and one of the most stunning in Bhutan. We are now at an altitude of

## Driving in Bhutan

The trip involves two days of driving for four to five hours to reach Bumthang in Central Bhutan and the start of the trek route. Although we will be taking the main west/east highway, the road is winding and narrow in places and we may be subject to delays, if we encounter road-building.

We plan to avoid the return drive by flying from Bumthang back to Paro.

## Trek Overview

At 7,550m, Gangkar Punsum is the highest unclimbed peak in the world, despite several attempts at the summit, before Bhutan banned all mountaineering. The trek route, towards the south east face, takes us through an inaccessible and untouched region, rarely visited by trekkers.

We will be trekking for 12 days over rough terrain and it is essential that you are fit and healthy and can devote time to training, as part of your preparation. In return, you will experience the thrill of trekking through a truly remote and unspoilt region of the Eastern Himalayas.

3,000 m.

*Overnight hotel: Gangtey Lodge, Phobjikha Valley*

[http://www.easternsafaris.comgangteygoenpalodge\\_home.html](http://www.easternsafaris.comgangteygoenpalodge_home.html)

### Day 3: Phobjikha Valley

Today, we will visit Gangtey Goemba, high on a ridge, overlooking the valley and take a stroll through the village. There are some beautiful walking trails through the valley, passing farmhouses and small temples, for anyone who wishes to explore. Or, you may decide to relax and enjoy the hotel.



*Overnight hotel: Gangtey Lodge, Phobjikha Valley*

[http://www.easternsafaris.comgangteygoenpalodge\\_home.htm](http://www.easternsafaris.comgangteygoenpalodge_home.htm)

### Day 4: Bumthang Valley

After breakfast at the hotel, we leave behind the beautiful Phobjikha Valley, to drive to Bumthang, and the heart of Central Bhutan. The drive is about 5 hours, with a stop for lunch. We will also visit a local textile shop and weaving centre at Chummi.

Depending on our arrival time, there may be time to stroll through Jakar, the main town in Bumthang, visiting the local shops along the single main street.

This evening we will organise our trekking gear, ready to start the trek in the morning.

*Overnight hotel: Yu-Gharling, Bumthang Valley*

<http://yugarling.com/>



## An adventure

This is an adventure holiday, with a touch of luxury at our hotel stays. For the most part, however, we will be well off the beaten track. You should expect the unexpected and be prepared to be open-minded and flexible.

Trekking in the Himalayas is not like walking in your local national park. The terrain will be steep and uneven, it will be extremely cold at night, days will be long and weather unpredictable. But it will probably be one of the most memorable trips you ever do!

## Gangkar Punsum Trek

### Day 5: Toktu Zampa – Khathang: walking time 5-6 hours.

We begin the day with a short drive north, past the village of Toktu Zampa, where we will meet our horses, horsemen and crew at the starting point of the trek. We will follow the Chamkhar Chuu (river) north, past farmhouses, a mani wall, Buddhist shrines and the 7th century temple of Nga Lhakhang. We pass through the village of Zhabethang (Shobthang), and hope to visit the small Choekhor Toe community school. Our campsite is further on, near the army camp at Khathang, where we will have our permits checked.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 2,834 m*

### Day 6: Khathang – Gopu: walking time 7 hours.

We are now leaving civilisation behind, following the river through a bamboo forest, as we make our way up the valley. As the valley narrows, impressive cliffs form a wall on the opposite side of the river and there are many side streams to cross.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 3,276 m*

### Day 7: Gopu – Tsampa: walking time 5-6 hours.

Today we continue to follow the river which tumbles down the narrowing valley. As we climb up from our camp, the vegetation becomes more alpine and the terrain more rugged. We will see a small temple, before another army camp at Tsampa, near the confluence of several rivers and our campsite for the night. Depending on our arrival time, we may be able to visit the temple.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 3,675 m*

### Day 8: Tsampa – Shingo: walking time - 5 hours.

From Tsampa, a bridge takes us over the Mela Chuu, past a small settlement of half a dozen huts, known as Tsawuu. A short, but steep climb, through forest, brings us to 3,900 m and some yak gates, built by local herders to keep their yaks from wandering too far. The trail becomes rocky underfoot. About 5 hours after leaving Tsampa, we arrive at Shingo, a few stone huts above the tree line, where we camp for the night. Today is a shorter walking day and there should be time this afternoon to relax in camp.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 4,209 m*

### Day 9: Shingo – Bamurpa: walking time - 4.5 hours.

The second of our slightly shorter days allows for acclimatisation as we head higher into the mountains. Weather permitting, we should have some great views of several peaks up ahead. We

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**Gangkar Punsum**  
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**Altitude sickness**  
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Above 2,500 m anyone may experience the symptoms of altitude sickness, resulting from the reducing atmospheric pressure which makes it harder for our bodies to absorb oxygen. The best approach is to acclimatise by ascending slowly and the itinerary has been designed to allow for this, with a gradual ascent to the highest camp of the trek. Nevertheless, you should be aware that everyone acclimatises at different rates and the following symptoms may be evidence of altitude sickness: broken sleep, loss of appetite, tiredness, headache, mild swelling of hands and face.

Our guide is trained to recognise the symptoms of altitude sickness, for which the only remedy is to descend to a lower elevation. Ultimately, it is the guide's decision as to whether a member of the group should descend.

will pass several small hamlets - no more than a few rough stone huts - and some more yak gates. Camp is at Bamurpa, a large flat meadow, next to the river.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 4,490 m*

**Day 10: Bamurpa – Zhegephu: walking time - 5 hours.**

From Bamurpa, we turn towards the west. We wade across the river (there is no bridge) to enter a valley that is known in some descriptions of this area as “Jumbo Jet Valley” because it is so wide. We are now in fairly unexplored territory, with no more than a handful of Westerners having visited this region. Surrounded by high ridges, the snowy south east flank of Gangkar Punsum can be seen from here.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 4,994 m*

**Day 11 - rest day at Zhegephu.**

Today, you can choose to relax in camp or explore this little-visited valley. If skies are clear, you will wake to a spectacular view of Gangkar Punsum. Several of the surrounding ridges afford stunning views of the area, its many peaks and glacial lakes.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 4,994 m*

**Day 12: Zhegephu – Tsampa: walking time - 8 hours.**

The day begins with an easy descent down to Shingo. Rather than wading back across the river we will stay on the western bank, crossing over the bridge at Shingo. From here, a gradual descent continues past some yak herder huts, to Tsampa.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 3,675 m*

**Day 13: Tsampa - Tsho Shap: walking time - 5.5 hours.**

Beginning with a series of switchbacks, we climb back above the tree line, from where there are views of a number of snowy peaks. We come into a beautiful valley and then to a glacial lake at 4,220 m. Camp is close by the lake.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 4,420 m*

**Day 14: Tsho Shap - Tashi Sa: walking time - 6 hours.**

We set off for our climb to the Thole La pass (4,730 m) which we should reach in less than two hours from camp. On a clear day, the views stretch in all directions as we give thanks to the local deities with the traditional shout, when reaching a pass, of “Yogaglo.” A steep descent leads down from the pass to the

## Visit Bhutan 2017

Bhutan is a destination like no other. Closed to the outside world until 1974, many aspects of the Bhutanese way of life have remained unchanged for centuries. In this isolated mountain kingdom, sandwiched between India to the south and Tibet to the north, you will experience the stunning natural beauty of the Eastern Himalayas and an ancient culture, underpinned by Buddhism.

You will have the opportunity to visit age-old temples and historic fortresses and will spend twelve days in one of the most remote and un-trekking areas of the country.

Thashi Chuu valley. Five and a half hours from last night's camp, we reach the bridge at Labrong. The campsite is a short distance from here.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 4,117 m*

### Day 15: Tashi Sa - Chokchum: walking time - 6.5 hours.

We begin the day with a descent to a fork in the trail. Right leads to Tsochenchen and over several passes to the hot springs at Dur. We will turn left and follow the trail that Heather and Krista took on their last day of the Snowman trek in 2013. The camp site is in a clearing known as Chokchum for our last night in a tent.

*Overnight Camp - altitude 3,247 m*

### Day 16: Chokchum - Dur and drive to Jakar: walking time - 4 hours.

Much of the final day's trekking is through forest, next to the river on a muddy trail. From a high point on a hillside, we can see the road head in the distance cutting through the trees. Gradually, fences, houses and a telephone tower ease us back into the real world. Our transport will be waiting as we cross a narrow suspension bridge. We will farewell our horsemen and crew and drive the short distance back to our lodge in Jakar.

*Overnight hotel: Yu'Gharling*  
<http://yugharling.com/>

### Day 17: fly Bumthang to Paro

This morning, if all goes to plan, we will avoid the 10-hour drive back to Paro by catching the domestic flight to Paro and transfer to our hotel in the Paro Valley.

This afternoon, you may choose to relax or explore Paro town, where there are many souvenir shops along the main street. If time permits, we may visit Paro Dzong, one of the most important in Bhutan.



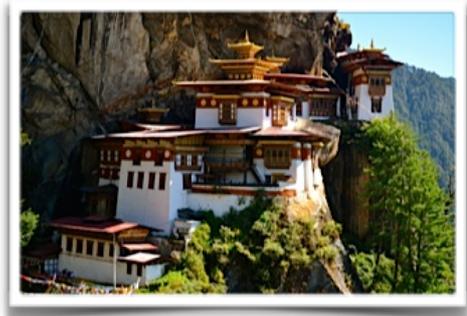
*Overnight hotel: Uma by Como, Paro*  
<http://www.comohotels.com/umaparo/>

### Day 18: Paro Valley

Today we have a full day to explore the Paro Valley. Options include a half day hike to Tiger's Nest monastery, perched on a cliff 800 m above the Paro Valley, local temples or perhaps a game of archery. For anyone wishing to relax and enjoy the

facilities at the hotel, you are, of course, free to do so.

Overnight hotel: *Uma by Como, Paro*  
<http://www.comohotels.com/umaparo/>



**Day 19 - Depart Bhutan**

All good things must come to an end and this morning we return to Paro airport for our flight to Bangkok and home.

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We expect to follow this itinerary. However, local conditions and weather may mean we have to make changes to the program. Times and distances stated are approximate, and may vary with individual and group fitness and interest levels.



## Departure Date

At this stage, we have suggested a departure date of 6 October 2017. Currently, there are only three internal flights per week between Bumthang and Paro and each takes only 22 passengers. We need to ensure that our departure date allows us to connect with one of these flights at the end of the trek. The flight schedule for October 2017 is not yet available. It is possible, therefore, that we may need to alter the departure date by one or two days, so that we coincide with the internal flight.

## Bhutan & Beyond

The trip has been arranged through Bhutan & Beyond, an independent travel agency based in Queensland, specialising in tailor-made trips to Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet and Northern India, for clients worldwide. Directors, James and Nicola Irving, have been travelling regularly to Bhutan for many years and are very knowledgeable about all things Bhutan. Bhutan & Beyond uses one of Bhutan's longest established trekking companies and one of the few companies familiar with the trek route to the South-East face of Gangkar Punsum. Bookings for the trip will be handled by James. James can be reached by telephone on + 61 7 5525 2845, toll free on 1300 367 875 (then press 1#) or by email at [james@bhutan.com.au](mailto:james@bhutan.com.au). Visit the Bhutan & Beyond website at <http://www.bhutan.com.au>.

## Krista and Heather

This will be Krista's sixth consecutive trip to Bhutan and Heather's eighth. We have trekked extensively in Western and Central Bhutan and have completed the Druk Path, Laya Gasa, Jhomolhari, Lingshi Laya, and Lunana (Snowman) treks. We are familiar with all the sites visited on the non-trekking days, the majority of hotels, the road journeys and internal flight.

## The trek route

Despite its isolation, the pace of change is gathering speed in Bhutan. Many trek routes are being eroded each year, as farm roads are built to make once-isolated villages more accessible. We have chosen a trek route that is seldom trekked and unaffected by road-building. The approach to Gangkar Punsum is largely unexplored and we are unlikely to meet more than a handful of trekkers, if any. A UK company claims to have been the first to take clients on this trek in 2014. The route will give you the chance to experience truly remote Himalayan trekking and, weather permitting, offers panoramic views of a section of the Eastern Himalayas that few visitors will ever see.

## On the trail

Trekking in Bhutan is organised differently to trekking in Nepal, its Himalayan neighbour. In Bhutan, all food and camping gear is carried on pack horses for the duration of the trek. There is nowhere to resupply along the way. Campsites are simple clearings in the forest, close to a water source. All nights on the trek are in a tented camp. Trekkers are required to bring their own cold weather sleeping bag. All other "standard" camping gear is provided as well as the following "premium" equipment which we believe will make the camping experience more comfortable: cottage-style tents, gas heater in the dining tent; folding camping beds and mattresses; blankets and hot water bottles.

The crew set up camp every afternoon - a collection of trekkers' tents, a dining tent and a toilet tent. All meals are cooked by the camp chef. Breakfast and dinner are served in the dining tent, while lunch is generally taken at a stop on the trail.

Trekkers carry a small day pack with water, spare clothes, a camera, sunscreen and other personal items. All other kit and camping gear is carried on horseback.

Temperatures on the trek can range from 25 degrees during the day to subzero overnight. It is important to have comfortable walking boots and warm, waterproof clothing. A detailed list of recommended gear will be provided once your place on the trip is booked.

## Cost

All trips within Bhutan and the flights to and from Bhutan are priced in US dollars. With a minimum of six guests travelling, the cost of this trip, excluding air travel to Bangkok from your departure point and from Bangkok to Bhutan return, is US \$7,250. This price is based on twin share. A single supplement is available on request. The approximate cost of the Bangkok-Paro-Bangkok flight is US \$750 economy or \$900 business class. The actual flight cost is not yet available so there may be a small increase or decrease to reflect the actual flight cost.

We will be in Bhutan in October, the best time to visit the Eastern Himalayas and, therefore, peak season. Flights and hotel rooms are in high demand and are often booked over a year in advance. Places on this trip will be booked on a first come, first served, basis.

## Payments

Payment may be made in US dollars or Australian dollars. Assuming we have sufficient interest in this group trip, a non-refundable deposit of US\$500 is required by 30 September 2016 to secure your place. A further payment of US\$2,500 is due when the return flight Bangkok/Paro is confirmed, expected to be December 2016. The outstanding balance is due by 15 July 2017. Should you wish to pay your outstanding balance prior to the final payment date, you are welcome to do so. If you are paying in AUD, the amount due will be calculated at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia retail rate of exchange on the day on which payment is due.

## Included

- Airport transfers in Bhutan
- Experienced English-speaking Bhutanese guide
- All meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner), other than dinner on the night of arrival in Bangkok
- Bottled water for hotel nights in Bhutan, boiled water when camping
- Group medical kit
- Luxury hotel accommodation for non-trekking nights in Bhutan on a twin share basis, with meals as noted below
- All group camping equipment
- Private transportation in Bhutan
- Park entrance fees, road and trekking permits
- Pack animals on the trek to carry 20kgs of personal equipment
- All Bhutanese Government Visa Fees and Royalties inclusive of 10% service charge and 10% sales tax.
- Sustainable Tourism Fund levy
- Eleven nights' camping in twin share tents with all meals, camping equipment and pack animals provided. If you prefer, you may choose a single tent at no extra cost.

## Hotels

Hotels are of a high standard and include the following meals:

- Uma by Como, Punakha – breakfast and dinner
- Gangtey Lodge, Phobjikha – breakfast, lunch and dinner
- Yu-Gharling, Bumthang - breakfast, lunch and dinner
- Uma by Como, Paro – breakfast and dinner

Other meals during our hotel stays will be provided at local restaurants and are included in the cost. Gangtey Lodge also includes complimentary laundry service.

## Not included

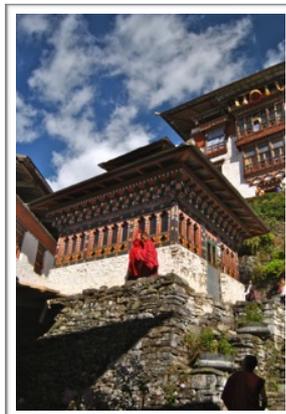
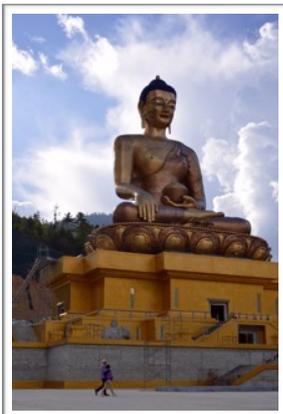
- Return flights to Bangkok from departure point
- Airport transfers to local departure airport
- Overnight accommodation at Bangkok airport hotel on the night before departure to Bhutan. We suggest the Novotel, Bangkok airport (approximate cost US \$100 per person, including breakfast, on a twin share basis and can be booked through Bhutan & Beyond).
- Return flights from Bangkok to Paro
- Sleeping bags and duffle bags required for the trek
- Expenditure of a personal nature such as souvenirs, phone calls etc
- Travel insurance - compulsory
- Tips - see below.

## Travel Insurance

You will be trekking in a remote mountainous area, with limited access to medical facilities. It is essential that you have travel insurance that covers evacuation and repatriation from a high-altitude trekking area, in the unlikely event that this should become necessary. A copy of your certificate of appropriate insurance must be provided to Bhutan & Beyond, prior to your final payment being made.

## Tipping

We will be accompanied by an experienced English-speaking Bhutanese guide for the duration of the trip and, during the trek, by the guide and a team of local camp assistants, a chef and several horsemen. Tipping the local support crew is expected. Once the size of our crew has been established we will let you know how much to allow for tips, which will be distributed directly to the local crew.



## For more information, please contact:

Heather McNeice on 0448 739946 or email [heathermcneice@mac.com](mailto:heathermcneice@mac.com)

Krista Waddell on 0499 552202 (Australia) / (702) 496 8382 (US) or [kristalvny@gmail.com](mailto:kristalvny@gmail.com)



## Fundraising for girls' education in Bhutan



This trip will be a major fundraiser for a girls' education program in Bhutan funded by the Australian Himalayan Foundation.

For many years the AHF has been working to help the people of the Himalaya through improvements in health, education and conservation. The AHF works in partnership with local communities in a long term, sustainable way and in Bhutan, they support the work of local NGO, RENEW.

RENEW was established in 2004 by Her Majesty, Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, Queen Mother of Bhutan and is a grass roots, not for profit organisation dedicated to the development of women and girls in Bhutan. Through this partnership, the AHF supports the education of girls in remote, disadvantaged communities who often walk more than 3 hours a day to reach the closest school. In Bhutan, we hope to meet with students in an isolated mountain school. You can read more about the work of the AHF by following the link below.

<http://www.australianhimalayanfoundation.org.au>

Everyone joining the 2017 trip is asked to contribute towards a group fundraising target of AU \$20,000. That money will go directly to the AHF's education program in Bhutan. If you would like to set up your own individual fundraising webpage, the AHF recommends gofundraise: (<http://personalchallenge.gofundraise.com.au>). Alternatively, we will set up a group page with gofundraise for anyone who would like to be included. We would, of course, be delighted to support you with any fundraising initiatives and can help with photographs and other materials.

We would love you to join us!

Tashi Delek! (May all good things come to you!)

*Heather & Krista*

