The Land of the Thunder Dragon
A cultural tour of Western Bhutan

Trip highlights

Half day hike to Tiger’s Nest monastery.

Watch masked dances at the Paro tsechu, the annual Buddhist festival.

Meet with representatives of the AHF’s partner organisation in Bhutan, RENEW.

Visit the Buddha Dordenma, one of the largest Buddhist statues in the world.

Spend three days in the beautiful Punakha valley, the ancient capital of Bhutan.

BOOK NOW TO SECURE YOUR SPOT

Trip details

Departs: 19 March 2018

Returns: 31 March 2018

Duration: 11 nights / 12 days in Bhutan

Cost: From US$5380pp

Group size: Min 6 and Max 12

Australian Escorts:

• Heather McNeice (AHF Queensland representative)

• Cheryl Ryan from 123Travel
Departure

Arrive in Bangkok. We suggest staying overnight at the Novotel at Bangkok airport, ready for an early morning departure to Paro in Bhutan.

Day 1: Fly to Paro, Explore Paro

Leave Bangkok for Paro in Western Bhutan, arriving mid-morning. We will be met at the airport by our Bhutanese guide for the short drive to the hotel in the Paro Valley.

After lunch, we will visit Paro Dzong (a fortress, housing both civil administration offices and a monastery – pictured right) and explore Paro town, with its wooden fronted shops, where you can buy local handicrafts. If time allows, we may also visit Kyichu Lhakang, in the Paro Valley, one of the oldest temples in Bhutan, dating back to the 7th century.

*Overnight hotel: Le Meridien, Paro Valley*

Day 2: Drive to Punakha Valley (4.5 hrs)

We leave Paro for the drive east to the Punakha Valley. En route, we will stop at the Dochu La road pass. On a clear day, there are stunning views of the snowcapped peaks of the Eastern Himalayas.

We will visit Chimi Lhakhang, the temple of the Divine Madman. It is a short 20 minute stroll through rice fields to reach the temple. Our hotel is close by, with views across the rice fields.

*Overnight hotel: local hotel Lobesa, Punakha*
Day 3: Explore Punakha Valley

We will start the day with a 45 minute hike up through fields of chilies, cabbages and rice along the banks of the Mo Chhu to the Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten. This is a relatively new stupa, built in the 1990s, in honour of the King.

From the rooftop balcony, there are stunning views across the Punakha Valley.

This afternoon, we will visit the impressive Punakha Dzong, at the confluence of the Mother and Father Rivers. Depending on timing, we may also visit a nunnery, on a hill overlooking the valley.

Overnight hotel: local hotel Lobesa, Punakha

Day 4: Explore Punakha Valley

Today, we will drive on a farm road above Uma to Chorten Nyingpo, a monastery on a hill at the end of the road. We will visit the monastery before walking through farms and small villages to a beautiful lake, Kabji Oka Tsho. The hike to the lake will take two to three hours.

Overnight hotel: Uma by Como, Punakha

Day 5: Drive to Thimphu (3.5 hours)

The drive from Punakha to Thimphu, Bhutan’s capital, takes about 3.5 hours. Before reaching the city, we may stop to visit Simtokha dzong, at the entrance to the Thimphu Valley. Our hotel, Galingkha, is located on Norzim Lam, Thimphu’s main street and there are several places of interest close by, including the National Memorial Chorten, the Postal Museum, the famous traffic policeman and a wide range of local shops. Enjoy free time this afternoon to explore downtown Thimphu.

Tonight, we will make the most of our central location to check out Thimphu’s nightlife.

Overnight hotel: Galingkha, Thimphu
Day 6: Explore Thimphu

This morning we begin with a short drive to the start point of a one hour walk to Cheri monastery, overlooking the Thimphu valley. Nearby is a temple dedicated to the goddess Tara and the national astrology school, which we will visit on our return.

Optional visits for this afternoon include a traditional paper factory, the National Textile Museum and the National Library.

*Overnight hotel: Galingkha, Thimphu*

Day 7: Explore Thimphu

RENEW, the AHF’s partner organisation in Bhutan, has its main office in Thimphu and today we will meet with officials to hear about their work. From RENEW, it is a short drive to the Buddha Dordenma, the large Buddha overlooking the Thimphu Valley.

After lunch, we will drive the short distance to the takin reserve, to see Bhutan’s national animal and then on to the telecom tower. It’s about a one hour walk from the tower, along the ridge, to Wangditse and Dechen Phodrang monasteries, before descending back down to the road where our transport will be waiting.

*Overnight hotel: Galingkha, Thimphu*

Day 8: Drive to Paro

We say goodbye to Thimphu this morning for the drive back to Paro. En route, we hope to visit Genekha School (about a 45 minute drive one way from the main highway), where there are several students sponsored by RENEW. This visit is subject to the availability of students and teachers.

We will continue to Paro, arriving in time for lunch.

Options for this afternoon include a visit to Sangchokkar Buddhist College, above Paro town and a hot stone bath at a rural farmhouse (small additional cost applies).

*Overnight hotel: Zhiwa Ling, Paro Valley*
Day 9: Tiger’s Nest hike

Today is one of the highlights of the trip with a half-day hike up to Taktsang, Tiger’s Nest monastery, perched on a cliff face 800m above the Paro valley. According to legend, this is where Guru Rinpoche landed on the back of a flying tigress, bringing Buddhism to Bhutan for the first time. Pilgrims from all over Bhutan make the steep 1.5 to 2 hour climb up to the monastery. We will visit several ancient temples in the monastery complex and take in the stunning views back along the Paro Valley.

After the hike, relax at the hotel or visit Paro town.

_Overnight hotel: Zhiwa Ling, Paro Valley_

Day 10: Paro festival

We will join locals at the Paro Tsechu, the annual Buddhist festival, held in the dzong, to watch the masked dances.

This afternoon, relax at the hotel or enjoy a short walk through the Paro Valley.

_Overnight hotel: Zhiwa Ling, Paro Valley_

Day 11: Cheli La pass and Kila Nunnery

This morning we will drive 35 km to the Cheli La pass. At 3,810 metres, it is one of the country’s highest road passes, from where, on a clear day, there are beautiful views of the Paro and Haa valleys and the snow-covered peaks of Mt Jhomolhari and Jichu Drake. We will walk from here, for about an hour, to the Kila Nunnery, before returning to Paro.

There will time this afternoon for last minute shopping in Paro town.

_Overnight hotel: Zhiwa Ling, Paro Valley_
Day 12: Departure

After breakfast in the hotel we will be transferred to Paro airport for the flight to Bangkok and home.

End of Tour

This itinerary is intended as a guide only. 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.
Heather McNeice

2018 will be Heather’s tenth trip to Bhutan. She has undertaken all the activities in the itinerary and is familiar with the hotels, road journeys and various sites we plan to visit.

Cheryl Ryan

2018 will be Cheryl's first visit to Bhutan. She has previously been the tour guide for many trips to India, Vietnam and Japan.

Cost and booking

Approximate cost: US $5,380, on a twin share basis. The price is subject to final confirmation when hotels have confirmed their charges for 2018.

The cost includes return economy flights to Bhutan from Bangkok and is based on the current Drukair fare. The Drukair fare schedule for Spring 2018 is not yet available and there may be a slight adjustment to the price of the airfare when the schedule for next year is released.

A single supplement is available on request.

All booking arrangements will be handled by 123Travel. www.123Travelconferences.com.au

We will be in Bhutan in springtime, ranked, with October, as the best time to visit the Eastern Himalayas. 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. Hotels may be substituted for those of a similar standard.

Payment must be made to 123Travel (the exchange rate at that time will apply). Assuming we have sufficient interest in this group trip, a non-refundable deposit of US$2,000 is required up front to secure your spot on the tour. The outstanding balance is due by 31 December 2017. Should you wish to pay your outstanding balance prior to the final payment date, you are welcome to do so.

Included:
The cost includes:

- Economy return flight Bangkok/Paro (business class fare, subject to availability, can be booked for a supplement of approximately $160, the exact amount to be confirmed when the fare schedule for Spring 2018 is released).
- Hotel accommodation with meals as specified below.
- Guided half-day walk to Taktsang (Tiger’s Nest) Monastery and local excursions.
- Experienced English-speaking Bhutanese guide.
- Airport transfers in Bhutan.
- Group transport in Bhutan.
- All Bhutanese Government Visa Fees and Royalties inclusive of 10% service charge and 10% sales tax.
- Sustainable Tourism Fund levy.
• All entry fees and road permits.

Hotels are a combination of five star international standard and local hotels. All meals, to be taken at the hotel or at a local restaurant, are included. Drinks are in addition.

**Not included:**

• International return flight from departure point to Bangkok.
• Overnight pre-departure accommodation in Bangkok. We suggest the Novotel, Bangkok airport (approximate cost US $100 per person, including breakfast, on a twin share basis).
• Airport transfers to and from your departure airport.
• Travel insurance
• Personal expenses such as spa treatments, telephone calls, internet charges, laundry and souvenirs.
• Tips - see below.

**Travel insurance**

Travel insurance is essential. Medical facilities in some areas of Bhutan are limited. You should ensure that you hold appropriate insurance to cover medical evacuation and repatriation, in the unlikely event that this might be necessary. 123Travel will be able to assist you with a quote.

**Tipping**

We will be accompanied by an experienced English-speaking Bhutanese guide and driver for the duration of the trip. Tipping the local support crew is expected. Further details of an appropriate amount will be provided in due course.

**For more information, please contact:**

123Travel  
07 5476 9368/ info@123Travelconferences.com.au  
Or drop in for a visit

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Shop 5/56 Burnett Street  
Buderim Q. 4556
Fundraising for girls’ education in Bhutan

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 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 three hours a day to reach the closest school. In Bhutan, we will meet with officials from RENEW to hear more about their work. You can read more about the work of the AHF by following the link below.

http://www.australianhimalayanfoundation.org.au

Everyone joining this trip is asked to contribute a donation personally or through fundraising, to the girls’ education program in Bhutan supported by the Australian Himalayan Foundation. All funds raised 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 will schedule a short meeting with RENEW in Thimphu.

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

Heather & Cheryl