

BHUTAN: RHODODENDRON FESTIVAL

30 MARCH – 15 APRIL 2025

FROM
£9,780
PER PERSON

Tour Leader: Louisa Thompson


The Ultimate
TRAVEL COMPANY



This fascinating tour visits the tiny Kingdom of Bhutan, which for centuries was closed to western visitors and remained hidden behind the peaks of the Himalayas – thankfully no longer the case today.

After a night in Delhi, we fly to Bhutan to explore this very special country. Described so aptly by the present Queen Mother of Bhutan as 'a natural environment of beauty, peace and tranquillity, where cultural and spiritual values have been allowed to grow and flourish'.

Our journey encompasses splendid monasteries and dzong along with the country's spectacular landscape of fertile valleys, lush forests and snow-capped peaks, its delightful people, and its unique culture. We will also visit Tingtibi, a remote village near the Manas National Park for some hiking and bird watching, getting off the beaten track.

Our visit also coincides with the festival of Rhododendrons in Thimphu at the end of our trip.



Punakha Dzong



Phobjikha Valley



Traditional Dancers

17-DAY ITINERARY, DEPARTING 30 MARCH 2025

30 March London / Delhi

Suggested flights (not included in the cost of the tour) British Airways flight BA257 departing London Heathrow at 18.50 hrs.

31 March Delhi

Arrive Delhi at 08.05 hrs. On arrival transfer to The Claridge's Hotel where one night is spent. Remainder of the afternoon at leisure. Dinner at the 1911 Restaurant at The Imperial Hotel.

1 April Delhi / Paro / Punakha

Transfer to the airport for a flight from Delhi to Paro. The flight into Bhutan takes you close to the great Himalayas, offering dazzling scenic views of some of the world's highest glacial peaks. You will experience breath taking views of Mount Everest, Kanchenjunga, and other famous Himalayan peaks, including the sacred Chomolhari and Mount Jichu Drake in Bhutan. As you enter Paro valley, you will sweep past forested hills with the silvery Pa Chu (Paro river) meandering down the valley below. On arrival transfer to Punakha (approximately 3½ hrs drive). At an elevation of 1,300m, Punakha is one of the lowest lying valleys in the Kingdom. With its temperate climate, this valley is the market garden of the country, where produce grows year-round and many Bhutanese reside during the colder winter months.

Lunch at a local restaurant. On arrival check into the Dhensa Boutique Resort, where two nights

are spent. The hotel sits in the heart of the verdant and lush Punakha Valley surrounded by pine forests and walking trails overlooking the Punakha river. Dinner at the hotel.

2 April Punakha

Morning walk through the farmland to Khamsum Yuelley Namgyel Chorten, built by the Queen Mother and dedicated to her son, the current King. The temple has commanding views of the valley up to the high mountains of Gasa and houses hundreds of images of various protector deities. Continue to the Suspension Bridge which, at 180m long, is one of the longest suspension bridges in the world. Visit Punakha Dzong built by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century and situated at the junction of Pho Chu and Mo Chu rivers. Inside, the utse is six storeys high and topped with a golden roof, whilst the fortress is divided by three courtyards housing administrative, monastic, and religious buildings respectively. It also houses a set of 108 volumes of the Kanjur (a holy book) written in gold. The dzong is now the winter home of the chief abbot and hundreds of monks and serves as administrative headquarters of the district.

Picnic lunch by the Punakha Dzong. Continue to the Shangchhen Dorji Lhengdrup Nunnery, made up of a collection of brass roofed buildings and brilliant white chorten that gleam high above the pine covered ridge of the Punakha valley. Return

to the hotel either by foot, or car for the remainder of the afternoon at leisure. Dinner at the hotel.

3 April Punakha / Gangtey

Drive (with luggage) to Phobjikha Valley, considered one of the most beautiful places in Bhutan and a designated conservation area. On the way, stop for a short walk to Chimi Lhakhang (the fertility temple) built in memory of the great saint Drukpa Kuenley, popularly known as 'The Divine Madman'. The monastery is highly believed to bless women with fertility. Visit a local incense making factory at Bajo Lhawang Dridhen.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Afternoon visit to the Gangteng Goempa – one of the oldest Nyingma monasteries in Bhutan – which stands in the centre of the valley, rising dramatically from a small ridge. Founded in 1613, the monastery has three storeys and a spire encompassing 14 chapels and halls within. Afternoon walk through the woods and down into the glacial valley, which lies on the edge of the Black Mountain National Park and is one of the most important wildlife preserves in Bhutan. Check into the multi-award winning Gangtey Lodge, where two nights are spent. Dinner at the hotel.

4 April Gangtey

There will be an optional hike along the Gangtey Nature Trail, however there will be a vehicle on standby for those who need to cut the hike short at any point. Visit a Bhutanese School



Trongsa Dzong



Bumthang



Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) Monastery

and see Khewa Lhakhang, a 15th century monastery that houses the statues of the Buddha of three times; past, present, and future.

Return to the hotel for the rest of the afternoon at leisure. Option to visit the black-necked crane information centre and see the documentary about the cranes which have a special place in Bhutanese folklore. Thanks to these beautiful visiting birds, the valley is now protected as an official conservation area. Dinner at the hotel.

5 April Gangtey / Trongsa / Tingtibi

Depart (with luggage) for the Zhemgang District (Approximately 4 – 5 hours' drive). On the way, visit Trongsa Dzong, built in 1647 by the Shabdrung, which is the most impressive dzong in Bhutan. The Ta-Dzong*, an ancient watch tower of the Trongsa Dzong is located on top of a steep hill about 1km beyond the Dzong. The watch tower houses an impressive museum filled with historical artefacts relating to the Kings of Bhutan.

*NB entails a climb up many steps.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Continue to Tingtibi, a remote village known for its pristine forests and rich birdlife. Along the Zhemgang road, keep an eye out for different bird species such as the Himalayan Monal, Rufous-necked Hornbill and Fire Tailed Myzornis which are commonly sighted in this region. On arrival you will settle down into your camp, where you will spend the next two nights. Dinner at the camp.

6 April Tingtibi

Wake up early before dawn to enjoy a full day's birdwatching

adventure, exploring different trails and habitats, spotting a variety of bird species in this remote part of Bhutan.

Packed lunch whilst birdwatching. Return to the campsite for dinner.

7 April Tingtibi / Bumthang

After breakfast, depart (with luggage) for Bumthang (approximately 4 – 5 hrs drive). On the way, visit a Yathra Factory, in Zugney village, Yathra is a deep coloured woollen textile used for coats or other forms of cloth pieces. You will see the weavers at work, or even see them dyeing the wool using natural dyes.

Lunch at a local farmhouse. Continue to Bumthang, a spectacular region, home to some of Bhutan's most revered Buddhist sites, and one of the best places for doing easier hikes in Bhutan, other than Gangtey. Check into the Mountain Resort* for three nights. Dinner at the hotel.

*Option to upgrade to The Six Senses Hotel.

8 April Bumthang

Drive to Kurjey Lhakhang, one of the most sacred places in Bhutan and where the patron saint, Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava) meditated. Continue to Jambay Lhakhang's home, where the early winter festivals are held, that draw thousands of Bhutanese for their annual blessings. Visit the Wangdicholing Palace – the old summer residence of Bhutanese royalty.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Visit the Tamshing Monastery followed by a

visit to the valleys' unique cottage industries – Red Panda Brewery, Bumthang Cheese/Dairy Facility, and the Bumthang Distillery, brewer of numerous distinctive spirits. Return to the hotel. Dinner at the hotel.

9 April Bumthang

Visit Ogyen Choling Heritage House, located in the Tang Valley. A short hike takes you to the original manor dating back to the 14th century which was destroyed in the earthquake of 1897 and was rebuilt in 1898 with a central tower. The central tower now houses a museum featuring various aspects of Bhutanese history and culture.

Enjoy a traditional picnic lunch with breath-taking views of the pristine surroundings. Drive to the Burning Lake at Membartsho which is renowned for its beauty, serenity, and spiritual significance. Return to the hotel. Dinner at the hotel.

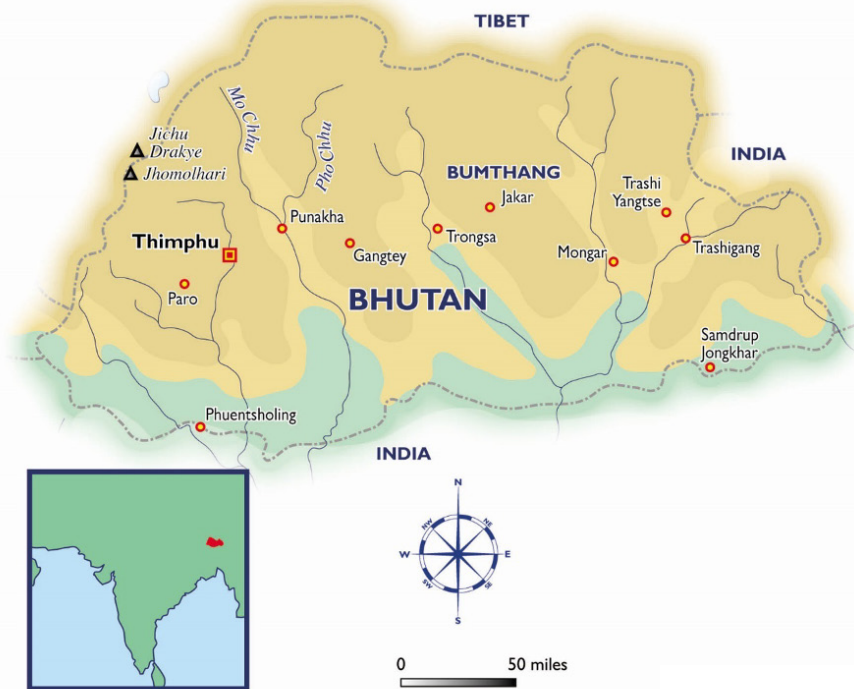
10 April Bumthang / Paro

Depart (with luggage) for Bumthang airport for a domestic Druk Airways flight to Paro.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Check in to the 5* Como Uma for two nights. Rest of the afternoon under own arrangements to go hiking or explore more of Paro. Dinner at the hotel.

11 April Paro

Morning visit to the Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) monastery, which perches on the side of a cliff, 900-metres above the valley. It was founded by Guru Rimpoche who, legend has it, flew on the back of a Tigress and meditated in the cave, where the monastery stands, for three months. The monastery itself



was built by Desi Tenzin Rabgye in 1646 and is a place of pilgrimage and is a recognised holy place.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Return to the hotel for the afternoon at leisure. Dinner at the hotel.

12 April Paro / Thimphu

Depart (with luggage) for Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, with a brief stop to visit the chain iron bridge built by the great master architect, Thangtong Gyalpo.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Check into The Postcard by Dewa located on the outskirts of Bhutan's capital city. Nestled in a forest, the hotel is the perfect place to wind down in the lap of nature and enjoy pristine views of the Khasadrapchu valley and Wang Chhu River. Afternoon at leisure. Dinner at the hotel.

13 April Thimphu

Drive to the high mountain pass of Docha La located 3,140 metres above sea level, which gives fantastic views of the Himalaya. Visit Druk Wangyal Lhakhang. Inside this temple are 108 Buddhist paintings made by monks. They tell the life of Buddha.

Lunch at a local restaurant. Continue to the Royal Botanical Park, Lamperi, which is the backdrop of the Dochula Pass and the venue for the Rhododendron Festival, a celebration of nature's resilience and beauty, highlighting the vibrant blooming of over 46 species of rhododendrons that adorn the Himalayan landscape. The festival not only showcases the floral splendour of Bhutan, but also immerses visitors in the rich tapestry of cultural traditions and ecological awareness. Enjoy

traditional Boedra and Zhungdra songs relating to nature performed by the local community. There will be an option for short and long hikes in the botanical park to see different rhododendron species and engage in the ecological richness. Return to the hotel. Farewell dinner at the hotel.

14 April Thimphu / Delhi

Depart (with luggage) for Paro airport for an international Druk Airways flight to Delhi. On arrival, transfer to the Roseate Airport hotel for one night. Lunch and dinner under own arrangements.

15 April Delhi / London

Transfer to Delhi airport. Suggested flights (not included in the cost of the tour) British Airways flight BA256 departing Delhi at 10.10 hrs, arriving London Heathrow at 15.15 hrs.

N.B. Please note that this trip does involve a substantial amount of walking and a certain level of fitness is required.

Please note that the accommodation in Tingtibi will be in tents and Bumthang Mountain Lodge is fairly basic. There is an option to upgrade to the Six Senses Bumthang.

TOUR PRICES PER PERSON

Tour Price	£9,780
Single Supplement	£2,995

Optional upgrade to Six Senses Bumthang Price upon request

Please note we have not included the cost of the flights in the tour price. Please contact us for prices should you wish to book them through us.

PRICE INCLUDES

- Accommodation throughout as shown in the itinerary in hotels, and well-equipped tents
- Economy class Druk Air flights as per itinerary
- Breakfast daily; 13 lunches; 14 dinners
- All entrance fees, visits, excursions, and transportation as per the itinerary
- Gratuities in restaurants for included meals
- Gratuities to driver/s
- Portage
- Gratuities to guide/s
- Local English-speaking guide/s
- The services of your tour leader throughout

PRICE EXCLUDES

- International flights
- Travel insurance
- Visas
- Items of personal expenditure (e.g. telephone calls / laundry etc.)
- Government levies or taxes introduced after costing and publication of this programme on 22.05.24



Dochula Pass



YOUR TOUR LEADER



LOUISA THOMPSON

Louisa joined Ultimate Travel in 2016, where she joined the Escorted Tours team, organising cultural and wildlife trips worldwide. She now sells tailor made trips, focusing mainly in Australasia and North Africa. Louisa's led and accompanied tours in Spain, Russia, eastern and southern India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Antarctica. She loves anything to do with the outdoors and is always planning unique and off the beaten track trips to some whacky destinations. She really enjoys photography and cooking and is always up for an adventure.



020 7386 4620 | ENQUIRY@THEULTIMATETRAVELCOMPANY.CO.UK | THEULTIMATETRAVELCOMPANY.CO.UK
25-27 VANSTON PLACE LONDON SW6 1AZ

