



Culture and World Heritage in Bhutan

June 11-20, 2018

June 10 Bangkok

Make your way today from the US to Bangkok. We will have a hotel reservation and group transfer on the early morning of the 11th. Malia will be arriving on the 9th to explore Bangkok and rest.

June 11 PARO

(D)

Early morning, we depart for our flights Bhutan AltruVistas can help you with this but please note it is not covered in the price of the tour). The flight into Paro Valley (2,200m/7,800ft) on the national carrier, Druk Air, is a befitting introduction to the magnificent beauty of Bhutan. On clear days we can enjoy a spectacular view of Bhutan's snow capped peaks as we approach Paro International airport

(some say, it is one of the world's loneliest airports). On arrival, we complete the customs and immigration formalities. After we pass through the arrival hallway, we will be received by the *AltruVistas* representative. Following check-in at the hotel and freshening up, we will enjoy a traditional **Welcome Dinner** and soak in the atmosphere of this magical capital with its busy shops and bazaars and photogenic citizens in national dress as we walk for our dinner reservation. (Khangkhu Resort requested)



June 12 PARO to Thimphu.

(B, L, D)

We start our day with a visit to the **National Museum** which is



housed in an ancient watch tower. The tour of the museum introduces Bhutan's history and culture through its national treasures. We then drive a comfortable 1 hour to Thimphu (8,000 ft.) the capital town along the newly expanded highway in the country. Thimphu has a population about 90,000 people and you will notice lot more vehicles and concrete buildings. The main street of Thimphu, called Norzin



Lam, is lined with shops of all descriptions mainly stocking goods imported from India and Thailand. This is the only capital in the world where there are no traffic lights. After we check-in to our hotel and freshen up, we will visit the **National Memorial Chorten (stupa)** built in 1974 in honor of the late Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. We then visit the **Institute of Traditional**

Medicine & Hospital, followed by visit to the **Institute of Traditional Arts and Crafts** where traditional arts & crafts are still kept alive through these young students being trained in the school. They are responsible for passing on our valuable ancient knowledge and skills to the next generation. After lunch, we visit the **Voluntary Artists' Studio, an NGO** teaching art to the youth of Bhutan and meet with local artists and see their art work.

June 13

Thimphu

(B, L, D)

This morning we enjoy time for an AM Photo Walk, to wander a bit on our own, or sleep in . Later we visit the "**Takin**" **preserve** and learn the story behind the existence of the national animal of Bhutan. Takin is a combination of goat and cow and looks more like a moose. We return to the hotel to have an informal discussion with some officials from the government including the **Gross National Happiness Commission, followed by dinner.** Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a yardstick to measure progress in Bhutan. GNH does not disregard GDP but it emphasizes the importance of spiritual well-being alongside economic prosperity.

June 14 Himalayan Vista & Punakha valley

(B, L,D)

Today we head eastwards into central Bhutan. The road to **Punakha valley** begins with a gradual climb through a forest of pine and cedar, covered with hanging lichen high up near Dochula pass (3,055 m/10,100ft). The pass offers a

brehtaking panoramic view (weather permitting) of the Himalayan mountain ranges which stretch for few hundred miles. There are many prayer flags fluttering at the pass to blow away prayers to benefit everybody. The views continue to entertain us as we descend along a series of hairpin bends to the fertile valley of Punakha (1,350 meters/ 4,430 feet). Before proceeding further to Punakha town we will hike up to the **Chimi Lhakhang (temple)** on a small hilltop. It is an easy 30 minutes walk through the rice paddy field and the small village. This temple is dedicated to the great Yogi in 15th century known as Lam Drukpa Kuenley or popularly known as the “Divine madman” in the west. He preached in the way that is unlike the stiffness of clergy and society of the time; he dramatized the teachings using songs and outrageous sexual humor. Bold Phallus symbols and paintings on the houses or temples are as a result of his influence to date. It is believed that this temple blesses women who seek fertility. A popular pilgrimage spot for the Bhutanese, it is frequented by childless couples and parents who have difficulty raising children from all over the world. Enjoy the lunch at a family run restaurant that offers great view of the village and the temple, **and free time to photograph the scene.** Late afternoon at leisure. (Dragon’s Nest Resort requested)

June 15 : Punakha Dzong and day hike **(B, L, D)**

Today, we drive for 30 minutes **towards Punakha Dzong (Fortress)** or the



“Palace of Great Happiness”, situated between the two rivers Pho Chu and Mochu (Male and Female River). This fortress serves as the winter seat of the Je Khenpo (the spiritual head of Bhutan) and the administrative headquarters of Punakha district. This Dzong/fortress had served as the capital seat of the Kingdom for more than three hundred years. This Dzong is one of the most beautiful Dzongs in the country and a splendid example

of Bhutan’s fine architectural and artistic traditions. After the visit to the Dzong, we then drive (20 minutes) further upstream the mochu/female river. The hike begins from the suspension bridge. After a catered/picnic lunch, we undertake the pleasant hike (2 hours round trip) to **the Khamsum Yueley Namgyal stupa.** This magnificent stupa was built by Her Majesty the Queen Mother for the well being of the kingdom and the benefit of all sentient beings. Built over a period of several years, the Bhutanese craftsmen including carpenters, painters, and sculptors consulted holy scriptures rather than engineering manuals, to construct this 4-storey temple that overlooks the beautiful Mochu river valley. Time permitting, on our way back, **visit the Vocational Training Institute (VTI) nearby.** VTI is an initiative taken by the government to mainly combat increasing unemployment among young school dropouts. The VTI provides basic employable skills to young students.

June 16 **Day Excursion to Gangey** **(B, L, D)**

Drive to Gangtey (at 3500 metres) to enjoy the vistas of the immense and remote Phobjikha valley and the black mountain ranges. We will stop and enjoy time to photograph. We will visit the **Gangtey Gompa** (one of Bhutan’s oldest

monasteries and currently under renovation) and explore the **Gangtey village** where the villagers continue to live a traditional Bhutanese rural lifestyle. Notably, this is the site where black-necked cranes visit in their hundreds in November each year after spending the summer in Tibet. We will learn about traditional rural life here.

June 17 Thimphu (B,L, D)

After breakfast, we will return to Thimphu and upon arrival in Thimphu, we will visit the **textile museum**. It introduces the different styles of the distinctly Bhutanese art form of weaving. After the museum, **meet Kelzang Choden & Kuenzang Wangmo**, who comes from a family of weavers from eastern Bhutan. They explain how the cottage industry of weaving works and shows how the back strap loom is used. Spend the rest of the afternoon exploring the local shops selling traditional Bhutanese weavings, paintings, Tibetan and Bhutanese silverwork, coral and turquoise beads, prayer flags, and numerous other souvenir items. In the evening, try our hand at cooking few Bhutanese dishes, which you may have acquired the taste over the last several days with our Cooking Class. How about some Ema Datshi! (

June 18 Paro (B, L,D)

This morning, we will return to Paro. We will first visit the seventh century **Kyichu Lhakhang/ monastery, we will visit the Paro Dzong (fortress)** built in the 17th century. The Paro Dzong was a setting for Bernardo Bertolucci's film, *The Little Buddha*. There is a little bit of leisure walk to do (20 minutes) to the Dzong past the traditional wooden bridge. After we enjoy a free Afternoon. (Khangkhu Resort requested).

June 19 Excursion to the Tiger's Nest Monastery (B, L,D)

After breakfast, our car will drop us at the starting point of the excursion to view the spectacular and famous



the spectacular and famous **Taktsang monastery (Tiger's Nest)**. The trail to the monastery climbs through beautiful pine forest, many of the trees festooned with Spanish moss, and an occasional grove of fluttering prayer flags. We walk at our own pace and stop midway at the cafeteria for rest and refreshment. We continue the hike further up until you see, clearly and seemingly within reach, the imposing Taktsang monastery. Lunch will be catered at the cafeteria. The round

trip hike can take anywhere between 4-7 hours including numerous stops. Built in 1600s, this incredible monastery clings to the edge of a sheer rock cliff that plunges 900 meters into the valley below. It is believed that, in the 8th century, Guru Rimpoche, the tantric mystic who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, landed



here on the back of a flying tigress to subdue a demon. Guru Rimpoche is believed to have meditated here for three months and, over the centuries various Buddhist Masters have meditated as well. It is considered one of the most sacred places for Buddhists. We return to hotel to watch **a specially arranged traditional mask dances, folk songs and dances and traditional music**. We can learn the importance, meaning and origin of each dance, followed by dinner.

June 20 Paro

(B.)

It's all goodbyes today as we depart for our home cities, taking with us friendships, memories, and deeper understandings. Early morning we drive to Paro airport for your onward journey to your next destination.

