



BHUTAN DRUK-YUL EXPEDITIONS

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"SPLENDORS OF WESTERN BHUTAN TOUR AND PARO FESTIVAL"

13-20 April, 2014

13 Apr/Sun, Kathmandu-Paro (by Druk Air)

The flight into Paro on our national carrier, Druk Air, is a befitting introduction to the spectacular beauty of our country. The remarkable and steep descent into the Paro valley is an awe-inspiring beginning to your adventure. Already you can feel the pace of life slow down. The first gift from Bhutan will be the cool, clean fresh air as you step out of the plane. After clearing passport and customs formalities you are met by your Bhutanese escort. Late afternoon visit Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest and most sacred shrines of Bhutan. Take a walk through the main town of Paro and to one of the innumerable archery grounds (Archery is the national sport of Bhutan). If we are lucky, we may catch a match in action. Overnight Paro.

14 Apr/Mon, Paro Festival (and Hike to Taktsang Monastery)

Witness the 4th day of the Paro festival, one of the years biggest festivals. Hundreds of Bhutanese, from all over the country, dressed in their finest hand woven clothes join in the celebrations that are the essence of Bhutan's religious ethos. The days programme will be provided to you and your tour guide will be with you explaining the theme behind the numerous exotic dances that take place. After lunch hike to Taktsang monastery "Tiger's Nest", the most spectacular monastery and probably the most photographed one in Bhutan, in a way a symbol of Bhutan. The beautiful excursion to the monastery takes about 5 hours for round trip. We stop for a rest and light refreshments at the Taktsang Jakhang (cafeteria) and then continue up to the monastery. The trail climbs through beautiful pine forest, many of the trees festooned with Spanish moss, and an occasional grove of fluttering prayer flags. Built in the 1692, this incredible monastery clings to the edge of a sheer rock cliff that plunges 900 m into the valley below. Legend has it that Guru Padmasambhava, the tantric mystic who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, landed here on the back of a flying tigress. Overnight Paro.

15 Apr/Tue, Paro Festival-Thimphu

Today is the last day of the Paro festival, witness the pre-dawn, annual display of the four storey tall sacred Thangka (silk applique) - prized possession of the Paro Dzong. After breakfast drive to Thimphu (1 hr drive), capital city of Bhutan. Thimphu has a population of about 100,000. The town is made up of just three lines of shops and is the only capital in the world without traffic lights. Visit the General Post Office, to pick the wonderful and unique Bhutanese postage stamps. Visit the crafts bazaar, where one can buy all types of local made products (masks, paintings, fabrics etc.). Visit the Memorial Chorten, a monument to world peace and a memorial to the Late King. It is a good place to go in the late afternoon and join the locals as they circle and pray when the work day is finished. Evening at leisure. Overnight Thimphu.

16 Apr/Wed, Thimphu Sightseeing

A full day to explore Thimphu, Bhutan's exotic capital city - a fascinating combination of traditional and contemporary life. Visit the Changangkha Lhakhang, perched on a ridge above Thimphu was established in the 12th century (your purification ceremony will be held). A visit to Motithang Takin Preserve for a chance to see the takin, Bhutan's national animal. Takin resembles a cross between a gnu and a musk deer. It has an immense face and a tremendously thick neck. Continue drive to Sangaygang view point, where one can get a full view of the Thimphu valley below. Visit Zilukha Nunnery one of the few surviving nunneries in Bhutan.

After lunch visit the Institute of Traditional Medicine, where the medicinal herbs abundant in the kingdom are compounded and dispensed, the Institute for Zorig Chusum (Painting School) - where students undergo a 6-year training course in Bhutan's 13 traditional arts and crafts, the Folk Heritage Museum opened in 2001, provides fascinating insights into Bhutanese material culture and way of life, the National Library, which houses an extensive collection of Buddhist literature, with some works dating back several hundred years, as well as modern academic books mainly on Himalayan culture and religion. Visit the handicraft Emporium, where they sell Bhutanese products such as the wooden masks, beautiful hand-woven textiles, carpets, jewelry etc. Visit the Buddha stupa and finally the Trashichodzong, located on the banks of the Thimphu river, this is Bhutan's administrative and religious center. It houses the throne room of His Majesty the King of Bhutan, government ministries, the nation's largest monastery and headquarters of His Holiness the Je Khenpo (the chief abbot) and the central monk body. Overnight Thimphu.

17 Apr/Thu, Thimphu-Punakha/Wangdue

Morning to Punakha/Wangdue valley (2.5hr drive), leaving Thimphu the road winds through small villages and a forest of pine and cedar, festooned with hanging lichen high up near Dochula pass (10,000 ft). The highest point on the road is marked by 108 chortens (stupas). The prayer flags on mountain slopes, bridges and high passes, transmit prayers to the Gods and keep up a constant communication with the heavens. On a clear day this pass often offers panoramic views of the eastern Himalayan mountain ranges. For the next two hours of drive, the road slowly descends into the lowlands of Punakha/Wangdue valley.

After lunch visit the Punakha Dzong, the "Palace of Great Happiness" and "a masterpiece of Bhutanese Architecture". It was built in 1647 by Shabdrung Nawang Namgyel, the man who unified Bhutan. The Dzong lies between the Fo Chu (male river) and the Mo Chu (female river), and is the winter home of the Je Khenpo (chief abbot of Bhutan) Central Monk Body. En-route visit and hike a short distance through paddy fields to Chimmi Lhakhang, a temple dedicated to Drukpa Kuenley, who as a favourite saint of the Bhutanese people is known affectionately as "the Divine Madman". The temple is on a hillside in the middle of rice fields and has become a pilgrimage site for childless couples. Overnight Punakha/Wangdue.

18 Apr/Fri, Punakha/Wangdue "Excursion drive to Gangtey/Phobjikha Valley"

After breakfast drive (5hr round-trip) to Gangtey/Phobjikha valley across the Lawala Pass (10,250 feet). This hidden valley in the Black Mountains at 9840 feet, is one of the most beautiful valleys in Bhutan. It is surrounded by mountains with rhododendron, Himalayan pine and dwarf bamboo, which is a favorite food of the Yaks. The famous Gangtey Gumpa, oldest and largest Nyingma Buddhist monastery in Bhutan, is located on a hill overlooking the beautiful valley. Phobjikha is also the chosen winter home of the very rare and endangered black necked cranes. The Cranes arrive around end October and stay through early March. Visit the magnificent Gantey Gumpa "monastery", followed by a hike along the nature trail - all downhill from the monastery to the valley floor. If time permits visit the Crane Information Centre. Drive back to Wangdue. Overnight Punakha/Wangdue.

19 Apr/Sat, Punakha/Wangdue-Thimphu-Paro

Early morning drive to Paro via Dochu la pass. In Thimphu, visit the Thimphu Weekend Market, where Thimphu residents mingle with villagers in an interesting urban and rural blend. People come from outlying rural villages to this market to sell vegetables and exotic fruits, & other items including dried fish, chili peppers, spices, tea (in bricks), butter (wrapped in leaves). Continue drive to Paro and visit the impressive Ta Dzong, the watchtower of the Paro Dzong which now houses the National Museum. The museum is an important center for the preservation of Bhutanese artifacts, culture and history. It contains marvelous and colorful collections of traditional handicrafts, ancient weapons, religious costumes, thangkhas, stamps, and even a gallery of stuffed animals. Overnight Paro.

20 Apr/Sun, Paro-Kathmandu (by Druk air)

After breakfast at the hotel, drive to Paro airport for flight to your onward destination.