

THE PEACEFUL PARADISE OF BHUTAN

Touring Bhutan With Explore India

It's easy to see why the tiny Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan was closed off to the rest of the world for so long. Focused on happiness and well-being, Bhutan offers a slice of life that makes it one of the most unique and highly desirable destinations in the world. Imagine a place where smoking is illegal and they don't have street lights as they are deemed as unfriendly – Bhutan, a place we knew little about but are so grateful they are now allowing visitors into their enchanting utopian world. Explore India Journeys Inc. has been taking Canadian travelers to amazing Bhutan for a few years now and many have even returned for a second time. Why do Canadians love Bhutan so much? Bhutan is a country that values the happiness of its people over anything and, upon setting foot in this incredible country, you too will begin to feel the sacredness of a way of living that is so precious you can't help but want to go back for more.

Compared to its neighbours China and India, Bhutan is relatively small with just over 38,000 square kilometers of subtropical plains and steep mountainous valleys. Travelling through the country one may think it's quite large, however, the thick woods and dense jungles make it feel that way as more than half of Bhutan's land is comprised of sublimely lush forests. The highest Himalayan peak in Bhutan is Gangkhar Puensum which stands at 25,000 feet above sea level. To preserve this natural wonder, the government of Bhutan prohibits climbing Gangkhar Puensum, however, does allow climbing of its mountain ranges that are less than 20,000 feet. The population of Bhutan is approximately 780,000 which is in contrast to its not so distant neighbour Nepal with a population of over 28 million people.

While Nepal has a mainly Hindu population, Bhutan is predominantly Buddhist and the country is dotted with some of the largest and most beautiful Buddhist temples in the world. A land of monasteries and fortresses, referred to in Bhutan as Dzongs, exploring the Bhutanese architectural wonders is a great way to learn about the history of the Buddhist kingdom. First stop on Explore India's tour to Bhutan is Thimphu, home to the largest statue of Buddha in the world called Buddha Dordenma. Situated in the Kuensel Phodrang Park, the massive bronze and gilded gold statue overlooks the southern entrance of the Thimphu valley region and is said to bring peace and happiness to the world. As if the Buddha Dordenma is not already a site to behold, it is mind boggling to know that it is also said to be filled with 125,000 small Buddha statues that have also been cast in bronze and gilded in gold.

Another highlight while touring the Thimphu Valley is the National Memorial Chorten which is another visible landmark of the region. Built in 1974 in memoriam to the third king of Bhutan, this Tibetan style stupa is a place of worship for many Bhutanese. The white-washed walls and golden annexes are a welcoming scene which offers a serene ambiance as one witnesses worshipers quietly coming and going. Tourists are welcome, however, in the evening it is discouraged as many worshipers would like this time to practice their faith without any onlookers. Regardless when you are there, it is a memorable experience to be in a place that evokes such an ambiance of utter peace and tranquillity.

Our journey continues west into the valley town of Paro which is also the airport town of Bhutan. One would expect an airport town to have shopping available for tourists and Paro is no exception to this. Bhutanese made items like jewelry, writing paper, clothing, wraps, carpets, hand-woven bamboo items, and hand-crafted metal products can be purchased here. After all your shopping you will most-likely be ready for a traditional Bhutanese meal and there is plenty to choose from in Paro.

You may think that Bhutanese food is similar to Nepalese food and you're right, however, there are also many delicious and unique dishes in Bhutan as well. A traditional dish in Bhutan, enjoyed at almost every meal is Ema datshi – a delectable snack of chilis and cheese all mixed together and fried in butter. No two Ema datshi's are the same because there is such a variety of chilies and Bhutanese cheeses to choose from, regardless, no matter which you get to try, they are all mouth-wateringly delicious.

Datshi means cheese, and there is cheese in a lot of the cuisine in Bhutan. Another favourite is Kewa datshi which is potatoes and cheese and is similar to scalloped potatoes. Similarly, Shamu datshi is a mushroom and cheese dish, equally delectable and can be a little spicy too. There are many meat dishes as well and among the favourite is a beef dish that incorporates vegetables, spices, and, you guessed it, cheese! This dish is called Shakam ema datshi, which is dried beef with cheese. Hungry yet? Well, be sure to have a good lunch before heading to our next destination - Paro Taktsang.

Among the top destinations in the world, Paro Taktsang, more commonly known as Tiger's Nest, is the stunning Buddhist monastery which was built into the Himalayan cliffside near the cave of where Guru Rinpoche, the Indian master who brought Buddhism to Tibet, first meditated. Built in 1692, it is an architectural masterpiece of beauty, craftsmanship, and skill as it is perched upon what seems like the edge of the world. Despite the many travelers who hike up to the famous spot each day, Tiger's Nest still operates as a monastery and the bells attest to the prayers and meditations going on inside.

Tiger's Nest, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is 10,000 feet above sea level with Paro at about 7000 feet. If you would like to hike up to the monastery it will typically take a person of an average fitness level about three hours. Mostly straight up, the 6.5 km roundtrip adventure is a great way to get some exercise as well as take in the spectacular views as you traverse your way along the path. It is recommended to wear closed toe shoes like runners or hiking boots and also comfortable, loose layers of clothing. Hats are allowed while you are hiking but you will be asked to remove and store your items in a locker when you reach the top. At the halfway point of your hike, you will reach the Taktsang Cafeteria where you can purchase a cool drink or tea to hydrate and refresh yourself. You can also purchase flowers or other small items if you wish to make an offering when you arrive at the monastery.

Depending on the time of year, when you reach Tiger's Nest there may be other tourists milling about and you will most like see the monasterial monks too. The views are spectacular and there is plenty of room and opportunity to take stunning photographs from several vantage points. You will feel the shift from our modern-day world to the magical and spiritual aspect of being immersed in such a naturally spectacular setting with such a rich history. A definite highlight of your tour to Bhutan, these memories will last a lifetime as you gaze upon your photos in the future as you reflect back to the incredible feeling of being in such a sacred place.

While embarking on this truly enchanting journey to Bhutan with Explore India, you can be assured to have all of these wonderful experiences and more. Complete with 5-Star accommodation, meals, and transportation, let Explore India handle all the details of your trip to Bhutan so that you may soak up the incredible atmosphere of this unique and intriguing country.

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