

ASIA · MOUNTAINS · HIKING · CULTURE · SACRED SITES · ARCHITECTURE



Bhutan

Bhutan limits mass tourism with a nightly Sustainable Development Fee, and the result is a Himalayan kingdom of whitewashed dzongs, prayer-flagged passes and archery matches rather than tour-bus crowds. Hike up to Paro's cliff-hanging Tiger's Nest, cross the covered cantilever bridge to Punakha Dzong, and time your visit for a tshechu, when masked dancers fill monastery courtyards.

i Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for Bhutan and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 10 December 2025.

CAPITAL Thimphu	CURRENCY Bhutanese ngultrum (BTN) £1 ≈ BTN 127	LANGUAGE Dzongkha, Tshangla Nepali, English	BEST TIME Mar–May, Sep–Nov
DAILY BUDGET £180–£650 £££ Expensive	PLUGS Type C, D, F, G 230V · UK plugs fit	FLIGHT FROM LONDON 17h via Delhi or Bangkok (then Drukair/Bhutan Airlines) ~£1,100–£1,600 return	TIME ZONE UTC+6 standard time

Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom of fewer than 800,000 people, folded into steep north–south valleys between India and Tibet, where districts are still run from dzongs, fortress-monasteries shared by monks and civil servants. Almost every trip starts at Paro, the only international airport, and heads east: Paro and Thimphu first, then over the Dochula pass to Punakha, on to the crane valley of Phobjikha and, with more time, across high passes to Trongsa and the temple-filled valleys of Bumthang. A week covers the west comfortably; ten days or more lets you reach the centre without spending every day in the car.

Travel here works differently from anywhere else in the Himalayas. Most visitors book through a Bhutanese operator who arranges hotels, a car with driver and a licensed guide, and the nightly Sustainable Development Fee comes on top, so even a simple trip costs far more than Nepal. In return you get uncrowded trails, immaculate temples and a country where the knee-length gho and ankle-length kira are everyday dress in offices and schools. Distances look short on the map but mountain roads are slow, and the altitude makes the Tiger's Nest climb hard work. It suits walkers, photographers and anyone curious about Gross National Happiness.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

SACRED SITE

Paro Taktsang (Tiger's Nest)

Clinging to a cliff about 900 metres above the Paro valley, this monastery marks the cave where Guru Rinpoche is said to have meditated after flying in on a tigress. The steep trail takes two to three hours up, with a cafeteria halfway.
- 2

ARCHITECTURE

Punakha Dzong

Built in 1637–38 where the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu rivers meet, Bhutan's most beautiful dzong was the seat of government until the 1950s and hosted the king's wedding in 2011. Jacaranda trees bloom violet around it in spring.

3

WILDLIFE

Phobjikha Valley

A broad glacial valley of dwarf-bamboo marsh where rare black-necked cranes spend the winter, roughly November to February. Gangtey Goenpa overlooks the valley floor, and the gentle Gangtey Nature Trail makes a lovely half-day walk.

4

SACRED SITE

Bumthang Valley

Four high valleys regarded as Bhutan's spiritual heartland, dotted with some of its oldest temples, including Jambay Lhakhang and Kurjey Lhakhang. Expect buckwheat pancakes, locally brewed Red Panda beer and Swiss-style cheese made in Jakar.

5

NATURE

Dochula Pass

At about 3,100 metres on the road from Thimphu to Punakha, 108 memorial chortens crown the pass. On clear mornings between October and February, the snow peaks of the eastern Himalaya, including Gangkhar Puensum, line the northern horizon.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Thimphu

≈ 115,000 people

One of the few capitals without traffic lights, where a policeman directs cars at the main junction. See the Centenary Farmers' Market, Tashichho Dzong and the giant Buddha Dordenma above town.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Phuentsholing

≈ 28,000 people

The southern border town facing Jaigaon in West Bengal is Bhutan's trading hub and the main overland entry from India; most travellers stay a night rather than linger.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Paro

≈ 11,000 people

A low-rise valley town of painted wooden shopfronts near the airport, and the natural base for the Tiger's Nest hike, Rinpung Dzong and the National Museum.

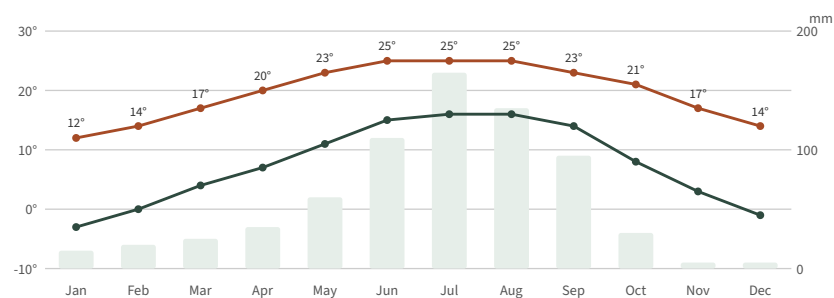
Figures are 2017 census town populations; Bhutan is still largely rural, and no other town tops 10,000.

When to go to Bhutan

Best time: **Mar–May, Sep–Nov.**

**Average climate in Thimphu**

— High °C
 — Low °C
 ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Mar–Apr	Paro Tshechu Five days of masked cham dances at Rinpung Dzong each spring, ending before dawn on the final day with the unveiling of a giant thangka, or thongdrel, of Guru Rinpoche.
Sep–Oct	Thimphu Tshechu The capital's biggest festival, three days of sacred dances at Tashichho Dzong in autumn, draws families in their finest gho and kira along with joking atsara clowns; book hotels early.
Nov	Black-necked Crane Festival Held on 11 November in the courtyard of Gangtey Goenpa in Phobjikha, with schoolchildren's crane dances and folk songs welcoming the birds back from Tibet for the winter.

How much does Bhutan cost?

SHOESTRING £180 per person / day ≈ BTN 22,820 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £300 per person / day ≈ BTN 38,033 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £650 per person / day ≈ BTN 82,405 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

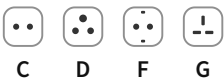
Food to try

Ema datshi The national dish: fiery green or red chillies stewed with soft local cheese, eaten with nutty Bhutanese red rice. Guides can ask kitchens to tone down the heat.	Phaksha paa Strips of pork, often fatty, stir-fried with dried red chillies and radish or greens; a staple of home cooking and roadside restaurants.	Momos Tibetan-style steamed dumplings stuffed with cheese, cabbage or minced meat, sold in snack bars across Thimphu and Paro with a sharp chilli sauce called ezay.
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Getting around

There are no railways, so almost everyone travels by private car with a driver, usually arranged with the guide through a tour operator. The main east–west road is paved but slow: allow about three hours from Thimphu to Punakha and two days from Paro to Bumthang. Drukair runs short domestic hops to Bumthang and Gelephu, and Thimphu has plentiful taxis. Overland visitors cross from India at Phuentsholing.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE  C D F G 230V — UK plugs fit	EMERGENCY NUMBERS Ambulance: 112 Fire: 110 Police: 113 Source: FCDO “Getting help”
DIALLING CODE +975	TIME ZONE UTC+6 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Not safe — drink bottled or treated water

DRIVING

On the left

TIPPING

Not expected in restaurants or shops, but guides and drivers are customarily tipped at the end of a tour, ideally in an envelope.

ETIQUETTE

Walk clockwise around chortens, prayer wheels and temples, remove shoes and hats in shrines, and don't photograph temple interiors. Dzong visits require long sleeves and long trousers or skirts.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Paro International Airport (PBH), Paro

Visas & entry for Bhutan

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must have a visa to enter and leave Bhutan.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Hepatitis A

Tetanus

Typhoid

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Chikungunya

Cholera

Dengue

Hepatitis B

Japanese encephalitis

Rabies

Tuberculosis

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

No yellow fever certificate is required to enter.

MALARIA

Low risk of malaria

- There is a low risk of malaria in the southern belt districts of Bhutan along the border with India: Chukha, Geyleg-phug, Samchi, Samdrup Jonkhar and Shemgang: awareness of risk and bite avoidance recommended.

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Bhutan

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Wed 21 Oct 2026

Dassain

Sun 1 Nov 2026

Coronation of His Majesty the King · Descending Day of Lord Buddha

Wed 11 Nov 2026	Birth Anniversary of the 4th Druk Gyalpo - Constitution Day
Thu 17 Dec 2026	National Day
Sat 2 Jan 2027	Winter Solstice
Fri 8 Jan 2027	Traditional Day of Offering
Sun 7 Feb 2027	Losar
Mon 8 Feb 2027	Losar
Sun 21 Feb 2027	Birth Anniversary of His Majesty the King
Mon 22 Feb 2027	Birth Anniversary of His Majesty the King
Tue 23 Feb 2027	Birth Anniversary of His Majesty the King
Fri 16 Apr 2027	Death Anniversary of Zhabdrung
Sun 2 May 2027	Birth Anniversary of the 3rd Druk Gyalpo
Thu 20 May 2027	Lord Buddha's Parinirvana
Sun 13 Jun 2027	Birth Anniversary of Guru Rinpoche
Fri 6 Aug 2027	First Sermon of Lord Buddha
Fri 24 Sep 2027	Blessed Rainy Day
Sat 9 Oct 2027	Dassain (date may shift)

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Dzongkha

ENGLISH	DZONGKHA	SAY IT
Hello	ཁྱེ་གཟུགས་བཟང་པོ་ལགས།	<i>koo-zoo ZANG-poh la</i>
Thank you	བཀའ་དྲིན་ཆེ་ལགས།	<i>ka-DRIN-chey la</i>
Please	ང་ལུ་གནང་།	<i>nga-loo NANG</i>
Excuse me	Atsi zur nang	<i>AH-tsee zoor nang</i>
How much is this?	འདི་ག་དམ་ཅིག་མིན་ན་?	<i>dee GA-dem chi IN-na</i>

Know before you go

- On Kathmandu–Paro flights, left-hand window seats usually give the best views of Everest and Kanchenjunga; the steep valley approach into Paro is memorable in itself.
- The Sustainable Development Fee is charged per night on top of hotels and guiding; check the current rate on the Department of Tourism's official website before comparing operators' quotes.
- Bring cash: card acceptance and ATMs that take foreign cards are patchy outside Thimphu and Paro, and Indian rupees are accepted at par alongside the ngultrum.