
Preparing For Your Journey: Bhutan

Bhutan is a small, landlocked Himalayan country led by a king, in transition to a constitutional monarchy. Facilities for tourism are limited. There is no U.S. diplomatic or consular presence in Bhutan. The U.S. Embassy in Delhi handles all assistance to U.S. citizens.

The modern name for the country comes from the Sanskrit word Bhu-Uttan, meaning High Land, although the Bhutanese refer to their country as Druk Yul -- the land of the Dragon. The indigenous people are Drukpas and they follow the Drukpa Kagyud school of Buddhism.

Time Zone: GMT/UTC +6

Language: Dzongkha, English, Sharchopha, Nepali etc.

Religion: 70% Buddhist, 25% Hindu, 5% others

Visas:

The visa fee for Bhutan is included in the tour price and paid in advance by us. After payment is received, it is deposited with the Dept. of Tourism in Bhutan and visa clearance is processed. Once they approve the visa it is forwarded to the Foreign Ministry who issues the visa. They then give the copy of clearance to Druk Air. On arrival at Paro airport, the clerk will find your clearance and issue your visa. In addition, we will send you a copy of the visa clearance to carry with you.

Travel Insurance:

Is highly recommended. We offer insurance through Travelex. We have found them to be fair and quick to respond. To view policies and apply online, go to originalworld.com and see the link to insurance on the right side bar.

Medical Facilities:

Medical facilities in the populated areas in Bhutan such as Thimphu or Paro are available, but may be limited or unavailable in rural areas. Medical services may not meet Western standards and some medicines are in short supply. Certain emergency medical services are provided free of charge to all tourists.

There are no required immunizations. Information on health precautions, such as safe food and water precautions and insect bite protection, may be obtained from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747) or via the CDC's Internet site at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel>

Weather:

The best time to visit Bhutan is in the Spring and Autumn, when most of the festivals take place and the weather is at the best. This is the ideal time for trekking and for traveling throughout the country. You're likely to get wet no matter the season but FYI- the monsoon is from June to August, when an average of 0.5m (1.5ft) of rain pours down in Thimphu and up to 1m (3ft) saturates the eastern hills. Higher parts of Bhutan have pleasant months either side of the rainy season. Days from March to April and October to November are generally warm with little rain, decent sunshine and temperatures between 25-30°C (77-86°F). Nights can get a bit fresh between November and March. Lower parts of the country experience heavier falls and colder temperatures during the day across this time.

Altitude:

The maximum elevation on a Bhutanese road (3140m/10302 ft in the west and 3750m/12303 in the east) is lower than that which causes altitude problems for most people. These are mountain passes that you cross to get to the next valley and you are only there for brief moment. Most of the towns and villages where you spend the night are between 2000 – 2900m (6560-9514 ft) and it is rare to have individuals suffer from altitude problems at these elevations.

Packing Suggestions:

Soft-sided bag is best weight limits for Druk Air flights are 20kgs econ/30 kgs for business class. Avoid revealing clothes. A set of long-sleeved light shirt and pants are useful against the extremely hot sun and mosquitoes, a wide brimmed sun hat, one pair comfortable light shoes, T-shirts, mosquito and insect repellent, spare camera batteries, small flashlight or headlight, sunscreen lotion, sunglasses w/strap, first aid kit for personal use, lip protection. A woman traveler suggested a sports bra for bumpy road travel, jacket for mornings and evenings.

Accommodations:

All hotels have running hot water, private shower/bath, and radiators/heaters but no central heating. We select the best available Bhutanese hotels. At the same time guests should keep in mind that standards here should not be compared to standards in the West. There are a few large corporate hotel groups that now have 5* hotels in Bhutan at extremely high prices. We do not use these for our group tours.

Food:

Food is mild - most hotels cater to tourists and take care not to make food too spicy. They can cater to individual tastes in bigger towns like Paro and Thimphu. Usually food is served in buffet. Breakfast - juice, tea/coffee, eggs, porridge or cornflakes, toast, sometimes ham and sausages, and fruit. Lunch and dinner - consists of rice, bread or noodles/pasta, 2 meat items, 2 vegetable items, salad, dessert, tea/coffee.

Currency:

1 US Dollar = 61.7 Bhutan Ngultrum (BTN) as of February 2015. Visitors are advised to carry cash, since credit cards are not widely accepted in Bhutan. ATM machines do not accept international cards; they are only for local use. You change money at the airport, the bank or at hotels.

Suggested Spending Money:

While all your essential needs for accommodation and food are included, you may wish to bring approximately \$300-500 for shopping and tips. Typical items of interest include hand-woven and handicraft goods, colorful masks, hand-woven bamboo items, silver, silk, bronzes, carpets, jewelry, wooden products, thangkhas and Bhutanese stamps. The items are not as inexpensive as in Nepal, due to the limited travel market. Best buys are at the weekend markets.

Taxes: Druk Air tickets now include airport taxes for exiting Bhutan. Hotels and restaurant in Bhutan charge 10% sales tax and 10% service charge. Since you meals and accommodations are covered in the tour cost, this is absorbed as well. But taxes are applicable for the beverages such as soda and alcohol. These items are not included in tour cost. **Exit Fees:** If you are coming into Paro from Bangkok, expect to pay Bhat 500 (about \$14) to the Thai Gov, from Kathmandu Rs. 500 (about \$7) to Nepal Gov, from Delhi or Calcutta, pay Rs. 150 (about \$4) to India Gov.

Tipping Guidelines:

Tipping is not required or expected, but if you feel you received exemplary service it is appreciated. General guideline is \$10 per day for the guide/escort and \$5 a day for the driver.

Purchasing Art:

There's no limit on the amount of art you can ship back. There are packing/shipping agents in Bhutan. You can also do it through the postal system that is quite reasonable. You'll have to keep receipts though and anything approaching an antique has to be cleared by the National Commission. Our associate in Bhutan can do that for you.

Suggested Reading:

"Treasures of the Thunder Dragon. A Portrait of Bhutan" by her majesty the Queen of Bhutan, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck. It is a personal account of her many journeys on foot to remote regions across Bhutan where she discovers sacred hot springs, ancient monasteries and a little boy who later is discovered to be a reincarnation of a great 17th century ruler. Available in Thimphu bookstores and Thimphu Handicraft Center, approx \$15.