

Earthbound Expeditions

Nepal and Bhutan Tour

12 days, from US$3,287 per person

Duration **12 days**	Grade **Easy**	Max altitude **3,120 m**
Start and end **Kathmandu**	On foot **Sightseeing**	Best season **Mar to May, Sep to Nov**
Accommodation **Three-star hotels**	Meals **Mostly full board**	Group size **Up to 12**
Getting there **Drukair flights**		

Nepal and Bhutan Tour Overview

Two Himalayan kingdoms in one trip: the living temple cities of the Kathmandu valley, the dzongs and monasteries of Bhutan, the Tiger's Nest, and rhino in the lowland jungle at Chitwan.

Tour overview

This trip visits two neighbouring Himalayan kingdoms that are very different from each other. Nepal is busy and crowded, both Hindu and Buddhist, and has been open to travellers since 1951. Bhutan is quiet, orderly and entirely Buddhist, admits visitors on a fixed daily fee, and has never been colonised or occupied. Twelve days is enough to understand why people who have visited both describe them so differently.

Why Bhutan is in the middle of the trip

The reason is the flights. Only two airlines fly into Paro, Drukair and Bhutan Airlines, and for most travellers the practical departure points are Kathmandu, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangkok and Singapore. Kathmandu is the only one of these in the Himalaya. The Bhutan section therefore fits in the middle of a Nepal itinerary, and it is not an expensive detour: the flight from Kathmandu to Paro takes an hour.

Who this trip is for

Travellers who want to see the Himalaya without trekking for two weeks. The only demanding day is the walk to the Tiger's Nest on day 7, which involves 900 m of ascent and descent at around 3,000 m and takes four to five hours. The rest of the trip is sightseeing, driving and a jeep safari in a national park. It suits travellers in their seventies and families with children, and we recommend it to travellers who cannot trek but want to see the mountains.

Cost of the Bhutan section

The Bhutan section accounts for much of the price of this trip. Bhutan charges a Sustainable Development Fee of USD 100 per person per night, plus a USD 40 visa fee, before any hotel, meal or guide costs. Four nights amount to USD 440 per person in government charges. This is not a mark-up by us but national policy, and it keeps the valleys quiet.

Key highlights of the Nepal and Bhutan Tour

- The Tiger's Nest monastery, on its cliff above Paro
- Punakha Dzong and the Dochula pass
- Four UNESCO sites in the Kathmandu valley
- Rhino and Tharu villages in Chitwan

Itinerary

Day	Route	Hours	Distance	Altitude
1	Arrive Kathmandu	-	-	1,400 m
2	Kathmandu valley sites, up to Nagarkot	-	-	2,175 m
3	Nagarkot sunrise, Bhaktapur, back to Kathmandu	-	-	1,400 m
4	Fly Kathmandu to Paro, on to Thimphu	1 hr flying	-	2,320 m

5	Over the Dochula to Punakha	3 hrs	-	3,100 m
6	Punakha to Paro via Wangdue	4–5 hrs	-	2,235 m
7	The Tiger's Nest	4–5 hrs	6–7 km	3,120 m
8	Fly Paro to Kathmandu	1 hr flying	-	1,400 m
9	Drive to Chitwan	5 hrs	-	150 m
10	Chitwan, canoe, jungle walk and jeep safari	-	-	150 m
11	Fly or drive back to Kathmandu	25 min flying	-	1,400 m
12	Fly home	-	-	-

Day 1

Arrive in Kathmandu

We meet you at the airport and take you to your hotel. In the evening we brief you on the trip and on the Bhutan documents: your visa clearance letter has already been issued, and your Paro flight seats are reserved against it.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, arrival day Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Dinner

Day 2

Kathmandu Valley sightseeing and drive to Nagarkot

You visit Swayambhunath on its hill, the cremation ghats at Pashupatinath, the great dome of Boudhanath and the carved courtyards of Patan, with a guide who can explain the religious art in detail. In the afternoon, we drive up to Nagarkot on the valley rim for the sunset.

Altitude: 2,175 m On foot: Easy walking, 3–4 hrs Night: Hotel, Nagarkot Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 3

Sunrise at Nagarkot and Bhaktapur

An early start to see the Himalaya along the northern horizon, including Everest on a clear morning. You then drive down to Bhaktapur, the best-preserved of the valley's three old cities, where we spend the afternoon before returning to Kathmandu.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: Easy walking, 2–3 hrs Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 4

Fly to Paro and drive to Thimphu

The one-hour flight offers some of the best mountain views of any commercial flight. Sit on the left to see the Himalaya, including Everest and Kanchenjunga. Pilots fly the approach into Paro manually between mountains. In the afternoon, you visit Thimphu: the Memorial Chorten, the 54 m Buddha Dordenma above the valley, and Tashichho Dzong.

Altitude: 2,320 m On foot: Easy walking, 2–3 hrs Night: Hotel, Thimphu Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5

Drive over the Dochula pass to Punakha

A three-hour drive east over the Dochula pass at 3,100 m, where 108 chortens stand on a rise and, on a clear morning, the eastern Himalaya is visible across the skyline. We descend into the warm Punakha valley to visit Chimi Lhakhang and then Punakha Dzong, at the meeting point of two rivers, which is considered the most beautiful building in Bhutan.

Altitude: 1,200 m On foot: Easy walking, 1–2 hrs Night: Hotel, Punakha Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6

Punakha to Paro via Wangdue

We drive back over the pass and west through Wangdue to the Paro valley, stopping along the way at places such as a roadside chorten, a village archery match or a farmhouse. Driving in Bhutan is slow, and the journey is an important part of the experience.

Altitude: 2,235 m On foot: None, 4–5 hr drive Night: Hotel, Paro Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 7

Hike to the Tiger's Nest

The main walk of the trip: three to four hours up through oak and pine forest to Taktsang, which sits on a cliff 900 m above the valley floor. Guru Rinpoche is said to have flown here on the back of a tigress. This is the most physically demanding day of the trip. Ponies are available for the lower half.

Altitude: 3,120 m at Taktsang On foot: 6–7 km, 4–5 hrs Night: Hotel, Paro Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 8

Fly back to Kathmandu

The morning flight west, with the mountains on the right-hand side this time. The afternoon is free in Kathmandu for Thamel and anything you did not see on day 2. In the evening there is a Nepali cultural show and dinner.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, flight day Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

Day 9

Drive to Chitwan

A five-hour drive south, out of the hills and onto the Terai plain, which is hot, flat and green, and much closer to India in character. Chitwan is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the last strongholds of the one-horned rhino. In the evening there is a walk by the Rapti river and a Tharu stick dance after dinner.

Altitude: 150 m On foot: None, 5 hr drive Night: Lodge, Chitwan Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 10

Full day in Chitwan National Park

A dugout canoe trip on the river at first light to look for gharial and kingfishers, a guided jungle walk, and a jeep safari into the park to look for rhino, and with luck a sloth bear or a tiger. In between, you visit a Tharu village and the elephant breeding centre.

Altitude: 150 m On foot: Jungle walk, 2–3 hrs Night: Lodge, Chitwan Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 11

Return to Kathmandu

A twenty-five-minute flight from Bharatpur, or a five-hour drive if you would prefer to see the countryside. The rest of the day is free for shopping in Patan and Thamel, and there is a farewell dinner in the evening.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, flight day Night: Hotel, Kathmandu Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

Day 12

Departure

We take you to the airport. If you are continuing on a trek, we introduce you to the trekking team here.

Altitude: 1,400 m On foot: None, departure day Night: No overnight Meals: Breakfast

What's included

- Airport transfers and ground transport
- Licensed English-speaking guide
- Accommodation throughout the trip
- All permits and national park fees
- Meals as per the itinerary

Not included

- International flights
- Travel and rescue insurance
- Personal trekking gear
- Tips and personal expenses
- Nepal entry visa (on arrival)

Permits and other costs

Permit	Fee	Issued by
Nepal tourist visa. Paid in cash at a bank counter. Indian nationals do not need a visa. This trip requires a multiple-entry visa, which is issued by default, because you leave Nepal for Bhutan and return.	$50 for 30 days, $30 for 15	On arrival at Kathmandu airport
Bhutan visa. Reviewed within five working days. You carry a clearance letter, and the visa is stamped in your passport at Paro. Visas on arrival are available only to Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian nationals.	$40, one-off and non-refundable	Online, by a licensed Bhutanese operator, against a paid itinerary
Bhutan Sustainable Development Fee. The USD 100 rate applies until 31 August 2027. It was reduced from USD 200 in September 2023. Children aged 6 to 12 pay half and children under 6 pay nothing. Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian nationals pay INR 1,200.	$100 per person per night	Paid with the booking, before the visa is applied for
Licensed Bhutanese guide. Required for travel beyond the Paro and Thimphu valleys, which this itinerary includes on days 5 and 6. For this reason, most visitors travel to Bhutan through an operator.	Inside the trip price	-
Chitwan National Park entry. SAARC nationals pay NPR 1,000.	NPR 2,000, about $15 a day	At the park gate, inside the trip price

Other cost	Amount	Note

Bhutan Sustainable Development Fee	$400	$100 per person per night for four nights. This is a government charge, not ours
Bhutan visa fee	$40	A one-off fee, non-refundable even if the trip is cancelled
Kathmandu to Paro and back	$560–760	Drukair or Bhutan Airlines. Only these two airlines fly this route and neither offers discounts
Bhutan hotels, guide and driver	$110–190 a night	Three-star hotels, full board, private vehicle and licensed guide for all four nights
Bhutan monument entry fees	$40–70	Punakha Dzong, Tashichho Dzong, Taktsang and the museums
Kathmandu hotel	$40–70 a night	Three-star, four nights
Kathmandu valley guiding and vehicle	$90–140 a day	Private car and an English-speaking cultural guide
Kathmandu monument fees	$45–60	Swayambhunath, Pashupatinath, Boudhanath, Patan and Bhaktapur, which has the highest fee
Chitwan lodge and activities	$120–190 a night	Full board, canoe, jungle walk, jeep safari and the park fee
Bharatpur to Kathmandu flight	$110–140	Twenty-five minutes, or a five-hour drive at no extra cost
Travel insurance	$70–130	Medical evacuation cover is essential: serious medical cases in Bhutan are flown to Bangkok or Delhi
Tips for guides and drivers	$150–250	Per traveller, across both countries

Packing list

Tiger's Nest walk

- Walking shoes or light boots with good grip. The path is stone and dust, with 900 m of steps
- Trekking poles if you find them helpful on descents. Sticks can be borrowed at the start of the path
- A small daypack, two litres of water and some food
- A warm layer for the top, which is 900 m above the valley and much colder

Temples and dzongs

- Long trousers and tops with sleeves. Shorts and vests are not permitted in a dzong and you will be refused entry
- Slip-on shoes. You remove them at every temple, around a dozen times
- A hat that is easy to remove, as hats are not worn indoors

- Smart casual clothes for the evenings, if you wish. Bhutanese hotels are relaxed, but the country is fairly formal

Clothing for a range of temperatures

- Layers. This trip goes from 150 m at Chitwan to 3,120 m at Taktsang within four days
- A light down or fleece jacket for Nagarkot, the Dochula pass and evenings in Bhutan
- A light waterproof jacket, needed more in spring and autumn than in the dry season
- Sunglasses and SPF 50 sun cream. The sun at 3,000 m is stronger than the temperature suggests
- Insect repellent and long sleeves for the evenings in Chitwan

Documents and money

- Passport valid for six months with two blank pages, plus photocopies
- Four passport photographs, for the Bhutan and Nepal visas
- A printed copy of your Bhutan visa clearance letter
- Travel insurance certificate showing medical evacuation cover
- US dollars in cash, in clean notes, for the Nepal visa, and a card for other expenses
- A universal adaptor, as Nepal and Bhutan use different socket types

Flights

Only two airlines fly into Paro and neither has codeshare agreements with other airlines. This section explains how that affects the way a Bhutan trip is booked.

Airlines serving Paro

Drukair and Bhutan Airlines are the only airlines certified to land at Paro. They do not belong to any alliance, have no codeshare agreements with European or American airlines, and cannot check a bag through from London. Your flight to Kathmandu is one ticket and the Paro flight is a second one, which we reserve for you as part of the trip.

Visa and flight booking order

Drukair will not confirm a Paro seat without a visa clearance number, and the Bhutan visa is issued only against a confirmed, paid itinerary. The operator completes these steps in the correct order, and this is one of the main things an operator does for travel to Bhutan. It is also why we ask for passport scans six weeks before departure rather than two weeks.

The approach into Paro

Paro lies at 2,235 m in a valley with mountains on both sides. Pilots fly the approach visually and manually, and only a small number of pilots are qualified to do so. It is one of the most dramatic landings in commercial aviation. For this reason the airport operates only in daylight and good weather, and there is no alternative airport, so a Paro flight can be delayed by a day.

Seating

Sit on the left from Kathmandu to Paro and on the right on the return. On a clear morning you can see Everest, Makalu, Kanchenjunga and Chomolhari one after another, and the cabin crew name them. Ask for the seat at check-in.

Allow a spare day at the end

Several parts of this itinerary depend on the weather: the Paro flight, the Nagarkot sunrise and the flight back from Chitwan to Bharatpur. None of these is likely to cause a three-day delay as a Lukla flight can, but we still advise against booking an international flight that leaves the morning after day 12, even if it is cheaper.

Accommodation

Where	Nights	Type	Room	Bathroom
Kathmandu	4	Three-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Nagarkot	1	Hill resort on the valley rim	Twin or double, mountain-facing	Private, hot water
Thimphu	1	Three-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Punakha	1	Three-star hotel or a valley lodge	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Paro	2	Three-star hotel	Twin or double	Private, hot water
Chitwan	2	Jungle lodge	Twin or double, or a cottage	Private, hot water

Heating
Available in the hotels in Bhutan, where it is needed in winter, and in Nagarkot. Kathmandu hotels rarely have heating, and in December it can be colder indoors than outdoors in the mornings.

Hot shower
Available every night throughout the trip. This is a tour rather than a trek, and the accommodation is comfortable.

Wifi
Available in every hotel, with good connections in Bhutan. No sites are blocked in Bhutan, unlike in Tibet.

Phone signal
Ncell and NTC cover Nepal. In Bhutan your guide can arrange a local SIM card on arrival, and roaming works in the valleys.

Power
230V throughout. Nepal uses type C, D and M sockets, and Bhutan uses type D, F and G. One universal adaptor covers both.

Water
Filtered water is provided in the vehicle in Bhutan and at the Chitwan lodge. Tap water is not safe to drink in either country.

Laundry
Same-day service in the Kathmandu and Paro hotels, charged per item.

Single rooms
Available throughout this trip at a supplement, unlike on our treks. No accommodation on this trip requires dormitory or twin sharing.

Meals

Meal	Time	What it is like
Breakfast	7:00–8:30	Buffet in the hotels. In Bhutan, expect red rice, eggs, and ema datshi if you would like it at breakfast
Lunch	12:30–13:30	In Bhutan, a set menu at a local restaurant, included. In Nepal, wherever you are during the day
Dinner	19:00–20:30	Bhutanese, Nepali, Indian and Continental. The Chitwan lodge serves a barbecue with a Tharu dance performance
Tea	constantly	Nepali masala chiya, and Bhutanese suja, a salted butter tea worth trying once

Diet	How we manage it
Vegetarian	Easy in both countries, and particularly so in Bhutan. Ema datshi, the national dish of chillies and cheese, is vegetarian.
Vegan	More difficult in Bhutan than you might expect, because cheese is used in almost every dish. Tell us when you book, and the guide will order ahead each day.
Gluten free	Rice is the staple food in both countries, so this is straightforward. Momo, noodles and Tibetan bread contain gluten.
Halal	Available in Kathmandu, but there is no certified halal kitchen on the Bhutan route. Vegetarian food is the practical option for those four days.
Chilli	Please note that Bhutanese food is very spicy, and chillies are treated as a vegetable rather than a spice. Tell your guide on day 4 and it is easily managed.

A typical day

Time	What happens
7:00	Breakfast at the hotel, at a comfortable hour, as this is not a trek
8:30	Depart with the guide and driver. In Bhutan, the same guide and driver are with you for all four days
10:00	The first dzong, temple or viewpoint of the day
12:30	Lunch. In Bhutan, this is a set menu ordered in advance
14:00	Afternoon: a second site, a village, a market, or a drive to the next valley
17:00	Return to the hotel. Bhutanese towns are small and you can walk around one in an hour
19:00	Dinner, and a briefing from the guide on the next day
21:00	Free evening, with the option of a bar in Thamel on the Kathmandu nights

Difficulty and preparation

Difficulty 2 of 5

An easy trip with one demanding morning.

- Ten of the twelve days are sightseeing, driving and a jeep safari, with no more than a few hours of walking at a time.
- Day 7, the walk to the Tiger's Nest, involves 900 m of ascent and descent at around 3,000 m and takes four to five hours. This is the only physically demanding part of the trip.
- You do not sleep above 2,320 m, so altitude is a factor on only one morning.
- Driving in Bhutan is slow and winding rather than long, and some people experience car sickness.
- Ponies are available for the lower two-thirds of the Tiger's Nest walk, which makes it accessible to most people.

Getting ready

6 weeks before: Walk uphill once a week
Take one walk a week that includes 300 m of ascent, building up to two hours. This is all the preparation this trip needs, and it is aimed at the Tiger's Nest walk on day 7.

4 weeks before: Wear your walking shoes
Do these walks in the shoes you will bring. You need proper walking shoes or light boots for one morning and comfortable shoes for the other eleven days. Many people bring only comfortable shoes.

2 weeks before: Practise descending
The descent from Taktsang is 900 m of stone steps and switchbacks, and it is harder on the knees than the climb. Take one walk that descends as much as it climbs, using poles if you have them.

1 week before: Check your documents
Check that your passport is valid for six months and has two blank pages, that you have printed your Bhutan clearance letter, and that your insurance covers medical evacuation. Serious medical cases in Bhutan are flown to Bangkok or Delhi.

Weather by month

Nepal and Bhutan share the same weather system. This section is most relevant to Bhutan, where the weather mainly affects the Paro flight.

Month	Day in Bhutan	Night in Bhutan	Kathmandu, by day	Conditions	Note
January	12°C	-3°C	19°C	Good	Cold, clear and quiet in both countries. Snow can close the Dochula pass for a day.
February	14°C	-1°C	21°C	Good	Warmer, clear and still very quiet. Losar, the Bhutanese new year, falls in February or March.

March	18°C	4°C	25°C	Best	Rhododendrons in flower on the Bhutanese passes, and the Paro Tsechu, the largest festival in the country.
April	21°C	8°C	28°C	Best	The best month of the year for this trip. Warm, clear and with everything in flower.
May	23°C	12°C	30°C	Good	Warm and increasingly humid, with cloud building in the afternoons. Chitwan becomes very hot.
June	25°C	15°C	30°C	Hard	The monsoon arrives. Paro flights begin to be delayed and the mountains are hidden by cloud.
July	26°C	16°C	29°C	Hard	Wet in both countries. Green, cheaper and quiet, but the Himalaya is not visible.
August	25°C	16°C	29°C	Hard	Similar to July. Leeches on the Tiger's Nest path and a real chance of a delayed Paro flight.
September	23°C	13°C	28°C	Good	Skies clear during the month and conditions are very good from about the 20th. The Thimphu Tshechu takes place this month.
October	20°C	7°C	26°C	Best	The clearest skies of the year and the busiest month. Book several months in advance.
November	17°C	2°C	23°C	Best	Cold, clear and quieter. Our preferred month for this itinerary.
December	13°C	-2°C	20°C	Good	Cold and very clear, and the best time for Chitwan. Hotels in Bhutan are heated, but hotels in Kathmandu often are not.

Averages for Paro and Thimphu, with the Kathmandu daytime figure alongside. The rating tracks the Paro flight as much as the sightseeing.

Guides and porters

Your guides

You have two separate teams, and they hand over at Paro airport. In Nepal, you travel with one of our own guides and a driver, both employed by us in Kathmandu. In Bhutan, you travel with a licensed Bhutanese guide and driver, because Bhutanese law requires guiding to be done by a Bhutanese national through a licensed local operator. We have worked with the same partner in Paro on every departure for many years. This is how we ensure consistent standards in a country where we cannot legally guide ourselves.

Guide training in Bhutan

Bhutanese guides take a national certification that covers history, Buddhist religious art, botany and etiquette, and they are re-tested regularly. Ask them what is painted on a dzong wall, which of the sixteen arhats you are looking at, or why there is a phallus painted on a farmhouse in Punakha. Of all our trips, this is the one where the quality of guiding makes the greatest difference to what you see.

Tipping

Tipping is customary rather than compulsory, and it is now expected of tour groups in both countries. Allow about $150 to $250 per traveller for the whole trip, divided between the two teams and given at the end of each section rather than at the very end. Your Bhutanese guide and driver are tipped together at Paro on day 8.

Responsible travel

The Sustainable Development Fee

Bhutan's Sustainable Development Fee of $100 a night is not a general tourist tax. It funds free healthcare and education for Bhutanese citizens and the country's forest conservation programme, and it is intended to limit visitor numbers. Bhutan is the only carbon-negative country in the world and one of very few with a constitutional requirement to maintain 60 per cent forest cover. The fee is what keeps places such as the Punakha valley quiet.

Dzongs are working buildings

Every dzong on this itinerary is both a monastery and a district administrative headquarters, with monks on one side of the courtyard and civil servants on the other. They are not museums. Cover your shoulders and knees, remove your hat, remove your shoes where asked, and do not take photographs inside the temple halls unless you are told it is permitted. Walk clockwise around chortens and mani walls.

Wildlife viewing at Chitwan

This itinerary includes a jeep safari, a dugout canoe trip and a guided walk. Together these offer the best wildlife viewing available and take you into the park at the times when animals are most active. Elephant-back safaris are available at Chitwan and we can arrange one on request. They are not part of the standard itinerary, so if you prefer not to take one, you do not need to do anything.

Supporting local communities

The Bhutan section, which is around half the price, goes to the Bhutanese government as the SDF and to the Bhutanese operator, hotels, guide and driver. The Nepal section is paid to us and stays in Kathmandu, Nagarkot and Chitwan. Almost none of the cost of this trip is paid to anyone outside the two countries you visit.

Booking and payment

How to book

Email us or send a WhatsApp message with your approximate dates and the number of people in your group. You will receive a reply from someone who has led this trip. There is no payment at this stage.

Payment for Bhutan before the visa application

This is different from our treks. The Bhutan section, which covers the SDF, the visa fee and the ground arrangements, is paid in full before the visa application is submitted, as required by the Bhutanese system. The Nepal section follows our normal terms: a thirty per cent deposit to secure your dates, with the balance paid on arrival in Kathmandu.

Documents and deadlines

We need passport scans six weeks before departure, which is earlier than for our treks. The Bhutan visa is reviewed within five working days, and Drukair will not confirm a Paro seat without the clearance number, so the process begins with your passport details.

Payment

Bank transfer, or card payment through a secure link. Card payments carry a bank fee of about 4 per cent, which we show you before you pay. The Nepal balance in Kathmandu can be paid in US dollars, pounds, euros or Nepali rupees.

Cancellation

The Nepal section follows our usual terms: if you cancel more than 30 days before departure, the deposit can be transferred to any other trip with no time limit, and within 30 days it is retained. The Bhutan section is different. The $40 visa fee is never refunded, and the SDF and ground costs already paid to Bhutan are subject to the Bhutanese operator's terms, which become much stricter within 30 days of departure. Travel insurance with cancellation cover is more important on this trip than on a trek.

Booking notice

Six weeks is comfortable and three weeks is possible. Two weeks is not enough, because of Bhutan's requirements: the visa takes five working days after a paid booking, and the Paro seat is confirmed after that. For October or either of the major festivals, book three months ahead.

Optional extras

Festival departure

+$200 on the price, included in the itinerary

The Paro Tsechu in March or April and the Thimphu Tshechu in September or October are the two largest festivals, and both involve several days of masked dances in a dzong courtyard. Dates follow the Bhutanese lunar calendar, and hotels are booked up a year in advance.

Bumthang

from $890, +3 days

Travel east beyond Trongsa to the four valleys of Bumthang, the spiritual heartland of Bhutan, which contain the country's oldest temples. The journey is a long drive or a short domestic flight, and it gives a deeper experience of Bhutan than the areas near Paro.

Druk Path trek

from $760, +4 days

A four-day trek from Paro to Thimphu over the ridge, passing high lakes at around 4,000 m, with nights in tents. It is the most accessible trek in Bhutan and a very different experience from the road tour.

Everest scenic flight

$220, 1 morning

A one-hour flight along the range from Kathmandu with a guaranteed window seat. It can be added on day 3 or day 11, and it is the closest view of Everest on this trip.

Pokhara and the Annapurnas

from $490, +3 days

Travel west to the lake at Pokhara, with views of the Annapurnas across the water, and an optional short walk to a viewpoint. It is easily added after Chitwan.

Single rooms throughout

$540

A room to yourself for all eleven nights. Unlike on our treks, this is available at every stop on this trip.

Frequently asked questions

Answers to the 21 questions travellers ask us most often. If your question is not here, contact us and we will answer it.

Why is Bhutan so expensive?

The cost is set by government policy. There is a Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) of $100 per person per night, plus a $40 visa fee, before any hotel, meal or guide costs. On this itinerary, four nights amount to $440 per person in government charges. This is part of a national policy of high-value, low-volume tourism. The fee funds free healthcare and education for Bhutanese citizens and the forest conservation programme, and it keeps the valleys quiet.

Is the fee $100 or $200 a night?

The fee is $100 a night. It was $200 from September 2022, was reduced to $100 in September 2023, and the reduced rate has been extended to 31 August 2027. Some websites written during this period still quote the older figures as current, which is why you may have seen different amounts.

Can I avoid the fee by travelling independently?

No. Visas on arrival are available only to Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian nationals. For everyone else, the visa is issued only against a paid itinerary, and the fee is charged for each night of your stay, whatever you do that day. A licensed guide is also required beyond the Paro and Thimphu valleys, and this itinerary leaves them on day 5.

Do children pay the fee?

Children aged 6 to 12 pay half, at $50 a night, and children under 6 pay nothing. The $40 visa fee applies to everyone.

What are the rules for Indian nationals?

The process is simpler and cheaper. No visa is needed: a permit is issued on arrival at Paro or Phuentsholing on presentation of a passport or voter ID card, and the SDF is charged at the regional rate of INR 1,200 per person per night instead of $100. The same terms apply to Bangladeshi and Maldivian nationals.

Why does the trip have to start in Kathmandu?

Only two airlines fly into Paro, Drukair and Bhutan Airlines, and for most travellers the practical departure points are Kathmandu, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangkok and Singapore. Kathmandu is the only one of these in the Himalaya, so the Bhutan section fits within a Nepal trip. The flight takes an hour.

Can I book the Paro flight myself?

In practice, no. Drukair will not confirm a seat without a Bhutan visa clearance number, and the visa is issued only against a confirmed, paid itinerary. The two steps have to be completed in the correct order, and arranging this is one of the main things an operator does for travel to Bhutan.

How far ahead do I need to book?

Six weeks is comfortable, three weeks is possible and two weeks is not enough. The limit is set by Bhutan: the visa is reviewed within five working days after a paid booking, and the Paro seat is confirmed after that. For October or either of the major festivals, book three months ahead.

Which side of the plane should I sit on?

Sit on the left from Kathmandu to Paro and on the right on the return. On a clear morning you can see Everest, Makalu, Kanchenjunga and Chomolhari one after another, and the cabin crew name them as you pass. Ask for the seat at check-in.

Can the Paro flight be cancelled?

Yes, because of cloud. Pilots fly into Paro visually between mountains, and there is no alternative airport, so flights operate only in daylight and good weather, and a flight can be delayed by a day. Delays are far less frequent than on Lukla flights, but we still recommend booking your international flight home with a spare day after day 12.

How much walking is there?

One morning. The walk to the Tiger's Nest on day 7 involves 900 m of ascent and descent at around 3,000 m and takes four to five hours. The rest of the trip is sightseeing, driving, a dugout canoe trip and a jeep safari. We recommend this trip for travellers who cannot trek but want to see the Himalaya.

Will I be able to walk to the Tiger's Nest?

Most people can. A good guide is whether you can walk uphill for two hours at home. Ponies can carry you for the lower two-thirds of the route, as far as the cafeteria viewpoint, and everyone walks the final section of stone steps. Many people walk as far as the viewpoint, look across at the monastery and turn back, which is still a rewarding day.

Will I get altitude sickness?

It is very unlikely. You do not sleep above 2,320 m on this trip, and the highest point is 3,120 m, for about an hour on day 7. For this reason, this page does not include an altitude protocol, unlike our trek pages.

Is this trip suitable for children and older travellers?

Yes, and it is one of only two trips we offer that we recommend for both. Every night has a bed, a private bathroom and hot water, the driving days are short, and the one demanding morning is optional. We have run this trip for families and for travellers in their late seventies.

Is Bhutanese food spicy?

Yes, very. Chillies are treated as a vegetable rather than a seasoning, and the national dish, ema datshi, is made of chillies and cheese. Tell your guide on day 4 and it is easily managed, as hotel kitchens are used to the request. We recommend trying the traditional dish at least once.

What should I wear in the dzongs?

Wear long trousers and tops with sleeves, with shoulders and knees covered. You will be refused entry to a dzong in shorts or a vest, as a dzong is a government office as well as a monastery. Slip-on shoes are useful because you remove them at every temple.

Is the internet restricted in Bhutan?

No. Internet restrictions apply in Tibet, not Bhutan. Hotels in Bhutan have normal wifi with no blocked sites, and your guide can arrange a local SIM card on arrival.

Is there an elephant safari at Chitwan?

Not on the two days in this itinerary, which include a jeep safari, a dugout canoe trip and a guided walk. Elephant-back safaris are available at Chitwan and we can arrange one on request. Many travellers ask us not to include one, so it is not part of the standard itinerary.

When should I go?

April, October and November. April brings rhododendrons in flower on the Bhutanese passes, and October has the clearest skies of the year, although it books up months in advance. November is our preferred month: cold, clear and quieter. Avoid June to August, when the Paro flight is unreliable and the mountains are hidden by cloud.

Should I travel during a festival?

If you want to see masked dances in a dzong courtyard, yes. The Paro Tsechu in spring and the Thimphu Tshechu in autumn are the two largest festivals. Dates follow the Bhutanese lunar calendar and change each year, and hotels are booked a year in advance for those weeks, so the trip has to be planned around the festival from the start.

Can I see more of Bhutan?

Yes. You can add three days to travel east beyond Trongsa to Bumthang, whose four valleys contain the oldest temples in the country and give a deeper experience of Bhutan than the areas near Paro. If you would prefer to walk, the four-day Druk Path from Paro to Thimphu is the most accessible trek in Bhutan.

Photos, videos and reviews of this trip: earthbound.rajansimkhada.com/nepal-and-bhutan-tour