



# Bhutan

March 22 – April 05, 2010

## Highlights

Imagine for a moment, a place where people grind grain with millennia old stone wheels while talking on cell phones and visitors view gorgeous Himalayan peaks through fluttering prayer flags from the comfort of a new SUV. A country unlike any other; no where else have the rulers decided that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product. Bhutan is where the old and new are alchemically intertwined, creating magic - to the delight of all who visit.



If there is such a thing as the road less traveled, this is it! You are embarking on a journey only a handful of tourists have made. Visitors were only allowed in the Haa Valley in 2004 and only 7 of them have been to Dorikha.

In Paro, you will witness one of the biggest festivals in Bhutan, the *Paro Tsechu*. Performed by monks and lay monks, a Bhutanese Tsechu is performed to recount the history of Bhutan and the Buddhism in Bhutan. For Bhutanese, performing and watching a Tsechu is an act of merit building honor. You will also witness the unfurling of the world's largest religious Thangka scroll, the *Paro Thongdrel*.

## What to Expect

On this cultural immersion program you will be spending time living with the villagers of Dorikha known as Dorips. Most Dorips, unlike many villagers in Bhutan, maintain two villages: a winter village and a summer village. In the summer home villagers grow potatoes, peas, barley, wheat, and buckwheat. In the warmer lower elevation winter village- they grow red rice, oranges, cardamom and other subtropical produce. Fall and spring are perfect times to visit as the timing coincides with the migration. Our spring trip will center around a home stay in the winter village and a popular festival (Paro Tsechu) in Paro. In addition, you will be seeing some of the highlights of this ancient hidden kingdom such as Punakha, Thimphu and a breathtaking visit to the Tiger's Nest.

## Who We Are



Crooked Trails is a non-profit community-based travel organization helping people broaden their understanding of the planet and its diverse cultures through education, community development and responsible travel.

In Bhutan, we work in conjunction with Bridge To Bhutan, an organization engaged in the conservation of indigenous architecture and preservation of culture. A portion of all Crooked Trails participants' program fees go to help fund projects supported by the organizations and villages we partner with.

## Registration and Costs

The cost of the Bhutan Program is **\$2660.00**. A \$500.00 deposit is required at the time of application and the remainder must be paid 8 weeks before departure. There is a The program cost is all inclusive; total immersion while in villages with rustic accommodations, transportation, traditional meals, and entry fees to all cultural sites, as well as the visa cost. The program cost does not include personal items, alcohol, tipping, international flights or international departure taxes.

- Single supplement is \$540
- Surcharge for solo traveler is \$520
- Surcharge per person (for a group of two people) is \$360

Crooked Trails is a 501(c) 3 non-profit and a portion of your program fees goes directly to the villages that you visit. This portion of your program fees is tax deductible and will be noted on your final receipt.

Upon registration we will send you the pre-departure packet, which includes background information on the people and villages we will visit so that you are better prepared to meet them and understand their customs. It will also include a suggested equipment list and itinerary.

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*IN APRIL THE ENTIRE  
HILLSIDES ARE RED, PINK  
AND WHITE. AND AT THE  
TOP OF MOUNTAIN PASSES  
AND PEAKS, ARE  
HUNDREDS AND  
THOUSANDS OF PRAYER  
FLAGS FLUTTERING IN THE  
WIND*

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# *Bhutan*

## **Home stay, festival, cultural excursions and trek to the infamous monastery Taktshang**

**March 22 – April 05, 2010**

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**A note:** All of our itineraries are flexible. Our philosophy at Crooked Trails is to let the country guide our experiences and not to live by a strict itinerary. If unexpected events arise, we may change plans to take advantage of the situation or deal with an issue. However, we will do all we can to offer you everything that is on the schedule. Please be flexible yourself and allow the program to unfold.

**Day 1-2, Mar. 22-23**     **Travel Days-** Depart US and arrive Bangkok.

**Day 3, Mar. 24**     **Depart Bangkok** very early and fly to Bhutan. (*Get a window seat! The views of the Himalayas are fantastic*).

**Day 4, Mar. 25**     **Paro.** A great introduction to Bhutan is to visit the National Museum housed in an old watch tower with its 8.5 foot thick walls that is built in the shape of a conch shell. The building itself is worth the visit. Once you are inside the museum, there is a specific route to follow through the entire building that ensures that you walk clockwise around important images. There are six floors of galleries and exhibits, each with a special theme. It has the most extensive collection of Bhutan's artifacts and history in the country.

Down the hill lies the Paro Rinpung Dzong (fortress), the centre of civil and religious authority in this valley. A short walk takes you to the base of the Dzong and across a traditional cantilevered, covered bridge. A short distance further is one of the many archery grounds. Archery is the national game of Bhutan. We may catch a match in action.

After lunch you will have 2.5 hours of adventurous driving to the *Haa* valley (8580 ft) over the Chele La Pass (12,540ft) which is marked by colorful prayer flags. (Take Dramamine if you suffer from motion sickness) On a clear day, which will most certainly be the case, you can get a spectacular view of Mount Jhomolhari (24,1362 ft), the second highest mountain in Bhutan. The drive then descends into the *Haa* valley, which had been open to tourism only since 2004. Driving down the countless switchbacks, you will be treated with panoramic views of the entire *Haa* valley, including the locally famous *Three Brothers Mountains*.

We will head off the main road onto a brand new spur road constructed in 2008 that leads to the village of Dorikha-the home of your guide. You will be set up in home stays with 2-4 people per home and enjoy dinner and get settled in.

**Day 5-6, Mar. 26 Dorikha Homestay.** During these days we will be spending time living and learning from the people of the village. We will learn about the amazing Bhutanese architecture, be involved in the agricultural processes of the spring time, and get involved in domestic chores such as making cheese and butter by hand, grinding grains with stone wheels and gathering wood. Most of the families will have arrived back from their migration from their winter village. There will be daily language lessons and plenty of time to hang out with the children, laugh with elders and visit the local sites. It is during this time that your understanding of true Bhutanese culture and life will be forged. You will not be on the tourist circuit seeing Dzongs and sleeping in hotels but rather eating and living in the local way. You must be prepared for bucket baths, squatter toilets and little privacy as well as the experience of a lifetime.

**Day 7, Mar. 27 Tego La Pass.** Today will be a trekking day for those interested. We will drive to the top of valley to *Tego La*, a high mountain pass (12,071 ft) with breathtaking views of the plains in the south and Mt. Jhomolhari in the northwest and the Haa Valley. You can also see Kachenjunga to the west in Sikkim. We will begin a 4 hour trek and enjoy a traditional lunch of savory buckwheat pancakes with chili sauce. For those who wish they can trek down the valley back to Dorikha, others can drive.

**Day 8, Mar. 28 Paro Festival (Day 1).** This morning is the last in Dorikha. After breakfast and goodbyes we will begin a morning drive to Paro. On arrival check-in at hotel followed by lunch. After lunch visit the Paro Dzong where the Masked dance-dramas of this typical Buddhist festival are going on. Be amongst throngs of Bhutanese from the Paro valley and from outlying villages of Bhutan all dressed in their traditional finery. Witness the age-old, wonderfully colorful and esoteric Religious masked dance-dramas performed by specially trained groups of Buddhist monks. Dinner and overnight at hotel in Paro.

**Day 9, Mar. 29 Paro Festival.** Early morning visit festival for the viewing the Thongdrel – the great Buddhist Thangka scroll dedicated to Guru Padmashambava. Spend the rest of the morning at the festival viewing masked dances and ritual activities. Truly a great climax to the most revered yearly festival of Bhutan. In the late afternoon, visit the 7th century Kichu Lhakhang temple built by Songtsen Gambo, the first Tibetan Buddhist king to spread Buddhism across the Himalayas. Overnight Hotel.

**Day 10, Mar. 30**      **Thimphu.** After breakfast drive to Thimphu. Thimphu has about 100,000 people sitting at almost 8000 feet representing a vibrant mix of the old and new- and the citizens like it that way. Traffic moves around a white gloved policeman (there are no traffic lights in the whole country) and monks and tourists mix in its lively streets. We will have a day and a half here to visit all the interesting spots including the Memorial Chorten, which was built in the mid 1970's in memory of Bhutan's third King, his late Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, popularly known as the father of modern Bhutan. After lunch we will be driving to Changgangkha Lhakhang, a monastery located on the top of a small ridge overlooking the Thimphu town. It was established in 12<sup>th</sup> century on a site chosen by Phajo Drukgom shigpo, a lama who came from Ralung in Tibet to spread Buddhism in Bhutan. Inside the temple the central statue is Chenrizig (Compassion Buddha) in an 11-headed manifestation. We will also be sure to visit the Takin reserve which was a former zoo but closed down because the king did not think a zoo was in line with the country's Buddhist philosophies. The animals were set free but the Takins were too tame and wandered the streets, and so they were put back in the reserve where you can visit them at close range. Takins are the national animal of Bhutan and look like a strange mix of yak, camel, moose and shaggy dog. You have to see one to believe in one.

**Day 11, Mar. 31**      **Thimphu.** The next day we will take a pleasant early morning hike from Sangaygang, a hill overlooking Thimphu valley, to Dechen Phodrang Monastic school. In the afternoon we will visit the Folk Heritage Museum, housed in a three-story traditional building built of rammed earth and timber. Enter the museum and you will be taken a century back in time. This museum recreates a 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional Bhutanese farmhouse. A tour of this almost-living museum will give you a glimpse into the way Bhutanese lived then [*relate it to what you have seen in the villages*] and how many rural people still live. Bring a flashlight as some of the rooms are quite dimly lit. Then, visit National Institute of Traditional Medicine founded in 1988. We will visit the National Institute for *Zorig Chusum*, the 13 forms of traditional arts and crafts commonly referred to as "the painting school." Also visit Simthoka Dzong, which is the first of the many Dzongs (forts) in Bhutan built by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Built in 1629, today it is home to the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies (ILCS). The students are both monks and lay people, who mostly graduate to become Dzongkha (national language) teachers. Overnight at Hotel Jhomolhari or similar.

**Day 12, April 1**      **Punakha.** This morning we will drive up and over Duchola Pass at over 10,000 feet. The chortens and stupas at the top are outstanding and the views of the Himalayas even better. We will stop to enjoy the breathtaking scenery and a cup of tea. Descending down the other side is to truly understand what hairpin-turn means. Have cameras ready as you are likely to see monkeys and many species of birds. We will descend down to the green flower filled valley to Punakha which was the capital for over 300 years (until 1955). The fortress located here is called Punakha Dzong and is situated at the

confluence of two rivers that represent the feminine and masculine. Punakha Dzong and is one of the most impressive buildings in Bhutan. It was built in 1637 and has 6 stories and astonishingly intricate decorative paintings and wood work. Your guide will explain the significance of the wheel of life and you will have plenty of time to explore this amazing structure. The fortress is now used as the winter seat of the Je Khenpo (the Spiritual head of Bhutan).

Drive up the valley and have lunch by the banks of the beautiful Mo Chu River. A pleasant 40-minute hike will lead us to Khamsum Yuley Namgye Lhakhang (temple) which presents a great view of the Mo Chu valley below. Overnight at Hotel Dragon's Nest or similar.

**Day 13, April 2 Paro.** Early morning, before we drive back to Paro over Dochu La pass, we will hike to Chimi Lhakhang (temple) which sits on a small hilltop. It is a pleasant 30-minute hike through rice paddies and a small village. This temple is dedicated to the great 15th century Yogi known as Lama Drukpa Kuenley or popularly known as the "Divine madman" in the west. He preached in the way that is unlike the stiffness of clergy and society of the time; he dramatized the teachings using songs and outrageous sexual humor. Bold Phallus symbols and paintings on the houses or temples are a common sight in Bhutan, confirming his influence to date. The symbols are believed to ward off the evil spirits.

It is also believed that this temple blesses couples having fertility problems. A popular pilgrimage site for the Bhutanese, it is frequented by childless couples and parents who have difficulty raising children from across the world. Stop for lunch stop at Dochula Resort. We will arrive in Paro and get settled into our hotels with time for shopping and an evening stroll in the town.

**Day 14, April 3 Taktshang.** Today we will visit Bhutan's most famous monastery - *Taktshang*, the Tiger's Nest. The history has it that Guru Rinpoche's consort Yeshe Tsogyal meditated here, achieved enlightenment then turned herself into a tigress and flew east where Guru Rinpoche flew back on her back and brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The monastery is perched precariously on the side of a cliff almost 3000 feet above the valley floor. There is only one way up to the tiger's Nest and that is to walk. The hike will take about 4 hours roundtrip with time to visit the monastery. After lunch, visit the ruins of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Drugyel Dzong and spend the rest of the evening at your leisure.

**Day 15, April 4 Bangkok.** After a morning breakfast at the hotel, you will drive to Paro Airport for a sensational take-off and scenic Himalayan flight past Mt. Jhomolhari. There will be a 40-minute stopover in Kolkatta, India and your flight arrives in the afternoon in Bangkok. You will overnight there. We recommend you spend a few days and can help set up some fun tours.

**Day 16, April 5**      **Home.** Your flight from Bangkok departs very early and arrives back in the United States the day you departed due to the time change.

***Crooked Trails***

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