

Beyond the Sky and the Clouds Exploring the Hidden Himalaya



10 NIGHT PACKAGE 3 nights Uma Paro & 7 nights Tourist Class hotels

Traveling through Bhutan's ethereal landscape on the way to the wild centre, we pass countless golden roofed monasteries and prayer flag covered hilltops, navigate endless emerald valleys and ancient forests with snow-capped Himalayan peaks in the background throughout. This ten-night package promises an easy yet comprehensive experience of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, with accommodation split between the luxury resort of Uma Paro, and carefully-sourced, traditional hotels in the less developed regions. The adventure starts with an exploration of the bustling markets and colorful museums of the capital Thimpu, before heading over the spectacular Dochhula Pass and following the Mo Chhu (Mother River) to Punakha and the Divine Madman's temple Chimmi Lhakhang. Sampling this Himalayan kingdom's inimitable Buddhist along the way, our journey continues on through the Black Mountains past yaks grazing on dwarf bamboo, reaching the sacred heart of Bhutan, the four valleys of Bumthang – beautifully rustic and deeply spiritual at the same time. On the return journey we stopover in Phobjikha an unusually wide, beautiful alpine wetland valley where the rare Black Necked Cranes fly down from Tibet to spend the winter. Once settled into the 5 star Uma Paro the main temples, monasteries and dzongs of the Paro Valley are on our doorstep with the awe inspiring walk up to the Tiger's Nest monastery as a fitting highlight to end this exploration of the Land of the Thunderdragon.

DAY 1

Arrival at Paro International Airport, Thimpu Sightseeing your Uma Paro guide will welcome you at the airport for the one and a half hour scenic drive to Thimpu, winding alongside two snaking rivers and passing countless fine examples of the quaint, traditional farmhouse architecture of Bhutan. The capital itself sprawls up the wooded western hillside of the Wang Chhu and is the centre of government, religion and commerce, Thimpu is a bustling town where traditional ways mingle with modern introductions. After check in to our hotel in the heart of the capital, the sightseeing begins.

Duration of drive: 1- 1.5 hours (50km)

Overnight: Druk Hotel, Thimpu

DAY 2

Thimpu Sightseeing, Punakha Valley via Dochu La, Chimmi Lhakhang after breakfast, the sightseeing begins in earnest and depending on opening hours, guests' interests and time, your guide may include some of the following in your private schedule:

The National Memorial Chorten, Trashi Chhoe Dzong: the “fortress of the glorious religion”, the National Institute of Traditional Medicine, the National Textile Museum, the Weekend Market, the Folk Heritage Museum, or you may wish to just go window shopping or perhaps try the one hour walk up to Tango Monastery at the head of the valley. It is then time to head off on a truly awe inspiring road as it zigzags up to the 3,140m-high mountain pass of Dochu La with its forests of fluttering prayer flags, maze of memorial chortens and, on a clear day, sweeping views of the main Himalayan range. Time to stretch the legs with the short walk across rice paddies to Chimmi Lhakhang, a fertility temple dedicated to Drukpa Kuenley, a Tibetan Buddhist saint known popularly as “Divine Madman.” infamous for his colourful and sometimes outrageous adherence to the Buddhist faith. The temple sits atop a picturesque hill surrounded by rice fields. Drukpa Kuenley built a chorten on the site in the 14th century, and it has long been a pilgrimage site for childless couples.

Duration of drive: 3 - 4 hours (76km)

Overnight: Meri Puensum Hotel, Punakha

DAY 3

Punakha Dzong, Wangdue Phodrang Dzong and Bazaar, Pele La, Chendebji Chorten, Trongsa An early morning start for further exploration of the Punakha valley, low enough (1200m) to allow bananas and oranges to grow. The destination for an optional early morning walk or by car - the massive architectural edifice of the 17th century Punakha Dzong (fortress/monastery) soon looms into view. Built in 1637 by Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal in a commanding position at the confluence of the Po Chhu and Mo Chhu (Father and Mother rivers).

Bhutan’s second oldest dzong goes by the full name of Druk Pungthang Decchen Phodrang (the Palace of Great Happiness) and is arguably the country’s most attractive. It served as the seat of the Kingdom’s government until the time of the second King and today serves as the winter home of Je Khempo, the head abbot of Bhutan, along with a retinue of 1,000 monks.

After a stroll through the quaint bazaar at Wangdue Phodrang to visit its dzong it is time to leave for Trongsa. The pass to cross today is the Pele La (3420m) in the Black Mountains with countless yaks grazing on the dwarf bamboo found here. The village of Sephu provides a shopping opportunity in the form of woven bamboo mats and baskets and soon after guests can stretch their legs with a visit to Chendebji Chorten, a stupa built in the style of Swayambhunath (the monkey temple) in Kathmandu, which covers an evil spirit which was killed at this spot. Winding again through forest there is a good chance to see monkeys before reaching a spectacular viewpoint across a gorge to Trongsa Dzong. Our hotel for the night can be seen to the left of the town and though you can almost touch it the road teases you and takes another detour (14km) before reaching Trongsa.

Duration of drive: 5 - 6 hours (135km)

Overnight: Yangkhil Hotel, Trongsa

DAY 4

Trongsa Dzong, Ta Dzong, Weaving Villages, Bumthang Built in 1648, Trongsa Dzong was the ancestral home of the ruling dynasty and the district administration office of the Trongsa district. Backing on to the mountain and built on several levels, the Dzong fits narrowly on a spur that sticks out into the gorge of the Mangde River and overlooks the routes south and west. The view from the Dzong extends for many kilometres and in former times nothing could escape the vigilance of its watchmen. Furthermore, the Dzong is built in such a way that in the old days, no matter what direction a traveler came from, he was obliged to pass by the Dzong. The Ta-Dzong, an ancient Watch Tower of the Trongsa Dzong is located on top of a steep hill overlooking the town and is worth the climb. The Journey to Bumthang is along one of the most scenically beautiful routes in Bhutan, passing pretty villages and monasteries dotted across wide open farm and wood land and several weaving concerns before entering Jakar, the market town serving the four valleys that encompass Bumthang. Home for the next 3 nights is the Swiss Guesthouse, full of rustic but simple charm with most of what appears on the dining table actually produced on the farm.

Duration of drive: 2.5 - 3 hours 68km

Overnight: River Lodge, Bumthang

Day 5

Jakar Dzong, Wangdichholing Palace, Lamey Goemba, Kurjey Lhakhang, Tamshing Lhakhang Bumthang is the name for a region of four valleys in the East of Bhutan centred on the town of Jakar, which is the largest between Thimpu and Tashigang in the East. The area is of great spiritual significance in Bhutan, being strongly associated with myth and legend as well as more corporeal manifestations, such as the great Buddhist preacher, Pema Lingpa, to whose descendants the present dynasty traces its ancestry. The area is truly unspoilt and is famous for the production of honey, as well as cheese, apples, apricots and Red Panda beer.

There is plenty to see and do during our time in Central Bhutan and your guide can help you plan a suitable itinerary. There are numerous day walks and places to visit including Jakar Dzong, Wangdichholing Palace, Lamey Goemba and the impressive Kurjey Lhakhang (temple) on the western side of Bumthang Chhu (river). Crossing the river, on the eastern bank visit Tamshing temple – the most important Nyingma Buddhist temple in Bhutan. Jakar Dzong (‘Castle of the White Bird’) was built by Minjur Tenpa, the third Druk Desi (Temporal ruler) in 1646 A.D. It is probably one of the biggest Dzongs in Bhutan with the surrounding walls about 1 km in circumference. There is also great scope for local village walks, along with a visit to the homeopathic hospital, the cheese factory and a stroll around Jakar town itself.

Overnight: River Lodge, Bumthang

DAY 6

Ura Valley and Village Explore the Choskhor Valley and drive out to the easternmost valley in Bumthang to Ura Village (1.5 hours) which is said to be home to some of the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan. This traditional, picturesque medieval village and its temple sound and echo from Bhutan’s past especially when one walks the cobbled walkways and meets the villagers who still wear sheepskins on their backs (used to sleep on at night). Depending on the time spent in the Ura valley there may still be time to visit Mebar Tsho (Burning Lake) and/or take a short hike to Thangbi Monastery in the afternoon.

Overnight: River Lodge, Bumthang

DAY 7

Bumthang, Phobjikha Valley, Gangtey Goemba, Carpet Weaving, Nature Study Centre— After three nights in the idyllic apple orchard setting of the Swiss Guesthouse overlooking the Bhutan's spiritual heartland it is finally time to start back west to explore the exquisite sweeping, glacial Phobjikha Valley. With its alpine setting on the western slope of the Black Mountains, the valley is famous as the seasonal home of the rare black-necked cranes, who spend the winter months here (the cranes can be observed from the last week in October through to mid-February). This is a designated conservation area and has a nature study centre for conservation studies and education of local farmers and students funded by the Bhutanese government, with assistance from the World Wildlife Fund. The sweeping views from the restaurant and rooms of the newly opened Dewachen Hotel take the eye across the wetlands sprinkled with tiny goembas and lhakhangs (monasteries and temples) which guests may wish to walk to... the lack of powerlines here will please any keen photographers and birders should not miss a visit to the wildlife viewing hides. This valley also boasts a carpet weaving concern and the 16th century Gangtey Goemba in a commanding position at the head of the valley. This monastery includes a school, meditation facilities and quarters for monks, and is home to the mind reincarnation of Pema Lingpa, one of the region's historically important Buddhist treasure discoverers.

Duration of drive: 5 – 6 hours (130km)

Overnight: Hotel Dewachen, Phobjikha

DAY 8

Phobjikha, Uma Paro Today's drive is the longest of the tour but with the comforts of a massage, swim and great food to look forward to at day's end back at Uma Paro. Time to retrace our steps back over the Dochu La for a second chance of that wonderful view of the Himalayan range. Returning to the Chuzum or confluence we catch a glimpse of the three shrines in Nepali, Tibetan and Bhutanese style which were built to ward off evil spirits near the checkpoint. Time permitting the journey can be broken with a visit to Tamchog Lhakhang built by Thangtong Gyalpo or the Iron Bridge Builder as he is known. This former saint from the 14th century introduced the art of building suspension bridges with iron chains and the only way to reach his temple is by one of these bridges. On the final leg the road snakes alongside the Pa Chhu, through apple orchards and rice paddies, past quaint homesteads to our home in the Himalaya, Uma Paro. After check-in and a show round, we invite you to spend the rest of the day relaxing around the property, enjoying the facilities or perhaps trying some other activity like the Bhutanese national sport of archery or maybe a therapy such as the traditional Bhutanese hot stone bath.

Duration of Drive: 5.5 – 6 hours (150km)

Overnight: Uma Paro

DAY 9

Daywalk Zurig Dzong, Rinpung Dzong, Ta Dzong, Paro Town & Kyichu Lhakhang Wind through pine forests high above Uma Paro to the pretty grounds of the fortress-like monastery of Zuri Dzong. Traverse across to Ta Dzong, housing Bhutan's National Museum (open Tuesday-Saturday) with magnificent views over Paro, and on down to visit Rinpung Dzong – 'Fortress on a Heap of Jewels'. The trail then leads across Paro Chhu (river) via a traditional covered bridge (Nyamai Zam) and then past the main archery ground, Ugyen Pelri Palace and into Paro town. A few kilometers north of Paro, we pay our respects at Kyichu Lhakhang one of the oldest temples in Bhutan with its magic orange tree which bears fruit all year round.

Duration: 5 - 7 hours (depending on time spent in National Museum and Paro)

Difficulty: Easy to Moderate

Guided with picnic

Overnight: Uma Paro

DAY 10

Highlights of the Paro Valley - Taksang Walk & Drukgyel Dzong One of the most amazing and important pieces of architecture in Bhutan, Taksang Goemba defies logic, gravity, and reason. Legend has it that this cliffside was where Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) landed on the back of a flying tigress, bringing Buddhism to Bhutan from Tibet.

To avoid the hot sun an early start is advisable for the two-hour climb, via the cafeteria, to the Tiger's Nest viewpoint. Descend steeply, then climb up to the monastery, passing a waterfall (visit monastery if it is open – with sufficient notice Uma Paro can arrange a permit). We retrace our steps or alternatively (time permitting) head further up to several remote temples and monasteries. Drive further up the valley to Drukgyel Dzong, built in 1644 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal to control northern route to Tibet. The route is picturesque, and the site of dzong magnificent (from here, only two-day hike to the border with Tibet, dominated by Mt Jhomalhari).

Duration: 7 – 8 hours

Difficulty: Moderate to Hard (ascent should not be attempted until at least third day in Bhutan, after acclimatization has occurred, riding ponies are available at an additional charge)

Guided with picnic

Overnight: Uma Paro

DAY 11

Depart Druk Air departs in the early morning to avoid adverse weather conditions so after breakfast, your transfer to the airport will be arranged for between 5am and 9am depending on the flight schedule and your destination.

Outside of Uma Paro, we have selected well-located, comfortable, somewhat rustic but charming tourist class hotels in terms of food and accommodation, for our journey.

On this privately guided itinerary we include all accommodation, meals, activities listed in the itinerary, experienced English speaking Uma guide, vehicle, taxes and airport transfers.

Uma Paro provides complimentary drinking water for all guided itineraries. If you have any special dietary requests, please let us know in advance. Where stated, trips include lunchtime picnics prepared by Uma Paro's chefs. Please place your picnic order the day before departure via your Guide or the Activity Desk on extension 3308.

Throughout your stay you have the option to participate in a range of extra Outdoor Activities at an additional charge.

Travel to Bhutan Uma Paro handles the whole booking process on behalf of our guests, including Druk Air flights (not included in the package) and visa applications (included in the package) but it is advisable to book well in advance to secure accommodation and seats on Bhutan's national airline - Druk Air.

Please read this document in conjunction with your confirmation letter and pre-departure information.

For more information on Uma Paro, including the full range of itineraries and services (including tailormaking, groups and the hosting of special events) we offer, please refer to the website www.uma.como.bz or email info.paro@uma.como.bz