



*Journey to Bhutan --  
Land of the Thunder  
Dragon*

October 26 – November 7, 2009

A Customized Travel Program to the Kingdom of  
Bhutan  
prepared for  
International BioExploration Society (IBEX)

# DAILY PROVISIONAL ITINERARY & SCHEDULE



*Few places on Earth compare to the great natural beauty and rich cultural heritage that is found in the remote Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Located between India and China in the high Eastern Himalayas, Bhutan rises within just a few hundred miles from the steamy plains of Assam to some of the world's highest peaks along its northern border with Tibet. This diversity of ecosystems – representing most of the climatic zones found on planet Earth but packaged within an area only about the size of Switzerland -- provides refuge to many thousands of species of birds, plants, insects and mammals that make Bhutan one of the world's most treasured biodiversity 'hot spots.'*

*The history of Bhutan is closely associated with the spread of Buddhism throughout the Himalayas, and Bhutan is the last place on Earth where the Vajrayana form of Mahayana Buddhism is practiced as a way of life that influences all aspects of society. Because Bhutan has never been colonized or occupied by any foreign invaders since the coming of Buddhism more than a thousand years ago, its cultural heritage and traditions remain authentic and intact. The authenticity of its robust cultural life also stems from the fact that Bhutan remains largely isolated from the rest of the modern world -- with the first road to the outside (India) constructed in the early 1960s and with the number of permitted tourists admitted to the Kingdom averaging below 10,000 annually.*

*This special journey from Bhutan's Western highland areas to the important cultural sites in Bumthang – with time for witnessing the rare masked-dances at historic Jampa Lhakhang and a stop-over in Phobjika where black-necked cranes from Tibet will be arriving for the winter -- is designed to provide an introduction to the environment of the Eastern Himalayas and the gentle way of life of the Bhutanese people -- an intellectually and spiritually exciting journey designed to provide a sense of discovery, adventure, and renewal.*

## **Day 1: Monday, October 26, 2009 -- Travel to Bhutan**

*Very early morning departure from Bangkok for the flight up into Bhutan with late-morning arrival at the Kingdom's only airport in the beautiful Paro Valley. After a welcoming lunch, an introductory visit to Bhutan's National Museum at the Ta Dzong with a commanding view of the valley. Evening at the Gantey Palace (historic 19<sup>th</sup>-century compound that was once the residence of the Governor (or 'Penlop') of Paro).*



**Day 2: Tuesday, October 27, 2009 -- Thimphu**

*Morning departure for Thimphu -- with stop en route to visit Simtokha Dzong (oldest in Bhutan built by the Shambdrung in 1629 and containing the finest collection of slate carvings in Bhutan). After lunch, a visit to the new Textile Museum and Bhutan's National Library (housing one of the greatest collections of ancient Buddhist texts). Lodging in Thimphu.*

**Day 3: Wednesday, October 28, 2009 -- Thimphu**

*Morning visit (to be confirmed) inside the massive Tashichoedzong (housing the King's offices and summer residence of the Je Khenpo). Lunch at the Royal Golf Club just outside the dzong with views of the mountains surrounding Thimphu). Afternoon visits to the Institute for Zorig Chuzom (Bhutan's Thirteen Traditional Arts) and the Institute for Traditional Medicine. Lodging in Thimphu.*



**Day 4: Thursday, October 29, 2009 -- Thimphu**

*Flex day in Thimphu and environs for supplementary visits and meetings as desired. Lodging in Thimphu.*

**Day 5: Friday, October 30, 2009: Travel to Wangdi**

*Mid-morning departure for points east -- with stops en route at Dochu La providing (weather-permitting) some of the best views of the high Himalayas towards Tibet.. After lunch, a leisurely walk through rice fields and a small Bhutanese village to Chimme Lhakhang (temple built by Lama Drukpa Kunley (affectionately known as the 'Divine Madman' because of his unorthodox ways of sharing Buddhist teachings)). Overnight in the Wangdi valley.*

**Day 6: Saturday, October 31, 2009 -- Trongsa**

*Morning departure for Trongsa -- ancestral home of the Wangchucks. After crossing Pele La (one of the highest mountain passes in the Kingdom), travel on towards Trongsa Dzong -- considered the most*



*impressive in all of Bhutan (built in 1644 and described as being perched so high in the mountains that the clouds float below). Overnight in Trongsa.*

### **Day 7: Sunday, November 1, 2009 -- On to Bumthang (Jakar)**

*After breakfast, continue on to Bumthang -- the cultural and environmental heart of the Kingdom. Periodic stops at points of interest along the way. Jampa Lhakhang is one of the most historic temples in Bhutan -- consisting of a complex of richly decorated sanctuaries surrounding a central courtyard. The masked-dances -- which are a defining aspect of Bhutan's remarkable cultural heritage -- make up part of the annual festival cycle at the temple and vary daily. Lodging in Jakar.*



**Day 8: Monday, November 2, 2009 --**

### **Masked-Dance Festival at Jampa Lhakhang**

*Special opportunity to experience the opening day ceremonies and dances of the annual masked-dance festival at historic Jampa Lhakhang in Jakar -- one of the most traditional of all of Bhutan's historic sacred masked-dance festivals. Lodging in*

*Jakar.*

### **Day 9: Tuesday, November 3, 2009 -- Travel to Phobjika (Valley of the Cranes)**

*Morning departure for the start of the return to the West. After lunch en route, continue west towards Phobjika -- the legendary wintering valley of the black-necked cranes. The landscape changes dramatically as the road rises to the higher elevations around Phobjika (yaks can sometimes be seen as the road enters the high-elevation short-bamboo pastures of the upper valley). Deeper into the valley (which has no electricity in order to protect the migrating cranes from the hazards of power-lines), opportunities to see the black-necked cranes (provided there are some early arrivals from Tibet). Overnight on the edge of the forest with views of the pristine valley.*

### **Day 10: Wednesday, November 4, 2009 -- Gantey & Punakha**

*A morning visit to historic Gangtey Gompa (monastery) in the heart of the Phobjika Valley, where ongoing reconstruction according to traditional methods can be witnessed. After lunch, an afternoon visit to Punakha Dzong -- one of Bhutan's most beautiful situated on an island on the river.*



*Evening at the hilltop inn 'Zangtopelri' with views overlooking the river valley.*

**Day 11: Thursday, November 5, 2009 -- On to Paro**

*Departure for Paro allowing time for botanical stops en route, lunch at Dochu La, and arrival in time for any visits into Paro village (or elsewhere) as desired. Overnight in Paro.*

**Day 12: Friday, November 6, 2009 -- Taktshang**

*Travel up the Paro Valley towards Taktshang -- most sacred monastery in Bhutan hugging the cliffs 2,000-feet above Paro Valley. The upward path towards Taktshang passes through forests of fir and rhododendron before reaching the higher elevation forests of live oak and hanging mosses. Every effort will be made to accomplish the climb to enter the monastery, which was rededicated in early summer 2005 with completely restored paintings and sculpture. Lodging at the Gantey Palace.*



**Day 13: Saturday, November 7, 2009 -- Departure from Bhutan**

*Morning departure flight returning to Bangkok (afternoon arrival in Bangkok – transfer to the Oriental).*



## The Setting of the Trip



*Weather-factors are highly variable in Bhutan (depending on the season). Late autumn and mid-spring are ideal times to travel to the eastern Himalayas (although a trip can be planned for any month of the year). Daytime temperatures typically range from the high-50s to mid-70s with nighttime temperatures ranging from the low-30s to mid-50s throughout most of the year (and depending on location). The black-necked cranes arrive in Bhutan only in the autumn.*

*Customized excursions to Bhutan are developed with an eye towards maximizing visitors' opportunities to experience direct and close-up the rich diversity of life found throughout the Kingdom.*

### Health Information

*There are no immunization requirements for entry into Bhutan. Anti-diarrhetics (it can happen) and motion-sickness pills (because of the mountain roads) are recommended. Bottled water is available throughout.*

### Traveling into Bhutan

*Travel from Bangkok or Delhi to Paro (Bhutan) is provided by DrukAir (the only airline permitted to fly into the Kingdom). Entry visas are secured in advance as part of any customized travel program to the Kingdom.*





## **Traveling in Bhutan**

*Over-land travel in Bhutan is provided by four-wheel-drive sports utility vehicles as required. Roads range from paved to rocky or muddy // all are narrow.*

*Transportation logistics allow for maximum possible flexibility (two people per vehicle plus driver and guide whenever possible).*

## **High-Altitude Considerations**

*The elevation of most lodgings is between 6,500 ft –9,500 ft (depending on locale). Short passes as high as 12,000 ft may be experienced on the road.*

## **A Note about Accommodations**

*We select hotels with cultural interests as well as optimum settings (most are situated on hilltops or along rivers providing quiet views of the surrounding areas). Most traditional Bhutanese lodges are pleasant, clean and comfortable with friendly and attentive staffs -- but not 'luxurious' by international standards. Stays at the new Amankora properties can be arranged as part of any travel program (subject to higher daily rates). Baths and showers are simple and functional with plenty of hot water. Nights can be quite cool in Bhutan (depending on locale and the season) -- extra blankets are the norm where and when necessary. Food is generally well-prepared, plentiful and delicious. Every effort is made to try to accommodate any special dietary needs with advance notice.*



## **Selected Readings and Publications**

***BHUTAN: HIMALAYAN MOUNTAIN KINGDOM, by Francoise Pommaret (current ed.).***

***BHUTAN: KINGDOM OF THE DRAGON, by Robert Dompnier (1999).***

***OF RAINBOWS AND CLOUDS: THE LIFE OF YAB UGYEN DORJI AS TOLD TO HIS DAUGHTER, by Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck (Queen of Bhutan and Honorary Chair of Smithsonian 2008 Bhutan Leadership Committee) (2000).***

***BHUTAN: MOUNTAIN FORTRESS OF THE GODS, by Ralph Von Gersdorff (1997) (note: the lowest price on Amazon is US\$264.47, which strikes me as very expensive (it is out-of-print but I believe it is still available for a lower price in some of the bookshops in Thimphu); I have a copy in Washington which was given to me as a gift by the Royal Government a few years ago; it is a very good book).***

***BHUTAN: A VISUAL ODYSSEY ACROSS THE LAST HIMALAYAN KINGDOM, by Michael Hawley (2004) (note: this is a smaller companion volume to the world's largest published book (which carries the same name but is much, much larger (5x7 feet !!!)) -- we displayed a copy of the large version at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington the night we awarded Yo-Yo Ma with the Walter Cronkite Stewardship Award and the Smithsonian announced that Bhutan would be 'featured country' at the 2008 Smithsonian Folklife Festival -- this book is a collector's item).***

***BEYOND THE SKY AND THE EARTH: A JOURNEY INTO BHUTAN, by Jamie Zeppa (1999).***

***LONELY PLANET BHUTAN, by Stan Armington (current ed.)***