

Bhutan

Trailing Nomads – Fall Migration Tour

Sample Itinerary

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.

Those departing from the US west coast will depart September 30th and fly to Thailand, arriving there on the night of October 1st. You will overnight and catch an early flight to Paro, Bhutan. You may opt to leave a day earlier and have a free day in Thailand. We can assist you with hotels in Bangkok.

Day 01: *Bangkok – Paro*

Depart Bangkok very early and fly to Paro, Bhutan. Your Crooked Trails partner guides Phuntsho and Phuntsho will greet you upon your arrival at the Paro airport (7590ft). We will head to Hotel Gangtey Palace and get checked in, shower and relax for a bit followed by a traditional Bhutanese lunch. En route you will get an impressive view of one of the most famous *dzongs* (Paro Rinchen Pung Dzong) in the kingdom. (Dzong means “fortress” in National language). After an introduction to the program we will drive through town and up the valley to visit the ruins of Drukgyel Dzong (the fortress of the victorious Drukpas) built in 1646 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal to celebrate victory over Tibetan invading forces and also to curtail further invasions from the enemy. The Dzong is at the end of the road and the beginning of the popular high-altitude Jhomolhari Trek. Here we can stretch our legs and walk around the ruins, getting our lungs used to altitude. Due to jet lag everyone will want to call it an early night and we will retire to the hotel early in the evening for dinner and a good night’s sleep.

Day 02: *Paro – Dorikha Village, Haa*

A great introduction to Bhutan is to visit the National Museum, housed in an old watchtower with 8.5 foot thick walls that are 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.

After lunch we 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 has only been open to tourism since 2004. Driving down the countless switchbacks, you will be treated with panoramic views of the entire 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. Share bygone stories with my grandparents and other village elders.

Day 03: Dorikha Village

Today we will be spending time living with and learning from the people of the village. We will learn about the amazing Bhutanese architecture, be involved in the agricultural processes of the fall time, and get involved in domestic chores such as making cheese and butter by hand, grinding grains with stone wheels and gathering wood. Most families with cattle will have started the migration. You will meet and mingle with the folks who remain in the village. With the arrival of roads, more villagers now choose to remain in the 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 04: Dorikha - Melongpong

This is the first day of our trek, following the trail of the annual nomadic migration, a traditional practice that is fast disappearing.

We will drive the craggy road (45 mins) 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. It used to be that villagers had to hike up to Tego La Pass, but now with coming of roads, villagers often get rides to the pass. Interestingly, the road also poses a threat to this practice of migration.

The other option is to forego driving and take the ancient trail (3hrs.) to the pass. A gradual hike up along a creek, crossing it repeatedly, will get you to Tego La. We will enjoy a traditional lunch of savory buckwheat pancakes with chili sauce.

Since most villagers would have started migrating south by now, we will be essentially tailgating the nomads today. There is a good chance that we will be able to catch up with the first of the nomads; the unique nomadic lifestyle will then begin to unfold before our eyes. Overnight camp at Tshochhu/Melongpong (Pastures where nomads graze their cattle) - tented camp/makeshift sheds used by nomads.

Day 05: Melongpong – Phel Lakha

Today, you will experience a life as a nomad. The gradual downhill hike will be joined by nomads. Upon meeting the nomads, we will take part in the migration. Nomad families generally spend a day to a week on each pastureland. Before they put a strain on the resources, the nomads move with their cattle to the next grazing land. The pastures are anywhere between an hour or two apart. Overnight camp at Latsono/Phel Lakha.

You will witness, no doubt, a unique, but also an emotional experience.

Day 06: Phel Lakha - Dorithasa

Today, we will continue to be with the nomads. As we move further south, we will come across more nomads on the way. Since these movements are not staged, but rather based on ad-hoc decision, we are not able to tell in advance which pasture would hold how many nomads. But rest assured, we will come across plenty of them. Overnight at Dorithasa village.

Day 07: Dorithasa

Today, we will take a two-hour excursion hike downhill through orange orchards to Amochu River. There along the banks of the river, we will meet more nomads. To continue on their journey south, herds of cattle cross the river. Overnight camp by the river.

Day 08: Dorithasa

We will hike back to Dorithasa village. After lunch, we will spend much of the day making visits to various village houses and meeting villagers. Overnight camp/farm houses.

Day 09: Dorithasa - Lasangna

Today, you will start making the journey back to Dorikha. Along the way, there is much wilderness to enjoy/investigate. There is a good chance that we will come across more nomads with their cattle. Overnight at *Lasangna* in a tented camp or makeshift used by nomads. The wide pastures make for a great camping site.

Day 10: Lasangna - Dorikha

For those who wish they can trek down the valley back to Dorikha, others can drive from Tego La pass. Overnight at a village home – choice of staying with another family. Experience traditional hot bath after a long hike.

Day 11: Dorikha – Thimphu (Capital)

Welcome to the only capital in the world without traffic lights – See for yourself what change is in store for Bhutan. Witness Bhutan’s challenges at play while still enjoying the best the city has to offer.

This morning is the last in Dorikha. After breakfast and goodbyes we will begin a morning drive to Thimphu. It takes four hours and on your journey, there is a good chance that you will spot some interesting bird species and grey langur as well. After a three-hour drive passing through numerous villages, you will arrive at the confluence of the Paro and Thimphu Rivers. Before you reach the confluence, you will drive past Dobji Dzong, which used to be a prison for serious convicts (yes, Bhutan does have some) until the late 1990s; it is now converted back to a monastic school. From the confluence, an hour-long drive follows Thimphu River reaching the capital.

Thimphu sits at almost 8000 feet and has about 100,000 people, 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 you will be driving to Changgangkha Lhakhang, a monastery located on the top of a small ridge overlooking the Thimphu town. It was established in 12th 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, 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.

In the late afternoon a short drive will take us to 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 19th 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 today. Bring a flashlight as some of the rooms are quite dimly lit. Then, we visit the National Institute of Traditional Medicine founded in 1988. We'll take a tour of the processing plant where you can see different stages of the production of herbal medicine. Finally, before we wrap up the day, we will visit the National Institute for Zorig Chusum, the 13 forms of traditional arts and crafts commonly referred to as "the painting school." Time permitting there is also an option of visiting the National Library. Dinner & overnight at Pamtsho Guesthouse/Hotel Jhumolhari in Thimphu.

Day 12 & 13: *Thimphu – 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 zhong-and-pines 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, and 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. 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 woodwork. Your guide will explain the significance of the wheel of life and you will have plenty of time to explore this amazing structure. We will retrace our footsteps and head down the valley to Wangdue Phodrang where we will explore the market, have dinner and overnight.

Day 14: *Punakha - Paro*

We will rise early and drive back over the pass with a lunch stop in Thimphu. In the early afternoon we will arrive in Paro and get settled into our hotel with time to relax and take a stroll in the town.

Day 15: *Paro (Taktshang Monastery)*

After breakfast, your car will drop you at the starting point of the excursion to view the spectacular and famous Taktsang monastery (Tiger's lair). The trail to the

monastery climbs through beautiful pine forest, many of the trees festooned with Spanish moss, and an occasional grove of fluttering prayer flags. You stop at the cafeteria for a rest and refreshments and continue the hike (if not tired) for short while until you see, clearly and seemingly within reach, the imposing Taktsang monastery. Built in 1600s, this incredible monastery clings to the edge of a sheer rock cliff that plunges 900 meters into the valley below. It is believed that, in the 8th century, Guru Rimpoche, the tantric mystic who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, landed here on the back of a flying tigress to subdue a demon. Guru Rimpoche is supposed to have meditated here for three months and it is considered a Mecca for Buddhists.

After lunch at tea house, we will drive back to town where you can visit the town temple, built in 1525, to check out ancient wall paintings. Time permitting, you can also take a short hike across the river to visit the Paro Rinchen Pung Dzong (meaning 'fortress on a heap of jewels'). The dzong has been one of Bhutan's strongest and most important fortresses; used to defend the Paro valley from Tibetan invasions in the 17th and 18th centuries, it now houses both the district administrative and monastic bodies. Dinner & Overnight at Hotel Gangtey Palace.

Day 16: *Paro – Bangkok*

After an early morning breakfast at the hotel, you will drive to Paro Airport for a sensational take-off and scenic Himalayan flight past Mt. Jhomolhari.