

## **Bhutan Spring Program 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 unravel in beautiful and mysterious ways.*

### **Day 1-2: Travel Days**

Depart US and arrive Bangkok, Thailand.

### **Day 3: Bhutan**

Depart Bangkok very early and fly to Bhutan. Your Crooked Trails partner guides Phunsto and Phuntso will greet you upon your arrival at the Paro airport (7590 ft). 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, which has a famous past as the protector of Bhutan, having stopped an invasion from Tibet. The dzong is at the end of the road and the beginning of the trek to Jhomolhari. 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 4: Paro**

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 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 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.

### **Day 5-7: Dorikha Homestay**

During these days 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 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 8: 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 9- 10: Thimphu**

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 Drukgon 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 Hotel Jhomolhari/Wangchuk in Thimphu.

### **Day 11-12: 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 Phodran where we will explore the market, have dinner and overnight.

### **Day 13: 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 for shopping and relaxing.

### **Day 14: 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; Guru Rinpoche flew on her back and brought Buddhism to Bhutan. 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.

**Day 15: 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 Dhaka, Bangladesh and your flight mountains1arrives in the afternoon in Bangkok. You will overnight there. We recommend you extend your stay by a few days and can help set up some fun activities.

**Day 16: Home**

Your flight from Bangkok will likely depart very early and arrive back in the United States the day you departed due to the time change.