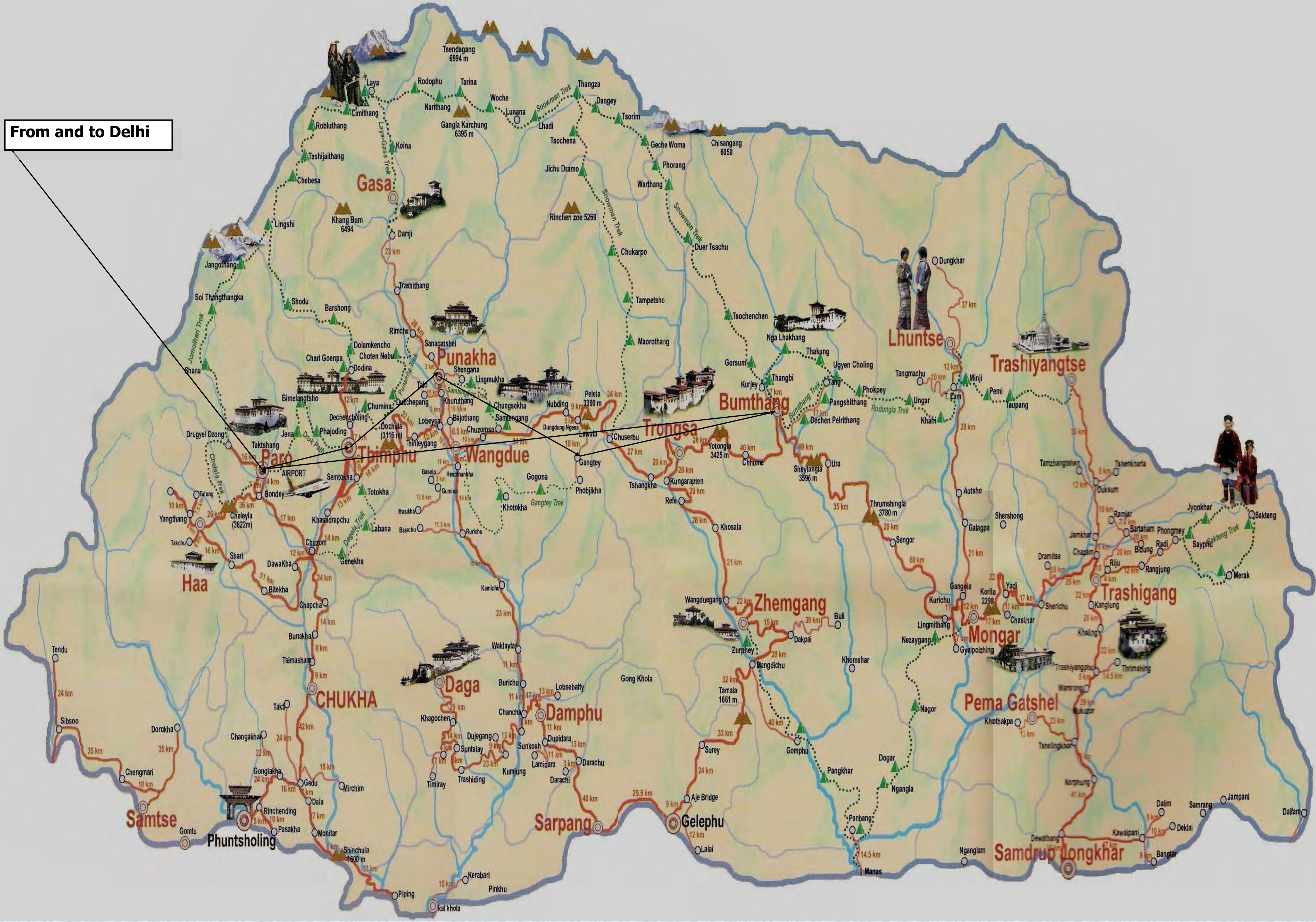
- Bhutan explored, Laterally -

laterallife

Because I've always wanted to...



From and to Delhi
Gasa
Punakha
Thimphu
Paro
AIRPORT
Haa
Wangdue
Trongsa
Bumthang
Lhuntse
Trashiyangtse
Trashigang
Mongar
Zhemgang
Pema Gatshel
Samdrup Jongkhar
Gelephu
Sarpang
Damphu
Daga
CHUKHA
Samtse
Phuntsholing
Tsendagang 6994 m
Gangla Karchung 6395 m
Chisangang 6050
Khang Bum 6494
Rinchen zoe 5269
Laya
Rodophu
Tarina
Woche
Thangza
Dangey
Tsorim
Lunana
Lhadi
Narithang
Limithang
Robluthang
Tashijaithang
Chebesa
Lingshi
Jangothang
Soi Thangthangka
Shana
Koina
Damji
Trashithang
Rimchu
Sanagatshel
Shengana
Lingmukha
Tsochena
Jichu Dramo
Geche Woma
Phorang
Warthang
Duer Tsachu
Chukarpo
Tampetsho
Maorothang
Tsochenchen
Nga Lhakhang
Thakung
Ugyen Choling
Gorsum
Thangbi
Kurjey
Yang
Phokpey
Pangshithang
Dechen Pelrithang
Ungar
Khaini
Tangmachu
Minji
Pemi
Taupang
T. Zam
Dungkhar
Snowman Trek
Laya-Gasa Trek
Jomolhari Trek
Druk Path
Dagala Trek
Gangtey Trek
Bumthang Trek
Rodungla Trek
Sakteng Trek
Dolamkencho
Choten Nebu
Chari Goenpa
Dodina
Bimelangtsho
Dechencholing
Chumina
Jena
Phajoding
Drugyel Dzong
Taktshang
Dochula (3116 m)
Thinleygang
Lobeysa
Bajothang
Khuruthang
Chuzomsa
Chungsekha
Samtengang
Nubding
Pelela 3390 m
Lawala
Dungdung Ngesa
Chuserbu
Gangtey
Phobjikha
Gogona
Khotokha
Yotongla 3425 m
Chhume
Ura
Sheytangla 3596 m
Thrumshingla 3780 m
Sengor
Tshangkha
Kungarapten
Refe
Khosala
Wangduegang
Buli
Dakpai
Zurphey
Tingtibi
Mangdichu
Gong Khola
Tamala 1661 m
Surey
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Pangkhar
Aje Bridge
Lalai
Panbang
Manas
Dogar
Ngangla
Nagor
Khomshar
Autsho
Galagpa
Shershong
Gangola
Kurichu
Korila 2298
Yadi
Chaskhar
Lingmithang
Nezaygang
Gyelpoizhing
Sherichu
Kanglung
Khaling
Thrimshing
Trashiyangphu
Wamrong
Mukuzor
Khothakpa
Tshelingkhor
Narphung
Dewathang
Tamzhangtshen
Tshenkharla
Duksum
Ramjar
Bartsham
Phongmey
Radi
Bidung
Rangjung
Jamkhar
Chazam
Dramitse
Riju
Jyonkhar
Sakteng
Saypho
Merak
Dalim
Samrang
Jampani
Daifam
Kawaipani
Dekiai
Bangtar
Nganglam
Semtokha
Totokha
Khasadrapchu
Labana
Chuzom
Genekha
Bondey
Talung
Cheleyla (3822m)
Yangthang
Takchu
Shari
DawaKha
Bitekha
Chapcha
Bunakha
Tsimasham
Takti
Changakha
Gonglakha
Gedu
Dala
Rinchending
Pasakha
Monitar
Shinchula 1600 m
Mirchim
Piping
Kerabari
Pinkhu
Kalikhola
Tendu
Sibsoo
Dorokha
Chengmari
Gomtu
Gaselo
Hesothankha
Gumina
Masakha
Basichu
Rurichu
Kamichu
Waklayta
Burichu
Chanchey
Lobsebatty
Dujegang
Suntalay
Kumjung
Sunkosh
Dupidara
Lamidara
Darachu
Darachi
Kagochen
Timiray
Trashiding

In a Nutshell...

Day 1 | Board flight to New Delhi. Overnight flight

Day 2 | Arrive New Delhi. The Imperial, Delhi

Day 3 | New Delhi - Paro Drive to Thimphu. Amankora Thimphu

Day 4 | AM explore Thimphu .
PM drive Thimphu to Punakha- Amankora Punakha

Day 5 | Tour of Punakha . Amankora Punakha

Day 6 | Punakha . Amankora Punakha

Day 7 | Drive Punakha to Gangtey Amankora Gangtey

Day 8 | Longtey hike and Potato shed dinner. Amankora Gangtey

Day 9 | Gangtey. Amankora Gangtey

Day10| Drive Gangtey to Bumthang. Amankora Bumthang

Day11| Explore Tang Valley, Bumthang District.
Amankora Bumthang

Day12| Bumthang. Amankora Bumthang

Day13| Fly Bumthang to Paro Amankora Paro

Day14| Paro. Trekking camp, Bumdra

Day15| Paro Valley Exploration via Tigers Nest. Amankora Paro

Day16| Fly Paro – Delhi. Home

Note: *This is very much a guideline for the travels across the Kingdom of Bhutan and the overall program is subject to travel conditions, and may be amended to cater to particular interests and desired experiences along the way.*

Driving Times..

	Paro	**Thimphu**	**Punakha**	**Gangtey**	**Bumthang**
Paro		2 hours	4.5 hours	6 hours	10 hours
Thimphu	2 hours		2.5 hours	4 hours	8 hours
Punakha	4.5 hours	2.5 hours		2.5 hours	6.5 hours
Gangtey	6 hours	4 hours	2.5 hours		4 hours
Bumthang	10 hours	8 hours	6.5 hours	5 hours	

Your Recommended Itinerary...

Board your flight to New Delhi
Today you will need to make your way to check in for your flight to Delhi. We advise that you arrive and check-in 2 hours prior to departure.

Overnight: Overnight flight
Meals: In-flight meals

Arrive New Delhi
If you are flying from London on Virgin Airlines you will arrive at 11:00 this morning in New Delhi. Upon arrival you will be greeted at the airport and transferred to your hotel by the hotel car. On arrival check in and welcome. This afternoon is at leisure.

Overnight: The Imperial, Delhi
Meals: Breakfast

New Delhi - Paro (Bhutan) - By road to Thimphu
This morning you will be met and transferred to Terminal 3 of the new Indira Gandhi International Airport in order to board your flight to Paro. We recommend that you be at the airport approx. two hours prior to your flight time, carrying both your Air ticket and Visa Approval Letter with you to present at time of check-in. As your flight weaves through the valley, arrival in Bhutan is like no other. As you touch down, keep your camera at the ready, as we have noticed how passengers slowly disembark and then stand on the tarmac totally bewildered. Move through to immigration where you will present your Visa Approval letter and Passport for the official stamp. As you clear the Immigration check, please make your way to the baggage delivery area and here you will meet your Guide for the first time. The transfer to Thimphu is approximately 1 ½ hours. Upon arrival and after settling in there will be limited time to explore, however the National Memorial Chorten is open 24hrs and this may be a chance to stroll the Main Street for some interesting Himalayan artefacts or textiles, so as to get a feel for what awaits you over the next week or so.

Overnight: Amankora Thimphu
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

AM Thimphu tour - PM Drive onto Punakha
This morning you will head to the north end of the valley to view Trashi Chhoe Dzong, the seat of Bhutan's government and Royal offices, and pay a visit to Pangri Zampa, two 16th century buildings that now house a monastic training school for astrologers. At the head of the valley, should you wish to stretch your legs, a short hike will take you to Cheri Goemba, the monastery where the first monastic body was established in the Kingdom. Back in town you should be able to visit a few of the capital's cottage industries ranging from traditional paper making to hand rolled incense.

Drive on to Punakha after a hearty lunch of all the tempting Bhutanese delights you begin the lengthy drive that takes you to Punakha Valley. Along the way, don't forget to ask the driver at any time to stop, for that moment in time that may not be captured again – guests have been known to return from Amankora Journeys with over 700 photos. As we enter Punakha Valley, you may stop to stretch your legs for a short walk thru the valley floor to the Chimi Lhakhang, the auspicious fertility monastery built by the "Divine Madman" in 1499.

Overnight: Amankora Punakha
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Tour of Punakha
Your day in Punakha Valley begins with a hike up through fields of chillies, cabbages and rice along the banks of the Mo Chhu to the upper end of the valley to the Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten, a stunning monument recently built by the Queens and consecrated in 1999. Returning down through the valley you will have plenty of time to take in the impressive Punakha Dzong, home to the remains of Bhutan's first ruler, Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal, and the winter residence of the monastic order's leader and his entourage of monks. Later a picnic lunch will be served on the banks of the Punak Chhu at a vantage point of the stunning Dzong and confluence of the Mo Chhu and Pho Chhu. Following lunch a quick drive will take you to the village of Talo where you will stop to walk the stunning, quiet grounds of the village temple and perhaps visit the home village of the Kingdom's four Queens. Of course, if you are looking for something more strenuous, further hikes or valley excursions can be organised.

Overnight: Amankora Punakha
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Punakha
LAPTSAKHA HIKE - In the rainy season, you will encounter wet mud on most of the trails in the Punakha area. This hike, which takes you from Laptsakha village to Punakha Police Station, is an exception. From Laptsakha village, you follow a path along the irrigation channel which is shaded by the surrounding forest and therefore gives a most-wanted relief from the heat. There are no hills, and hardly any steep descents as you wander through the forest and past small village houses with beautiful views of Punakha valley and the Mo Chhu river. The full hike takes from 2 ½ to 3 hours, but can be shortened depending on where you choose to leave the irrigation channel and make your way down to the valley floor. The hike can be combined with a visit to the newly opened nunnery „Sangchhen Dorji Lhendrup Lhakhang.

Overnight: Amankora Punakha
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Sunday 14 October | Drive Punakha to Gangtey
Today you will transfer to Gangtey this should take around two and a half hours.

Spend your afternoon relaxing.

Overnight: Amankora Gangtey
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Gangtey -Longtey Hike/Potato Shed
Today you will take a picturesque hike through some of the most beautiful parts of Gangtey. A 30 minute drive will take you to the starting point in Longtey village and your hike will take between 3 - 5 hours. This trail will initially take you through a small village where the yak herders put up their camps in the winter. From here you continue upwards through mystifying old growth rhododendron forest. For the next two hours or so, you may feel like you are in the setting of the Lord of the Rings surrounded by tall old trees!

This evening after a freshen up you will go for dinner in the local candle-lit potato shed, this is a truly romantic and atmospheric experience. Situated a 5 minute walk form your lodge is a stone built potato shed which houses the local farmers potato harvest. In the midst of all these spuds a bukhari has been mounted making the shed comfortably warm. Start your evening with some locally brewed Ara. A local musician plays and sings local folk songs while you enjoy your Bhutanese meal.

Overnight: Amankora Gangtey
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Gangtey

TONGPHUSHING TRAIL - This is a beautiful leisurely walk through the pine forest, farmland and the villages. The hike starts from the lodge and continues through Tokha village all the way to the Phobjikha valley. The walk provides insight into village life, farming and also offers great views of the Phobjikha valley. The hike ends near the RSPN campsite. Alternatively, you could also start this hike from RSPN campsite towards the lodge. The hike takes about 1 ½ - 2 hours.
TOKHA VILLAGE LOOP - This loop is the perfect easy afternoon hike, which you can easily do alone. From the lodge, follow the road to the left and continue past village houses until crossing a small bridge. Turn left towards Tokha village community and the Beta Community School. From here you can continue by road back to the lodge to complete the loop. This walk takes about 1½ - 2hours.

Overnight: Amankora Gangtey
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Drive Gangtey to Bumthang
Today's journey onward to Jakar (Bumthang) is perhaps long, but certainly memorable with dramatic landscapes of terraced farmland, deep river valleys and precariously perched farmhouses viewed from the only east west highway that has been ingeniously carved out of the mountain faces. Following a brief stop at Chendebji Chorten, which according to belief was built to cover the remains of a demon spirit, you will carry on to what was the original home of the royal family. Upon reaching Trongsa you may take time to stroll this quaint village and official business permitting, perhaps visit the Trongsa Dzong, ancestral home to Bhutan's monarch where you will often find novice monks reciting mantras or practicing on sacred horns, flutes or drums.

Overnight: Amankora Bumthang
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Explore Tang Valley – Bumthang District
Today you will explore further into the Bumthang district with an excursion of the stunningly beautiful Tang Valley. This seldom visited valley offers a treat as it reveals some of the "off the beaten track" lhakhangs and monasteries, and the amazing museum at Ugen Chhoeling Palace. A short hike takes you up to this well maintained Palace and it's cultural treasures inside. Along the way, you will stop for a traditional picnic with breathtaking views of these pristine surroundings.

Overnight: Amankora Bumthang
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Bumthang
This morning you will explore the neighboring palace, Wangdichhoeling, home to the 2nd King, and the auspicious prayer wheels next door. Heading up valley, you will take in the grand Kurjey Lhakhang, considered one of Bhutan's most auspicious monuments, that was once the resting place of Guru Rimpoche, and Jambay Lhakhang, home to the early winter festivals that draw thousands of Bhutanese for their annual blessings. Heading back into town and across the Bumthang Chhu, you will enjoy a visit to the sin alleviating Tamshing Monastery followed by quick visits to the valleys unique cottage industries – Red Panda Brewery, Bumthang Cheese/Dairy Facility and the Bumthang Distillery, home to numerous distinctive spirits

Overnight: Amankora Bumthang
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Fly Bumthang to Paro
Today you will catch your flight back to Paro where you are spending the next few nights. After arriving into Paro and crossing through Paro Town, heading towards the north end of the valley. Here, set in a pine forest, you will find the Amankora lodge and it's Spa. In the afternoon, there is an opportunity for a quick stroll to the nearby ruins, a visit to some of the valley's oldest and holiest religious monuments or a ramble down Paro's main street.

Overnight: Amankora Paro
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

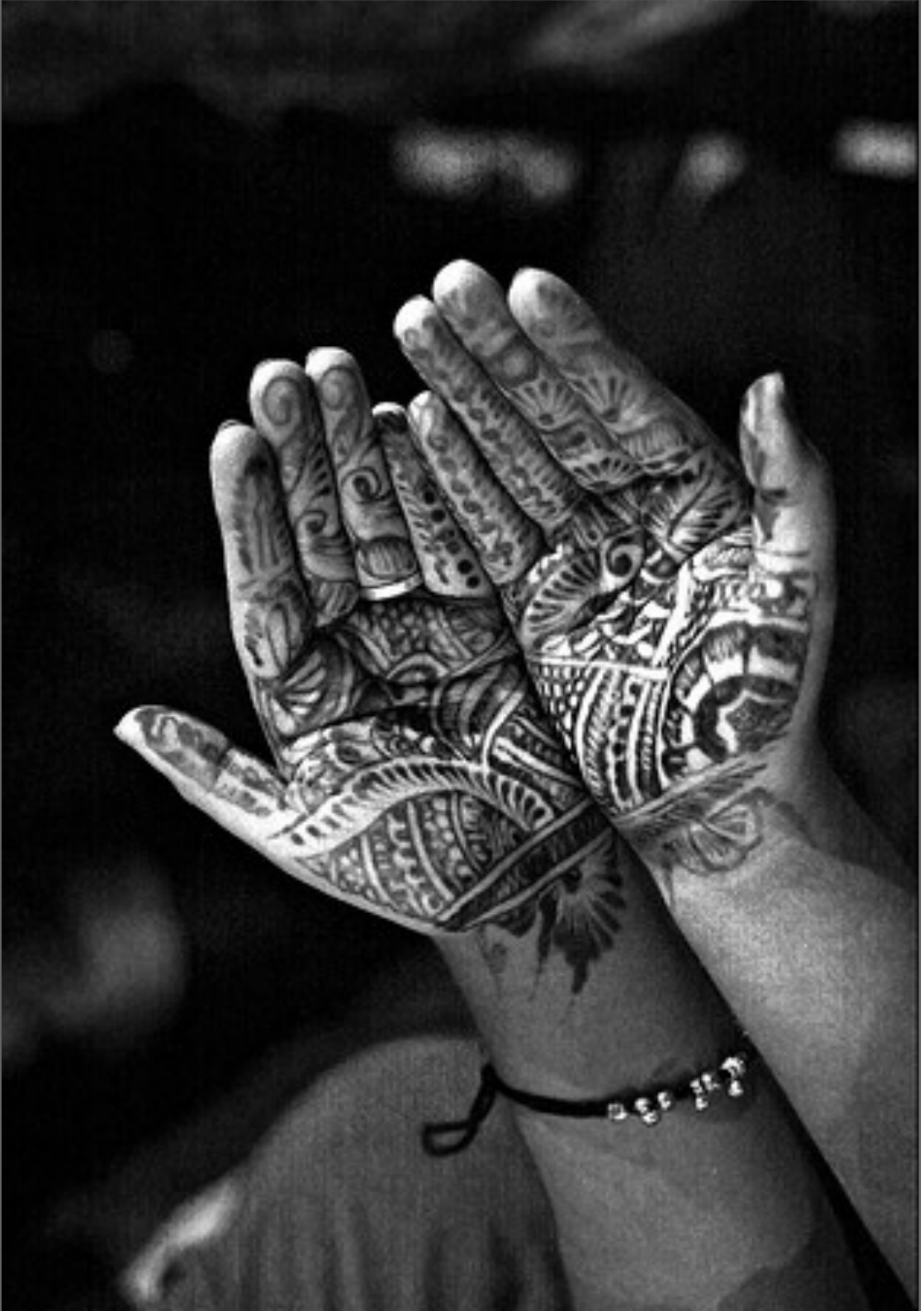
Trekking camp to Bumdra
Hike from Sang Choekor Buddhist College in the Paro valley (2,800 m) to Yak pasture where you camp below Bumdra Monastery (3,800 m)

The adventure begins with an early morning drive up to the Sang Choekor to meet your ponies; while they are being loaded you may pay our respects at the college. The initial one to two-hour ascent of a shady, forested ridge, brings you to a clearing with prayer flags and views down into both the Paro and Do Chhu Valleys. Above and ahead the Chhoe Tse Lhakhang (temple) nestles on the mountainside a further one to two hour's walk away. The trail undulates for a while before the last steep section up to the pretty temple which offers commanding views south over Paro and northwards to the snowcapped Himalayas.

After a final 20-minute climb through ruins and fluttering prayer flags, we plunge back into ancient forest, and, after traversing for about 40 minutes, you will come out onto a high wide meadow dotted with sacred chortens and prayer flags. Your home for the night is tucked away just under Bumdra Monastery (Cave of a Thousand Prayers) and offers unimpeded views of the Himalayan range. After lunch visit the monastery (if it is occupied) and also climb the peak to the north (about 4000 m) for even better views, returning in time for a well earned dinner.

The higher you go, the better the sky

Overnight: Trek camping, Bumdra
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner



Return trek to your lodge
After a hearty breakfast, it is time to either head straight back into the valley or spend a little extra time soaking up the view. Eventually you have to drop back into the ancient pine and rhododendron forest on the monks' zigzagging trail.

After one to two hours of descent you catch glimpses of the golden roofs of temples below. The path snakes across the mountainside between these monasteries before reaching the gardens of Zangto Pelri (Heaven on Earth) from which you can, if you are brave, peer over the edge, straight down onto the ornate rooftops of Taktsang Monastery perched against the cliff-face far below.

An hour later and you are at the gates of Taktsang looking across the gorge; a steep descent to a waterfall then up some steps and you'll reach the Tiger's Nest itself. Retracing our steps we begin the final descent of about 45 minutes to reach your vehicle and return to the hotel.

Relaxing at the lodge this evening.

Overnight: Amankora Paro
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Paro - New Delhi
Early this morning you have an early morning transfer from Amankora Paro to Paro Airport for your International departure – you will leave for the airport 2 hours prior to travel time. Your flight departs Paro at 08:25 and lands in New Delhi at 10:15.

Overnight: n/a
Meals: In-flight Meals

Laterally sleeping...

The Imperial
The most distinguished hotel in the country's capital, The Imperial, built in 1934, is located in the heart of the city. Reflecting the heritage of Mughal Delhi, this hotel offers graceful architecture with modern facilities, with utmost elegance. Housing some of the finest collections of art and artefacts within India - this is a museum hotel, with fabulous service and selection of restaurants.

Amankora Thimphu
The lodge incorporates tall, white-washed stone buildings accessed through an enclosed entrance court. The Living and Dining Room features soaring ceilings and an outdoor dining deck with views of the nearby stream and surrounding forest. The spacious Library with its seating, writing and lounging areas, houses a collection of books on Bhutan and the surrounding Himalayan regions. The Boutique specialises in a fine collection of Bhutanese textiles, Himalayan art and jewellery. The Spa includes three treatment rooms, a steam room and changing areas. Two dwellings house a total of 16 suites featuring a combined living and bedroom that includes a king-size bed, two reading chairs and a window banquette providing views across a landscaped courtyard or directly onto the nearby stream and pine forest. Room interiors feature wood panel and chocolate brown walls. The traditional *bukhari* is positioned between the bedroom and the bathroom with a shower, toilet and twin vanities. The suites are individually heated during cold winter months.

Amankora Gangtey
Floor-to-ceiling windows in the combined living and dining room offer beautiful views over the expansive Phobjikha Valley. Spa facilities include two treatment rooms and changing areas. The eight suites are identical to those of Amankora Thimphu, offering an open plan bedroom and bathing area. The design combines wood panelling and chocolate brown walls, traditional *bukhari*, terrazzo-clad bath, shower, vanity and daybed offering views across the valley.

...sleeping Laterally

Amankora Bumthang
Overlooking established orchards and nestled near the grounds of one of Bhutan's royal palaces, the lodge offers a library, comfortable living room, regal dining room and cosy spa with three treatment rooms, a steam room and changing areas. Accessed through an impressive stone-clad hallway, 16 guest suites are situated in four separate dwellings, each containing two suites on the ground floor and two on the upper floor. Suites feature wood-panelled interiors, a traditional *bukhari*, king-size bed, terrazzo-clad bath, shower, twin vanities and daybed overlooking the courtyard, nearby Wangdichholing Palace and monastery.

Amankora Punakha
Accessed by crossing a suspension bridge over the Mo Chhu, the lodge is centred by a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse built by a former Je Kempo (Chief Abbot of Bhutan). This quaint, three-storey structure with its preserved vegetable dye wall paintings is now a reception area with a Dining Room, traditional Altar Room, a courtyard for alfresco dining and a tea pavilion. Just beyond is the Spa with two treatment rooms, a steam room, changing areas and a yoga/meditation room. Eight suites, located in three rammed-earth dwellings, are situated in an orange orchard with views across the rice fields and up the Punakha Valley. The suites are identical to the design of the suites at Amankora Paro and feature wood-panelled interiors, a traditional *bukhari*, king-size bed, terrazzo-clad bath, shower, vanities and daybed. Suites are individually heated during the cooler winter months and air-conditioned in the summer months.

Amankora Paro
Thirty minutes from Paro's international airport, the lodge contrasts rustic with contemporary design, featuring natural rammed-earth walls and a gentle sloping roof. A lime-washed stone pavilion houses the living and dining rooms, library, boutique and outdoor terrace. Behind the main cluster of buildings is the Spa which includes a sauna, steam room, five treatment rooms with hot stone baths, changing rooms and a glass-walled yoga suite. There are six dwellings with four suites each, two on the ground floor and two on the upper floor. The 24 suites are similar in design with a king-size bed, a traditional *bukhari* (wood-burning stove) and a large terrazzo-clad bath.

...Laterally thinking

Bon Appétit
The people of Bhutan love to eat and every region has its own specialty. Bhutanese affinities for Yak meat is well known, but they also relish a completely vegetarian dish made of humble cheese and chilli. This special dish is known as 'Ema Datshi' and it is said that a trip to the Dragon Kingdom is incomplete without tasting this delicacy. It is undoubtedly tasty but very, very hot as the Bhutanese are incredibly passionate about chilli. They use chilli in everything!

Modern Life
Thimphu is one of just two capital cities in Asia that does not have a single traffic light. (The other is Pyongyang, North Korea.) There was such public outcry when local officials installed a single signal that it was quickly removed, and a traffic officer was reassigned to the intersection. Further to this Bhutan was one of the last countries in the world to introduce television to its people. The government lifted a ban on TV – and on the Internet – only 11 years ago.

Religion
Bhutan is the only country in the world to retain the Tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism (Drukpa Kagyu) as the official religion. The Buddhist faith has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the cultural, ethical and sociological development of Bhutan and its people. Annual festivals (tsechus and dromches) are spiritual occasions in each district. They bring together the population and are dedicated to the Guru Rinpoche or other deities. Throughout Bhutan, stupas and chortens line the roadside commemorating places where Guru Rinpoche or another high Lama may have stopped to meditate. Prayer flags dot the hills, fluttering in the wind. They allow Bhutanese people to maintain constant communication with the heavens.

The People
Bhutan's indigenous population is the Drukpa. Three main ethnic groups, the Sharchops, Ngalops and the Lhotsampas (of Nepalese origin), make up today's Drukpa population. Bhutan's official language is Dzongkha. Given the geographic isolation of many of Bhutan's highland villages, it is not surprising that a number of different dialects have survived. To keep the traditional culture alive Bhutanese people wear the traditional clothing that has been worn for centuries. Bhutanese men wear a 'gho,' a long robe tied around the waist by a belt. The women's ankle length dress is called a kira, made from beautifully colored and finely woven fabrics with traditional patterns.

Country Information…

India
From the snow-capped Himalayas in the north to the sun drenched coastal villages of the south, India unfolds like an ancient tapestry. At times threadbare and fading, the land stretches from desert dunes and scattered slums to the rich embroidery of ancient, jewelled palaces, and the majestic domes of forgotten empires.

Since the first civilisations rose on the banks of the Indus River almost 5,000 years ago, India has given birth to Buddhism and Hinduism, been touched by the Empire of Alexander the Great, seen the ancient empires of the Mauryas and Guptas rise and fall, and has traded with Pharaohs and Caesars.

An invasion by the white Huns scattered its people until the sweeping hand of Islam saw new kingdoms rise, heralding the era of the Sultans. Defeat came again as the Mogul Emperors marched over the mountains and into the Punjab. The decline of the Mogul Empire gave way to the Marathas, who consolidated control of India just in time for the arrival of the British. The sun finally set on the British Empire as India reclaimed independence in 1947, heralding a new age of democracy.

Delhi
The city consists of two parts - Old & New Delhi. Old Delhi was the capital of Muslim India between 17th and 19th century and has many mosques, monuments and forts. New Delhi, the imperial city was created by the British as the capital of India.

In 1911, Edwin Lutyens', the most renowned English architect of the day, was chosen to design New Delhi. Lutyens' architectural conceptions were totally different from the Hindu or Mughal architecture. The city centre has wide, straight avenues in a strict layout, plenty of parks and low colonial buildings with spacious gardens.

As well as being known for its formal parks, New Delhi has many more fantastic sights to offer: the magnificent Parliament Building, the Rashtrapati Bhawan (the official residence of the President of India in the 330 acres of land and designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens), India Gate, Qutab Minar (the 72.5 meter high tower dating back to the 13th century) and Humanyun's Tomb, which was built in the 16th century and architecturally considered the forerunner of the Taj Mahal.

Bhutan
Aside from the awe-inspiring scenery, when arriving in Bhutan the thing that strikes you is the most extraordinary sense of peace and tranquillity. Perhaps this is not surprising in a country whose success is measured not by GDP but by Gross National Happiness. And this is mandated. The Bhutanese seem wonderfully content, with a shy sense of humour and an embracing warmness. You see the pride in their country as they regale you with stories of tradition and culture and the country's uniqueness.

And unique Bhutan truly is. In keeping with Buddhist values, the people live in harmony with nature and Bhutan is one of the top ten bio-diversity hot spots of the world. Unlike much of Asia there is not a cigarette or plastic bag to be found; they are illegal. The landscape actually appears virginal and picture postcard like with the freshest and cleanest air you will ever encounter.

The scenery is wonderfully diverse. Those after the majestic grandeur of snow capped mountains will love the views of the Eastern Himalayas in the north. Those who appreciate something more gentle will fall in love with the rich and fertile Paro Valley. In Spring the countryside is a riot of colour with wild flowers in abundance. It is also a gardener's delight - where else can you get 50 species of Rhododendron's? There is enough to keep even the most ardent bird twitcher happy – 770 species of bird await discovery and identification. Other lateral pursuits include amazing altitude trekking – both long and shorter routes are available. The culturally inclined will enjoy the Buddhist festivals. Yearly festivals are celebrated in each district and are a feast for the eyes; amazing masks, costumes and dancing in the stunning setting of a Dzong. If all this sounds too energetic, you can simply indulge and soak in the extraordinary scenery. Known to only a few there are five Aman resorts dotted around Bhutan.

Not only is it the majesty of the landscape that will catch your eye but the small detail will be equally captivating. Don't rush and just allow your eyes to gaze and your senses to appreciate the small things. Where else in the world will you find giant sized Penis paintings on the side of houses? Marvel at how your guide seems to remain immaculate in his traditional, woven Gho on the ascent to The Tigers Nest. Sit in the square in Thimpo and wait for a teenager to come and slowly and shyly start speaking English. Relax and relish the traditions of a Bhutanese stone bath. Appreciate the multi-coloured prayer flags along mountain ridges fluttering in the breeze or just watch the world go by in the square in Thimpo. Our advice to really appreciate Bhutan is to throw away the blackberry, turn off the mobile phone and envelope yourself in the sense of peace and calm of Bhutan.

Paro
Paro Valley is closest to the international airport and sits at an elevation of 2,250m. There are a number of monasteries and monuments in this area but none as dramatic as the 8th century Taktsang, or 'Tiger's Nest'. A highly revered monastery built on a sheer cliff face at a height of 2,950m, the site is widely visible from the valley floor. While the hike up is challenging, horses, mules and donkeys are usually on hand to ease the journey. In an excursion to the town of Paro itself, the National Museum, previously the watchtower of the valley, displays an intriguing collection of artefacts that illustrate the rich culture and heritage of the Kingdom. A short stroll away is the dominating Paro Dzong, a prime example of Bhutanese architecture. From the dzong, a leisurely walk back into town crosses over one of Bhutan's traditional cantilevered bridges and continues on to the 15th century Dumtse Lhakhang town temple with its altar and beautiful wall paintings. Just on the outskirts of Paro town lie the twin temples of 7th century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the first Buddhist temples built in the country.

Thimphu
Thimphu, a steep valley at an altitude of 2,350m surrounded by richly forested mountains dotted with ancient monasteries and *lhakhangs* (temples). The town is built up from the Thimphu Chhu (river) and centred by a quaint clock tower and its surrounding lanes of shops, vegetable and meat markets and a variety of local restaurants. As Bhutan's capital city, Thimphu is home to many attractions and activities including the National Textile Museum, Folk Heritage Museum, National Library where Bhutanese craftsmen continue to pursue the traditional art of xylography, Philatelic Centre and the bustling Changlingmethang Market. Just up the valley, is the seat of government and the office of His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, in the majestic Tashichoe Dzong. Nearby, one can visit Pangri Zampa, two 16th century buildings that now house a monastic astrologer training school. At the head of the valley, a walk across one of the country's oldest cantilever bridges leads to Cheri Goemba where the Kingdom's first monk community was based. Closer to town, Thimphu's main street provides the opportunity to browse for Himalayan jewellery and Bhutanese handicrafts and textiles. To this day, Thimphu remains the world's only capital without traffic lights, man being the preferred option.

Phobjikha Valley
A stay here always begins with a casual stroll through the quaint Gangtey village, before visiting the ancient altars and ramparts of the massive Gangtey Goemba. Should the Gangtey Tulku be in residence then an audience for a highly-revered blessing may possibly be arranged. The Phobjikha Valley is a remote, isolated, and simply stunning, u-shaped glacial valley and home to the Black Mountains National Park - one of Bhutan's most important wildlife sanctuaries. At an elevation of 3,000m on the western slopes of the Black Mountains, this glacial valley is home each winter to a flock of 300 rare and endangered black-necked cranes which arrive from Tibet. Numerous nature walks and treks are offered throughout the valley's varied terrain and, in winter, the reclusive black-necked cranes can be seen from the nearby Crane Centre or a viewing hide set near their main nesting and feeding grounds.

Bumthang Valley
Bumthang comprises four valleys – Chhume, Choekhor, Tang and Ura. The entire region is commonly known as Bumthang Valley and is covered with fields of buckwheat, millet and potato, with apple orchards climbing up the slopes to mix with deep pine forest. Across the valley lie many of the Kingdom's most auspicious and highly revered houses of worship and ancient monasteries. The valley is known for its cottage industries which produce highly sought after Bumthang butter, Gouda and Emmenthal cheese, honey and a variety of intriguing fruit spirits and brandies. Amankora Bumthang's neighbouring Wangdichholing Palace was built in 1857 as the Kingdom's first palace and is now the residence of a small group of monks that also share residence in an adjacent Goemba all overlooking five square chortens (Buddhist reliquary monuments) housing water-driven prayer wheels.

Punakha
Punakha is one of the lowest-lying valleys in the Kingdom at an elevation of 1,300m. With its temperate climate, this valley is the market garden of the country. Produce grows year round and many Bhutanese reside here during the colder winter months. One of the highlights of Punakha is visiting the Punakha Dzong, which straddles the confluence of the Mother (Mo) and Father (Pho) rivers like an ancient ship stranded by the tide. The dzong's first courtyard functions as the administrative headquarters for the Punakha district and contains 21 temples within its third courtyard, the largest of which is the monks' hundred-pillared Great Assembly Hall. Beyond the pre-eminence of the dzong, the Chimi Lhakhang built late in the 15th century is a must see to take in the history of this auspicious worship house and its ritual phalluses. Closer to the lodge, a beautiful morning hike takes one to the regal Khamsum Yuelley Namgyel Chorten which dominates the upper Punakha Valley with views across the Mo Chhu and up towards the mountainous peaks of Gasa and beyond. High above the Punakha Valley also lies the secret village of Talo, the birthplace of the Zhabdrung who unified Bhutan and built many of the Kingdom's existing dzongs.

Travel Information...

General...

Travel Health: Obviously we are not doctors and therefore not in a position to give out health advice. We strongly advise that you check the NHS travel website (http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/home.aspx)for up to date information and discuss inoculations with you GP as early in advance as possible.

Safety: Your safety is hugely important to us. With so many variable factors that can affect this we advise you check the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office before you leave for travel advice and tips for British nationals overseas (http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/).

Insurance: laterallife trips do not include travel insurance. However we strongly advise that you buy some before you travel. We recommend Campbell Irvine for a comprehensive policy (http://www.campbellirvine.com/asp/quotationChooseSTMT.asp)

India...

Electricity: 240 volts, 50Hz. A variety of power outlets are used in India, but most plugs have two or three round pins.

Language: Although English is generally used for official and business purposes, Hindi is the official language and is spoken by about 40 percent of the population. Urdu is the language common with the Muslim demographic. India has a total of 22 official languages

Tipping: In India, taxi drivers do not expect to be tipped, however tipping is expected in other services (porters, guides, hotel staff and waiters in small establishments). In tourist restaurants or hotels a 10% service charge is often added to bills. Baksheesh is common in India, it is more a bribe than a tip and will ensure better service; it is given before rather than after the service.

Money: The currency is the Indian Rupee (INR), which is divided into 100 paise (singular paisa). Major currencies can be changed at banks, and authorised bureaux de changes. It is impossible to obtain rupees outside India, but no matter what time you arrive in India there will be an exchange office open at the airport. It is illegal to exchange money through the black market and it is advisable to refuse torn notes, as no one will accept them apart from the National Bank. It is best to change money into small denominations. Travellers cheques and major credit cards are widely accepted, particularly in tourist orientated establishments. ATMs are not generally available.

Visa requirements for UK nationals: British citizens must have a passport that is valid upon arrival, and a visa, to enter India.

Local Customs: India is generally a fairly tolerant society but visitors should be aware of religious and social customs; smoking in public was banned in October 2008. When visiting temples visitors will be required to remove their footwear and cover their heads. In general women should dress conservatively both to respect local sensibilities and to avoid unwanted attention. Topless bathing is illegal. Indians do not like to disappoint and instead of saying 'no' will come up with something positive, even if incorrect. Social order and status are very important in Indian culture. Avoid using the left hand, particularly when eating.

Communications: The international access code for India is +91. The outgoing code is 00 followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 0044 for the United Kingdom). City/area codes are in use, e.g. (0)11 for Delhi. International calls can be quite expensive and there are often high surcharges on calls made from hotels; it is cheaper to use a calling card. Alternatively, there are telephone agencies in most towns which are identifiable by the letters STD for long distance internal calls and ISD for the international service. The local mobile phone operators use GSM networks and have roaming agreements with most international operators. Internet cafes are available in the main cities and resorts.

Duty Free: Travellers to India over 17 years do not have to pay duty on 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 250g tobacco; one bottle of alcohol; medicine in reasonable amounts; 59ml of perfume and 250ml eau de toilette; and goods for personal use. Prohibited items include livestock, bird and pig meat products.

Bhutan...

Time: Local time is GMT +6 hours.

Electricity: Electrical current is 230 volts (50Hz). European round pin attachment plugs and three-pin rectangular plugs are in use.

Language: Dzongkha is the official language, and various Tibetan dialects are spoken. English has recently become the language of instruction in schools but is only spoken fluently by guides and tourist industry professionals.

Tipping: Tipping is not expected in restaurants as your meal would have been prepaid by your tour agency. On treks it is usual to tip the cook, his assistant and any porters. Ask your guide for advice. If you hire a driver tip him at the end of your trip. Bhutanese tradition is that one typically refuses a tip the first time it is offered but accepts it the second time.

Travel Information...

Money: The local currency is the Ngultrumbut subdivided into 100 Chetrums. The currency is pegged to the Indian rupee on scale of 1:1. The Ngultrumbut was only introduced in 1974 before which the country had no currency, relying on a system of bartering to acquire goods. US Dollars and Travellers Cheques can be exchanged at banks and large hotels. Visa and Mastercard are not widely accepted.

Visa requirements for UK nationals: British nationals must have a passport. A visa is required and must be applied for in advance through a tour operator.

Safety Information: Bhutan is one of the safest destinations on the planet. There is virtually no crime or violence.

Local Customs: Bhutan is a traditional Buddhist society. Dress conservatively when visiting religious sites, avoid public displays of affection, and never climb or sit on a statue. Do not take photographs within temples unless permission has been granted to do so. Avoid pointing at people or religious icons with your finger; this is considered very rude. Smoking is banned in all public places including restaurants and bars. Betel nut is chewed throughout the day by young and old alike and has become an integral part of Bhutanese society. The royal family is revered and deeply respected; avoid any disparaging remarks or gestures. Mountains are considered to the abode of the gods and hence any recreational activities therein are disallowed.

Communications: The international dialling code for Bhutan is +975. The outgoing code is 00 followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 0044 for the United Kingdom). There is extensive mobile phone coverage, which is more reliable and widespread than the landline network. Internet access is available in all main towns and hotels.

Duty Free: Travellers to Bhutan may bring with them up to 400 cigarettes/150g pipe tobacco/50 cigars, two litres of liquor, and goods for personal use. Guns and ammunition, narcotics, antiques and wildlife products are prohibited.

Recommended Reading...

'Beyond the sky and the earth'
When she left for the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan in 1988, Zeppa was committing herself to two years of teaching and a daunting new experience. A week on a Caribbean beach had been her only previous trip outside Canada; Bhutan was on the other side of the world, one of the most isolated countries in the world known as the last Shangri-La, where little had changed in centuries and visits by foreigners were restricted. Clinging to her bags full of chocolate, hair conditioner and Immodium, she began the biggest challenge of her life, with no idea she would fall in love with the country and with a Bhutanese man, end up spending nine years in Bhutan, and begin a literary career with her account of this transformative journey. by Jamie Zeppa

'Kingdoms beyond the clouds'
Of the 24 Himalayan kingdoms which survived until the British left India, only two, Nepal and Bhutan, are independent sovereign states yet many of the royal families still survive. The author of this book travels from Ladkh to Bhutan, discovering these forgotten kings and hill rajas. by Jonathan Gregson

'So close to heaven'
Journalist Crossette visits the last remaining strongholds of Tantric Buddhism, examining the ways this culture has preserved its uniqueness amidst the homogenizing influences of contemporary geopolitics. "There is no other full-length contemporary American account of this likable and largely unvisited kingdom....Crosette unravels the intricacies of Buddhism with considerable clarity."--The New York Times Book Review. by Barbara Crossette

'Seeing with the third eye'
In this affectionate overview of Bhutanese beliefs and culture and a tribute to his grandmother, Wangchuk recalls with earthy detail the rhythms, festivals and traditional ways of life in rural Bhutan. Sangay Wangchuk, who lives in Thimphu, Bhutan, is a guide and director of Bhutan Walkers. by T.Sangay Wangchuk

'Dawa, the story of a stray dog in Bhutan'
Dawa looks like just another scruffy Thimphu street dog, but don't be fooled: he understands Dzongkaha, he has an urge to see the world and his bigger-than-normal brain is matched only by his compassionate heart. His is an extraordinary life; follow it from its tragic beginnings to his ascension as the legendary Leader of Howling in Thimphu, to the miracle that saves him. Dawa's story will appeal to all who have experienced life's rigors - but have never given up hope on the possibilities. (from back cover) by Kunzang Choden

'The circle of karma'
The first novel by a woman to come out of the small kingdom of Bhutan. Written in English, the novel tells the story of Tsomo, a young Bhutanese woman who embarks on the difficult and lonely journey of life. by Kunzang Choden

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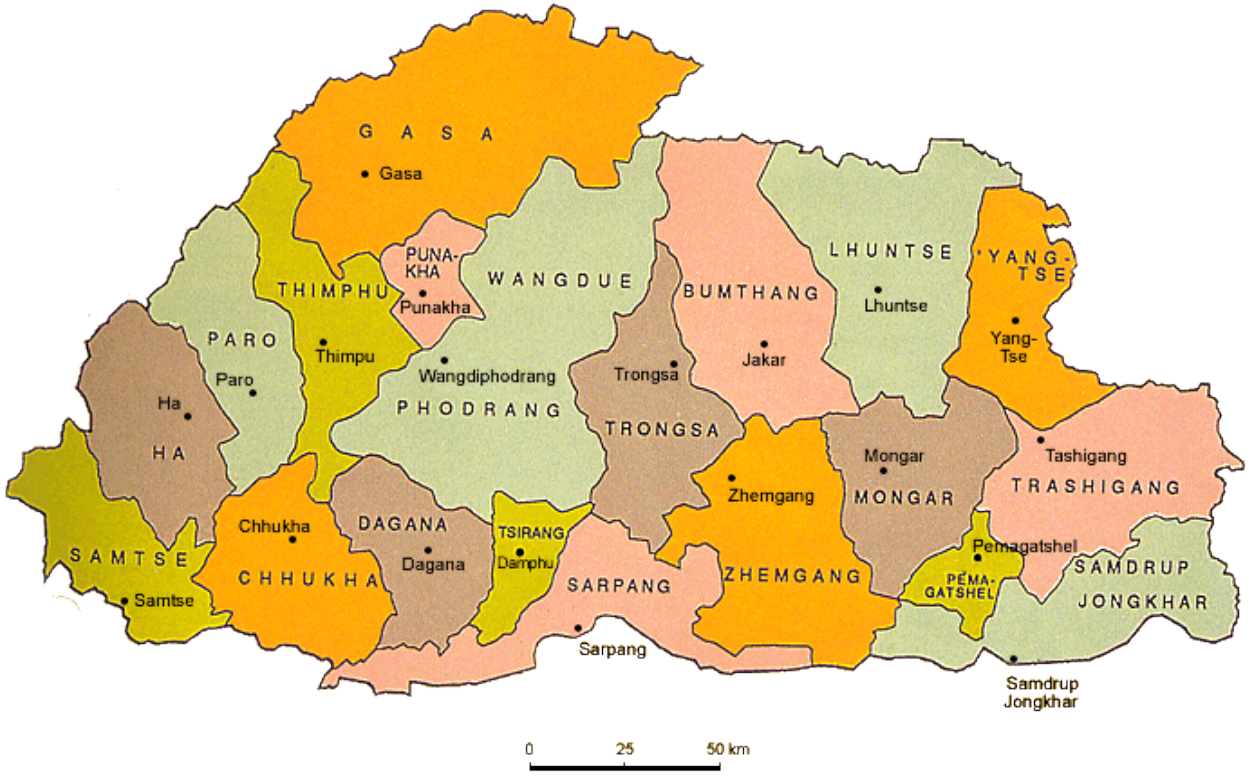
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