



Bhutan

in collaboration with Bhutan

Photo: Aaron Santelices/Unsplash



Pritam_Saha/Shutterstock.com

Long isolated from the outside world, Bhutan is a relic of a more traditional Asia, preserved in time and with little in the way of tourist infrastructure. In an increasingly connected world, this small, beautiful, and utterly charming Himalayan country is one of the last truly off-the-beaten-path destinations on the planet. It is a challenging country to visit, but to those who choose to venture there, it soon reveals itself to be an especially rewarding one, as well.



aaron boris/Unsplash



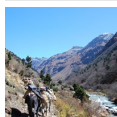
Eagle9/Shutterstock.com

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On a hill just to the south of Thimphu, on the site of the ruins of the Kuen...

THE COUNTRY



Chr. Offenberg/Shutterstock.com

The striking and harsh Himalayan landscape is home to some of the warmest people on Earth, whose Buddhist traditions remain very much central to daily life. As the world's last remaining Buddhist Kingdom, officials are cautious to limit tourism and its influence on the Bhutanese way of life in order to preserve the uniqueness of their cultural and natural heritage.

Isolated from the world until as recently as 1974, it is a place unlike any other. Television was first introduced to Bhutan in 1999, and there is still not a single traffic light to be found in the entire country. The Bhutanese are also intensely environmentally aware, and it is decreed by law that no less than 65% of the country's land surface must be covered by protected forest areas (unsurprisingly, it is the only country on earth that is a 'carbon sink', meaning that it absorbs more greenhouse gases than it emits).

But perhaps the clearest indication of Bhutan's singularity is the fact that instead of measuring the progress of the country in terms of Gross Domestic Product, the Bhutanese use Gross National Happiness, which takes into account more than mere economic factors to measure the success of the nation and the well-being of its people.

DO & SEE



mbrand85/Shutterstock.com

Bhutan's cultural and natural uniqueness is on full display in every corner of the country. Find picturesque mountainsides dotted with tiny shrines and temples, or marvel at the world below you from the top of unfathomably tall Himalayan peaks. Adventure-seekers will have no shortage of activities, including some of the planet's most challenging hikes and most rewarding views.

Thimphu



Though still largely traditional in many ways, Bhutan's fascinating capital is going through something of a transformation. It remains the only world capital without a single traffic light, yet Thimphu is in many ways rapidly modernising, with several 5-star hotels and increasing numbers of restaurants and nightlife venues.

Photo: Sarah Lois/Shutterstock.com

Paro Taktsang



The holy grail of Bhutan's attractions is the 'Tiger's Nest' monastery, carved scenically into the side of a steep cliff, elevated at nearly 900 metres above the Paro valley. Those who endure the somewhat challenging climb will find their reward in the form magnificent vistas and access to the complex' temples, statues, and sacred artefacts.

Photo: Sompol/Shutterstock.com
Address: Taktsang Trail, Bhutan

Tashichho Dzong



Every major community in Bhutan has its own dzong, a centre for religious, civic and administrative life, but none is quite as magnificent as Thimphu's Tashichho Dzong. Though this iteration was built in the 18th century, there has been a dzong at this site since 1216, making it one of the most important religious and political places in the country.

Photo: theskaman306/Shutterstock.com
Address: Chhagchhen Lam, Thimphu
Opening hours: Daily 9am-5pm

Memorial Chorten



One of the country's most recognisable religious landmarks, Memorial Chorten's golden spires and bells attracts Thimphu devouts and fascinated visitors alike. This Buddhist shrine and stupa (a mound or structure used as a place of meditation) was built in 1974 to honor

Bhutan's third king, or Druk.

Photo: Nakcrub/Shutterstock.com
Address: Chhoten Lam, Thimphu

Buddha Dordenma



On a hill just to the south of Thimphu, on the site of the ruins of the Kuensel Phodrang palace, stands the majestic Great Buddha Dordenma statue, one of the largest Buddha statues in the world (52 metres tall). Gape in awe at both the shine of the bronze statue gilded in gold and the magnificent views of the surrounding areas from the hilltop. The walk up and down the hill takes about 1.5 hours.

Photo: Nakcrub/Shutterstock.com
Address: Kuensel Phodrang, Thimphu

Punakha Dzong



Punakha Dzong is the second largest and second oldest dzong in the whole of Bhutan, and until 1955 it served as the country's seat of government. Located at the confluence of the Mo and Pho rivers, it is also the country's greatest fortress, built to defend against Tibetan invasions.

Photo: Iwanami Photos/Shutterstock.com
Address: Punakha

The Snowman Trek



Adventure-seekers will find no more rewarding excursion than the Snowman Trek, an intensive 24-day hike that crosses 11 high-altitude peaks, remote villages and some of the world's greatest views. It is considered to be one of the most difficult treks on the planet and should only be attempted by experienced trekkers.

Photo: Amazingwilko/Shutterstock.com

Cycling



Another test of physical endurance, a cycling trip from Paro to Bumthang is a 4-day, 350 kilometre adventure that gives participants a chance to experience the spellbinding Bhutanese countryside, passing peaks of 3,500 metres above sea level. Again, this is a challenging endeavor and should only be attempted by experienced riders.

Photo: Dylan Haskin/Shutterstock.com

Chokhor Valley



The Chokhor Valley, in Bhutan's central Bumthang district, boasts countless small temples and shrines dotting its hillsides. Impossibly pleasant and peaceful pathways guide visitors from one cluster to the next, showcasing the area's natural beauty. The hike is much milder than other more extreme treks, but can be a bit challenging nonetheless.

Photo: christian kober/Shutterstock.com

Archery



Archery is Bhutan's national sport and most beloved traditional passtime. Festivals and tournaments can be found all around the country on most weekends, showcasing the great skill of the participants and the cheerful and easygoing nature of the Bhutanese people. Attending one of these festivals is often one of the most remarkable and enjoyable activities for visitors to Bhutan.

Photo: Göran Höglund (Kartlåsarn)/Flickr(image cropped)

DINING



Caroline Pang/Shutterstock.com

Bhutanese cuisine tends to be quite spicy and almost always includes rice in one form or another. Ema Datshi, the national dish, is a mix of spicy chillies accompanied by a local cheese (Datshi), and therefore should not be missed. Momos, or Tibetan-style dumplings, as also highly recommended.

Tower Cafe (Thimphu)



A recent addition to Thimphu's burgeoning cafe scene, the centrally located Tower Cafe was started by three young friends hoping to make a splash with their fresh coffee and hearty but wholesome comfort food. Sandwiches, burgers and other snacks feature on the menu.

Photo: Alena Haurylik/Shutterstock.com

Address: Tower Square, Thimphu

Opening hours: Daily 9am-8:30pm

Phone: +975 17 85 85 71

Bumthang Brewery Red Panda Beer (Jakar)



The Swiss Farm Panda Beer Garden serves its very own beer (Red Panda), the only beer brand produced in Bhutan. Take the short

tour of the microbrewery and (visitors get the chance to sample the beer and cider), and follow up with a meal at this pleasant restaurant serving Western cuisine (set lunches and dinners, and cheese made on-site).

Photo: Nishihama/Shutterstock.com

Address: Jakar

Opening hours: Mon-Sat 7:30am-5pm

Wangchen Momo Corner (Thimphu)



Do like the locals do and head to the ever-buzzing Wangchen Momo Corner, one of the city's most popular budget restaurants that serves

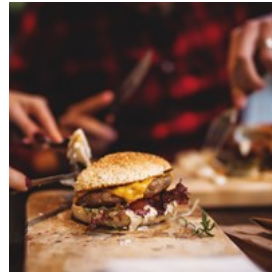
ubiquitous Bhutanese "momo" (dumplings, originally from Tibet) and a few varieties of noodles. Service is fast and efficient.

Photo: szefei/Shutterstock.com

Address: Chogyal Lam, Thimphu

Phone: +975 17 60 46 17

Cloud 9 Gourmet Burger & Milk Bar (Thimphu)



If your palate begs a break from spicy Bhutanese, the comfort of familiarity at Cloud 9 Burger might just be what the doctor ordered.

Burger buns are baked fresh, and burgers come with beef, pork, chicken and vegetarian patties. Do not skip on the decadent milkshakes.

Photo: Dusan Petkovic/Shutterstock.com

Address: Ghaden Khanzang Bldg 42, Phenday Lam Thimphu

Opening hours: Mon-Fri 9am-10pm, Sat-Sun 7.30am-10pm

Phone: +975 2 331417

Seasons (Thimphu)



Thin-crust pizza might be the restaurant's primary draw (locally preferred thick crust on request), but its menu extends far beyond, to

include somewhat unexpected Indian thali and the less unanticipated salads, pasta, and dessert. Mind that the menu is exclusively vegetarian. Make use of the green outdoor patio if weather permits.

Photo: Romaset/Shutterstock.com

Address: Dondrub Lam, Thimphu

Phone: +975 17 64 31 86

Tou Zaiga Restaurant (Paro)



Tou Zaiga is where aspiring chefs of Bondey Institute of Hotel Tourism polish their culinary skill, serving some of the finest cuisine in all of Bhutan to

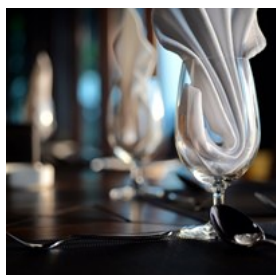
a select few lucky ones in the process. Call or request that your guide makes arrangements for a three-course dinner tailored to your tastes.

Photo: wavebreakmedia/Shutterstock.com

Address: Bongde, Lunyi Gewog, Bonday Lam Rd, Paro, Bhutan

Phone: +975 77 42 09 97

Bukhari (Paro)



Offering the finest of Paro dining, Bukhari Restaurant is a stylish circular space with panoramic ceiling-to-floor windows and a fireplace

centrepiece. Menus are seasonal, with lunches blending international cuisines and dinners leaning towards Bhutanese flavours.

Photo: evilbeau/Shutterstock.com

Address: Paro, Bhutan

Internet: www.comohotels.com/en/umaparo/dining

Email: uma.punakha@comohotels.com

More Info: Located at COMO Uma Paro

Sonam Trophel Restaurant (Paro)



This Bhutanese restaurant serves some great value lunches, and has an extensive dish list of extras for out-of-lunch hours, some Indian and

Chinese. Try the momo (dumplings) with pork, vegetables, cheese or chicken, and the vegetarian Bhutanese specials.

Photo: szefei/Shutterstock.com

Address: Paro, Bhutan

Opening hours: Wed-Mon 9.30am-9pm

Phone: +975 8 271287

CAFÉS



TuiPhotoEngineer/Shutterstock.com

For the best coffee in Bhutan, visitors will want to check out the burgeoning cafe scene in central Thimphu. Young entrepreneurs are establishing stylish and modern new businesses, introducing western-style cafe concepts and high-quality coffee to the city.

Below are some of our top cafes recommendations in Bhutan:

Ambient Cafe (Thimphu)



Ambient Cafe is Thimphu's indisputable favourite haunt for local expats. With free WiFi, great coffee and tea, and good vegetarian lunch

served daily, it's hardly surprising that many return to the cafe on a regular basis. Serves home-made cakes and desserts.

Photo: YKTR/Shutterstock.com

Address: Nordzin Lam, Thimphu

Opening hours: Daily 9am-10pm

Phone: +975 17 11 77 71

Thijha (Thimphu)



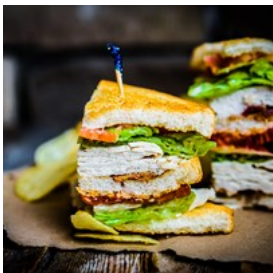
Boasting a modern space with minimalist but stylish design, Thijha is one of the city's best cafes. They feature a large selection of drinks, including smoothies, milkshakes, tea, hot and cold coffee, and more. Snacks are also available, such as pizza and ice cream.

Photo: Brent Hofacker/Shutterstock.com

Address: Clock Tower Square, Thimphu

Opening hours: Daily 8am-10pm

Tower Cafe (Thimphu)



A recent addition to Thimphu's burgeoning cafe scene, the centrally located Tower Cafe was started by three young friends hoping to make a splash with their fresh coffee and hearty but wholesome comfort food. Sandwiches, burgers and other snacks feature on the menu.

Photo: Alena Haurylik/Shutterstock.com

Address: Tower Square, Thimphu

Opening hours: Daily 9am-8:30pm

Phone: +975 17 85 85 71

Champaca Cafe (Paro)



The delightful Paro cafe serves quality vegetarian meals, and is one of Paro's best locations for a decent cup of coffee. The dessert selection is

pleasantly extensive, and there is a surprisingly wide variety of teas. Request cow milk to be replaced by a soy substitute if you prefer.

Photo: baranq/Shutterstock.com

Address: Main Street, Paro

Phone: +975 77 21 20 57

Cafe Perk (Jakar)



Cafe Perk might just be all of Bumthang's all-around best cafes: it's excellent for a decent vegetarian lunch (the pizzas are so large they easily feed two!), and great for a cup of coffee and dessert (cakes are freshly-made on site).

Photo: Oliveshadow/Shutterstock.com

Address: Main Road, Jakar

Phone: +975 17 73 92 17

BARS & NIGHTLIFE



imtmphoto/Shutterstock.com

Thimphu may seem like a relatively small city, but it packs a punch in terms of nightlife. From casual bars to rowdy nightclubs, there is a whole spectrum of venues and vibes to be found, often featuring live music, DJ sets, and plenty of good times.

Below are the best bars and nightclubs in Thimphu, Bhutan:

Hi Jinks (Thimphu)



Druk Hotel's on-site bar is a dimly lit space that breathes an old-world air. Early birds might be able to score one of the incredibly inviting

armchairs by the bar and proceed to indulge in a drink a two (the drink list features a selection of cocktails and wines).

Photo: Kichigin/Shutterstock.com

Address: Clock Tower Square, Hogdzin Lam, Thimphu

Phone: +975 2 322 966

Internet: www.drukhotels.com

More Info: Druk Hotel

Bumthang Brewery Red Panda Beer (Jakar)



The Swiss Farm Panda Beer Garden serves its very own beer (Red Panda), the only beer brand produced in Bhutan. Take the short

tour of the microbrewery and (visitors get the chance to sample the beer and cider), and follow up with a meal at this pleasant restaurant serving Western cuisine (set lunches and dinners, and cheese made on-site).

Photo: Nishihama/Shutterstock.com

Address: Jakar

Opening hours: Mon-Sat 7:30am-5pm

Mojo Park (Thimphu)



The excellent live music venue features live acts all through the week, and is a place known for its infectiously good vibes.

The crowd of regulars is made up of both locals and expats who have long discovered Mojo Park to be the coolest nightlife

spot in Thimphu.

Photo: Syda Productions/Shutterstock.com

Address: Yangchenma Building, Changlam Thimphu

Viva City (Thimphu)



At once a nightclub, bar, and live music venue, Viva City is the one unmissable nightlife establishment for anyone looking for after-hour

action. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights are when Viva City opens its doors to local and international party-goers.

Photo: Asia Images Group/Shutterstock.com

Address: Sheten Lam, Thimphu

Phone: +975 17 60 20 13

The Zone (Thimphu)



This popular Thimphu hangout teems with visitors both day and night. In the evenings, the vibe is conducive to sampling a local draft or two, and excellent food is served all through the day, including their famous yak burger.

Photo: TORWAISTUDIO/Shutterstock.com

Address: Chang Lam, Thimphu

Opening hours: Daily 9:30am-9pm

Phone: +975 2 331 441

Om Pub (Thimphu)



The casual Om Pub is another one of the young generation's favourite hangout locations.

Located in the second floor of

well-past-its-heyday Jojo's Shopping Complex,

Om is a casual bar with occasional live band performances and a solid selection of drinks.

Photo: Yellowj/Shutterstock.com
Address: Jojo's Buliding, Thimphu
Opening hours: Daily 10am-10pm
Phone: +975 17 60 36 17

Hotel Sinchula Rooftop (Phuentsholing)



This budget hotel's rooftop contains one of the areas most scenic open-air establishments (bar come evening and restaurant through the day), known for its views just as much as the rather high quality cooking. The hotel itself offers modest rooms with basic amenities.

Photo: MintImages/Shutterstock.com
Address: Phuensum Lam, Phuentsholing

SHOPPING



dangtrinh0612/Shutterstock.com

Shopping in Bhutan largely revolves around traditional arts and crafts, textiles and clothes, religious symbols and mementos, and perhaps most prominently, locally produced delicacies. Check out Thimphu's numerous produce and handicraft markets, or venture further a field to find unique items and shops in places like Paro and Jakar.

Norzin Lam Street (Thimphu)



Norzin Lam is Thimphu city's main artery, one lined with all manner of local craft shops and stalls, along with larger shopping centres. Expect to find anything from art work and handicrafts to clothing, carpets, books, woven and wood items.

Photo: Christopher J. Fynn/Wikimedia Commons(image cropped)
Address: Norzin Lam Street, Thimphu

Thimphu Weekend Market (Thimphu)



Thursday through Sunday see the area just next to Changlimithang Stadium turn into a busy market, vendors from all across Bhutan gathering to sell incense, dried goods, yak meat and cheese, regional fruit and vegetables, and all manner of local produce.

Photo: Phuong D. Nguyen/Shutterstock.com
Address: Chhogyal Lam, Thimphu
Opening hours: Thu-Sun

Handicrafts Market (Thimphu)



Within arm's reach from Thimphu's Weekend Market is the market dedicated to Bhutanese arts and crafts (some items are produced across the border, in Nepal). Expect to find anything from pieces made of indigenous yak to woven items, woodwork, ornaments, and more.

Photo: dangtrinh0612/Shutterstock.com
Address: Chhogyel Lam, Thimphu

National Handicrafts Emporium (Thimphu)



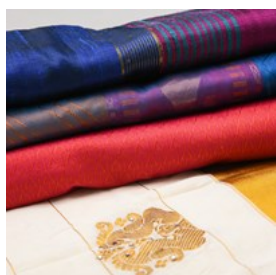
The National Handicrafts Emporium is an arts and handicraft store run by the government, which means fixed pricing (payment cards are also accepted, alongside cash). The assortment of goods ranges from rugs to woven items, traditional clothing, bags, and other pieces.

Photo: De Jongh Photography/Shutterstock.com

Address: Norzin Lam, Thimphu

Phone: +975 2 323 245

Sephub Gyeltsen Tsongkhag (Thimphu)

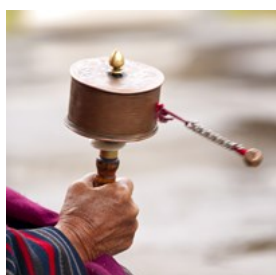


To purchase a traditional Bhutanese garment try this location on Norzin Lam. The store sells high-quality men's ("gho") and women's ("kira") garments, all at incredibly affordable prices. It is one of the city's most reputable clothing vendors.

Photo: Santhosh Varghese/Shutterstock.com

Address: Norzin Lam, Thimphu

Lama Tshering Dorji General Shop (Paro)



This Paro location isn't a souvenir shop per se, but can make for a curious browse around; it stocks all manner of spiritual and religious paraphernalia, and is frequented by local monks.

Photo: Wouter Tolenaars/Shutterstock.com

Address: Paro, Bhutan

Yoser Lhamo Shop (Jakar)



This Jakar location is Bhutan's main outlet for the products of Swiss Farm, an operation once started by a Swiss expatriate and now led by his son. Swiss Farm brews Bhutan's only local beer - Red Panda - and produces cheese, honey, and drinks like brandy and cider.

Photo: Markus Mainka/Shutterstock.com

Address: Jakar, Bhutan

DSB Books (Thimphu)



The country's oldest bookstore (which also happens to have the its most extensive assortment) is DSB Books, located in the first floor of Jojo's Shopping Complex in Chang Lam. The store offers a large selection of literature on Bhutan, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more.

Photo: Julia Velychko/Shutterstock.com

Address: Chang Lam, Thimphu

Internet: www.dsbbbooksbhutan.bt

More Info: Jojo's Shopping Complex

TOURIST INFORMATION



Kai19/Shutterstock.com

Tourism in Bhutan



Bhutan follows a "High Value, Low Impact" tourism policy in order to preserve the country's natural and cultural uniqueness. As such, a

Minimum Daily Package is required for all visitors to Bhutan:

\$200 per person per night during January, February, June, July, August, and December.
\$250 per person per night, during March, April, May, September, October, and November.
Discounts available for children and students.

This sum includes all accommodation, meals, transportation, camping and trekking equipment, as well as a certified guide for your entire stay.

All visitors to Bhutan (besides Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian passport holders) must organise their trip through a certified tour operator, which handles all arrangements for visiting groups. More information under Passport/Visa.

Photo: WEB-DESIGN/Shutterstock.com

Passport/Visa



Citizens of India, Bangladesh and the Maldives do not need a visa to visit Bhutan. All other citizens will need a permit to enter the

country, only obtainable through certified tour operators in Bhutan and their international partners. These take care of all visa arrangements and organize all of your trip's details, including accommodation, transportation and providing a personal guide for your group.

Upon entering the country, visitors receive either an Entry Permit (valid only for Thimphu and Paro) or a Restricted-Area Permit (valid for the whole country). Those wishing to visit Buddhist temples will also need a Temple Permit from the Ministry of Culture. All permits should be handled by your tour operator.

Note that some unregistered tour operators have popped up, so be sure to visit the website below to make sure you choose a certified operator.

Photo: TukTuk Design/Shutterstock.com

Internet: www.tourism.gov.bt/plan/tour-operators

Airport



Paro Airport (PBH) is Bhutan's only international airport, located 6 kilometres from the town of Paro and about 65 kilometres from

Thimphu. Taxi services are available, but most international visitors will be met by their guide and provided transport to their destination.

Photo: Juan Garces

Address: Airport Road, Paro

Phone: +975 2 29122

Internet: www.paroairportairline.com

Best Time to Visit



The most popular times to visit Bhutan are Spring and Autumn, when the weather is best.

Springtime visitors will get to enjoy blooming

nature and milder temperatures, while the Thimphu Festival takes place towards the end of September or beginning of August. Because of these advantages, the Minimum Daily Package fee is slightly higher during these months (\$250 per person per night, instead of \$200).

Photo: VectorA/Shutterstock.com

Public Transport



There are no trains in Bhutan, so transport within the country is limited to road and air travel. There are taxis in Phuentsholing, Paro,

Jakar and Thimphu (long distance services are also available), but again, most travellers will a private vehicle provided to take care of all transport needs.

Photo: Pierre-Luc Auclair

Taxi



There are taxis in Phuentsholing, Paro, Jakar and Thimphu (long distance services are also available), but most travellers will a private

vehicle provided to take care of all transport needs.

Photo: ArrivalGuides

Pharmacy

Kuenphen Pharmacy



Photo: Gemma Garner

Address: Norzin Lam 2 21, Thimphu

Opening hours: Daily 9am-9pm

Post

Bhutan Post



Photo: Andy Fuchs

Address: Thimphu

Opening hours: Mon-Fri 9am-4pm, Sat 9am-1pm

Phone: +975 2 327 791

Telephone

Country code: +975



Photo: Jardson Almeida

Electricity



230 V. 50 Hz. Plug types
C, D and G.

Photo: Stirling Tschan

Population

763,092 (2019)

Currency

Bhutanese Ngultrum

Opening hours

Opening hours for shops and businesses in Bhutan are generally 9am–5pm. Restaurants usually stay open until about 10pm.

Newspapers

Kuensel
The Bhutanese
Bhutan Observer

Emergency numbers

Fire: 110
Thimphu Traffic: 111
Ambulance: 112
Police: 113

Tourist information

Bhutan Department of Tourism
PO Box 126, Thimphu, Bhutan
www.tourism.gov.bt