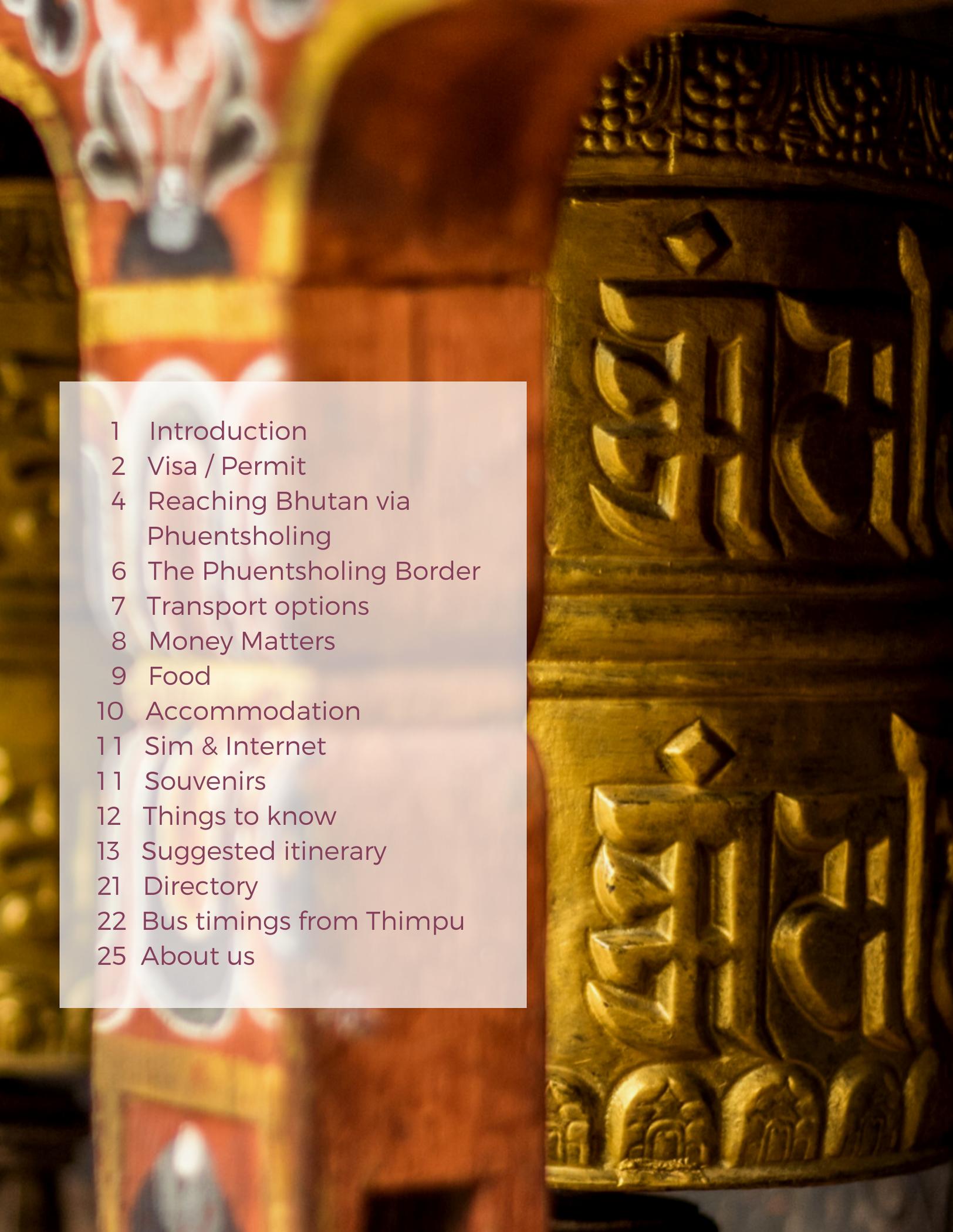


FOR INDIAN TRAVELER

Backpackers' guide to Bhutan





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INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is referred to as The Last Shangri-La – a fictional place described by British author James Hilton in his novel Lost Horizon i.e., likened to a utopia, a land and its people isolated from the outside world, existing in a state of perpetual bliss.

Tucked away in a Himalayan pocket blanketed by forests that have stunted time, backed by a government that lays emphasis on the happiness of its people and the upkeep of Bhutanese culture above all else, Bhutan revels in its religious eccentricity and a culture that has retained its virginity. No traffic lights. A handful of cinema halls. An odd IT firm or two. No fast-food franchise chains whatsoever. Breath-taking simplicity.

Harsha and I travelled to Bhutan in June (2016) when monsoon grips the country. We figured we would save some money by travelling when tourism is not at its peak. Our collective wisdom then brought forth an important question – “What will we do if it rains?” which was readily taken care of

by our collective problem-solving skill – “Let’s carry umbrellas.” To our good luck, monsoon was lethargic that year and we had the privilege of witnessing some truly mesmerizing sights of the Himalayan kingdom in a cloudy embrace.

We backpacked across Western Bhutan Bhutan with no advance hotel bookings, a cheese-heavy diet (more on that later) and an open mind. To summarize, two girls with no rigid travel plans in a land with a fascination for the male genitalia (more on that later). How did we do it?

VISA/ PERMIT

Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian nationals travelling to Bhutan do not require a visa to enter Bhutan. However, they need to obtain an entry permit, either from Phuentsholing (if they travel by land) or Paro airport (if they travel by air) upon arrival.

Immigration Office in Thimpu, this permit allows travel to areas other than Thimpu and Paro. This is valid for the travel duration specified.

Obtaining an entry permit in Phuentsholing

Permit Office Timings

The office opens at 9 a.m. and closes by 5 p.m.

Location

About 200 metres from the Bhutan gate in Phuentsholing, on the right.

Documents Required

1. A passport or voter's ID (carry the original document and 1-2 photocopies). Indian citizens who do not have either of these two documents can get an "Identification Slip" from the Indian Consulate Office in Phuentsholing (subject to providing proof of Indian citizenship).
2. Passport size photographs (1-2 copies)

Permit Fees

The permit is issued free of cost.

IMPORTANT

All government offices (including the permit office at Phuentsholing and Thimpu) remain closed on weekends and national holidays. They may remain closed during certain festivals. Keep this in mind when you decide your travel dates. (Check the website for dates: <http://www.tourism.gov.bt>)

Permit Types

Entry Permit

Issued at the Paro airport and Regional Immigration Office, Royal Govt. of Bhutan, Phuentsholing, this permit allows travel only within Thimpu and Paro. The permit is valid for seven days and can be extended at the Immigration Office in Thimpu.

Special Area / Route Permit

Issued only at the Royal Govt. of Bhutan

Procedure

1. You will need to fill in a form with your personal details, name of the hotel where you are residing, details of ID, local number (if any) and attach your passport size photograph along with a copy of your ID. Upon submission of this form at the counter, you will get a token number.
2. You will then proceed to stand in a queue for biometric.
3. If you are lucky, like we were, you will get your permit within the next half an hour.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reach the permit office 10 minutes early, there might be a long queue.
- Make further plans keeping in mind that the process may take up to 3 hours.
- Keep the original copy of the permit handy as you will be required to produce it at several checkpoints during your journey.

Obtaining special area permit in Thimpu

Permit Office Timings

The office opens at 9 a.m.

Location

15 minute walk from the clock tower on Norzim Lam.

Documents Required

1. Entry permit (carry the original document and 1-2 photocopies)
2. Passport size photographs (1-2 copies)

Permit Fees

The permit is issued free of cost.

Procedure

1. You will need to fill in a form with your personal details, name of at least one hotel where you intend to reside along with the address, details of your ID, local number (if any). You will also need to provide a list of all the places that you wish to visit. You are not required to submit an itinerary here. Attach a copy of your entry permit and a photograph to the form and submit.
2. Pray.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make further plans keeping in mind that the process may take up to 3 hours.
- Add as many places as you can in the form if you are not travelling with a fixed itinerary. For e.g., we listed both Phobjikha and Haa and ended up visiting only the latter.

REACHING BHUTAN VIA PHUENTSHOLING

Phuentsholing is one of three border areas open to Indian travellers, Gelephu and Samdrup Jongkhar being the other two.

The following section outlines two ways to reach Phuentsholing.

Bagdogra - Jaigaon

Private Taxi: Rs 2000

Bagdogra - Hashimara

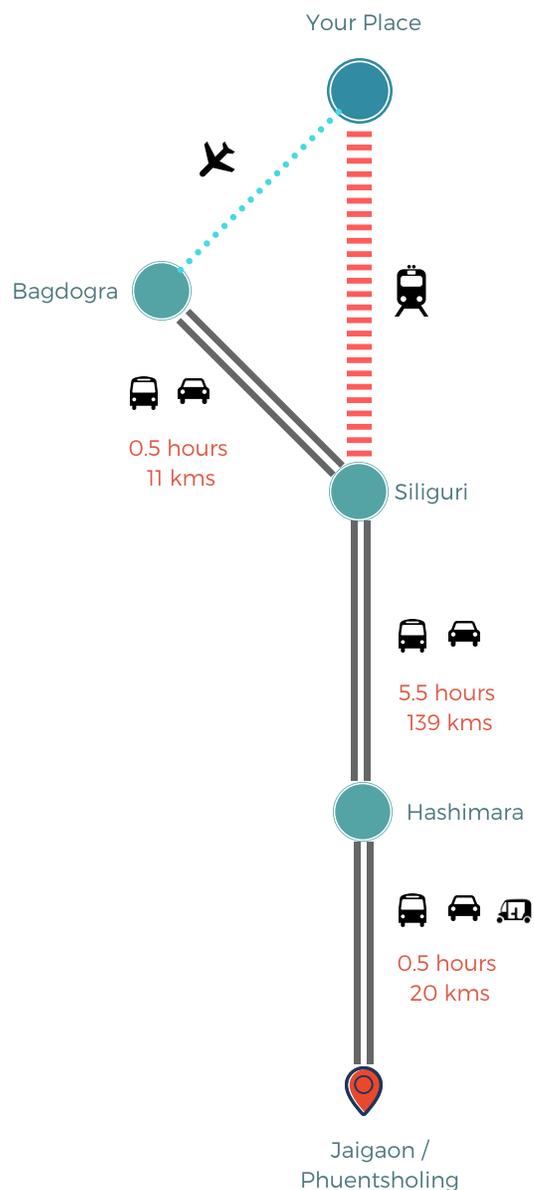
If you reach Bagdogra by 12 noon, you can get a direct NBSTC bus to Hashimara that starts from the airport itself.

Fare: Rs 185/person

Hashimara - Jaigaon

You can take a shared seater auto or private auto to Jaigaon.

Shared auto fare: Rs 20



West Bengal Map



THE PHUENTSHOLING BORDER

The Phuentsholing border, which is no more than a massive gate-like structure, is between the Indian town of Jaigon and Bhutanese town of Phuentsholing. While the Indian side is heavily crowded and chaotic, the Bhutanese side is just the opposite.

The main structure is for vehicles to pass through. A separate smaller gate caters to pedestrians moving in and out of Bhutan. One can casually walk into Bhutan from India and vice-versa without a permit.

Timings

While the official consulate general of India website (<http://www.consulatephuentsholing.nic.in/?0687?000>) states that the gate is open for pedestrians only till 8 p.m., we observed that the guards let in people till 10 in the night.



TRANSPORT OPTIONS

Between districts

Bhutan is divided into districts and not states. These are your options to travel between districts.

Buses

Buses are sparse and usually full, Thimpu and Phuentsholing being the only exceptions. To give you an idea, there is only a single bus that plies between Paro and Haa valley, that too, on alternate days.

They are the cheapest mode of transport. Try to pre-book tickets at the bus-stop—called booking offices—the day before you intend to travel.

Shared Taxi

A shared taxi is your next best option if you don't find a bus. They are easily available (most of the times, outside booking offices). On an average, a shared taxi will cost you twice as much as a bus ticket.

Private Taxi

This should be your last resort as private

cabs charge exorbitant rates.

Within a district

Buses

There is no local bus service.

Shared Taxi

Shared taxis are not readily available. Of all the districts we visited, we found a shared taxi only in Punakha.

Private Taxi

If you intend to see a handful of tourist spots within a district over a day or more, consider hiring a single cab and negotiating accordingly.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Travel by Toyota coaster buses. These mini buses give you a great opportunity to interact with locals.
- Do not travel by shared taxis or buses if you would like to spend time at a spot(/a pass) that falls in your journey. Buses will only stop at restaurants and shared taxis will wait no more than ten minutes at a certain spot on request.

MONEY MATTERS

Unlike tourists from other countries, Indian nationals do not have to pay a fixed daily tariff during their stay in Bhutan.

Bhutanese currency is Ngultrum.
1 Ngultrum(Nu) = 1 Indian Rupee

ATMs in Bhutan are as frequent as an Abhay Deol movie. We only saw a handful in Paro and Thimpu.

If you want to avoid withdrawing money from ATMs in Bhutan, you can carry Indian currency, which is readily acceptable there.

Most guides (including the official Bhutan government website) recommend not

carrying India currency of denomination greater than Rs. 100. However, most hotels and cab drivers accept Rs. 500 notes.

Credit or debit cards are rarely accepted as a mode of payment.



IMPORTANT

We traveled before demonetisation came into effect in India. We suggest confirming if higher denomination is still being accepted in Bhutan.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Exchange your lower denomination Indian currency for higher denomination Bhutanese currency at your hotel.

FOOD

Food seemed like an elusive dream the entire time that we were in Bhutan. We would start early in the day with little breakfast (restaurants and cafés open by 10 and most places where we stayed offered lousy food) and a promise in our hearts – “Raste me kuch kha lenge.” (We will get something to eat on our way.) A promise that would always go unfulfilled.

Bhutan does not have the kind of street food culture that we do in India. Cafés and restaurants do not litter the landscape and the handful that there are, close by 9 p.m. or earlier.

The fact that the two of us tend to take the road so sparsely travelled that there is no trace of a road only made matters worse. We had a bag of peanuts, chips and two cans of a lousy local beer for dinner in Paro one night after we lost our way on a hike up a hill to a monastery. By the time we reached the town, everything was closed except for a small liquor shop.

It was only on our last day in Bhutan in Haa valley that we were reminded that

just as nothing makes you think of home sooner than hunger, nothing makes you feel like home than a good meal. We had the most divine meal of our lives in the countryside, cooked by our hostess – a farmer and a brilliant cook, one that we are aching to enjoy once more when we go back, whenever that will be.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Keep loads of snacks handy if you intend to start early in the day or trek. You may not have breakfast included in your hotel and most restaurants and cafés open late.
- Try Bhutanese cuisine particularly Ema datsi and Kewa datsi with red rice. You are a dolt if you order pulao and matar paneer in a restaurant, which you are not likely to find anyway.
- Be very, very careful when you try Suja tea. Looks like tea but tastes like liquefied salty butter.

ACCOMMODATION

In Punakha, after desperately searching for a place to spend the night (we did not pre-book rooms for the entire journey) for close to an hour and a half, we finally found a room where the sheets appeared to bear the fruits of some intense pelvic action. The second best room that we found looked like a place that the police were likely to raid at three in the night. I must add - the surrounding hills were peppered with resorts. Why didn't we opt for the latter? Because we are cheap as hell.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Live in homestays wherever you can. Nothing can beat the experience of living in a hundred-year old house in the midst of apple orchards.



TIP

- Most hotels close by 10 p.m. If you plan to book hotels as you go, try to reach early. We came close to spending our first night in Thimpu on the streets.
- There are few budget options in Bhutan, more so when you move to the smaller towns. Either spend a fortune or embrace the bodily fluids of the previous occupant of your room.

SIM & INTERNET

Buy one! For Rs. 210, you can get a local tourist SIM from Tashi Cell. You will need to fill in a basic form and furnish a copy of your passport.

Internet connectivity is best in Thimpu. Several cafes and hotels in Thimpu offer free wi-fi. Tashi Cell offers 3G and 4G networks that progressively worsen as you travel to remote towns.



TIP

Remember to get your access/SSID setting changed for enabling data on your new SIM.

SOUVENIRS

Do you remember I mentioned male genitalia in the beginning of the guide? Of course you remember, you pervert! Well, let's just say there are plenty of souvenir options available fashioned in the shape of the male genitalia. I know what you are thinking. No, that's not what it is. I could tell you about the other souvenirs that you could buy but let's be honest, now that I have told you, you are only after the phallus replica.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Buy Bhutanese clothing from shops close to the border gate in Jaigaon.



TIP

Souvenirs are sold in Thimpu and Paro. Avoid shops in the main city area for they will be expensive. Instead, try to find out about weekend markets.

THINGS TO KNOW

Time

Bhutan is half an hour ahead of India. Please keep this in mind when you consider the opening time of government offices.

Clothing

While the Bhutanese are rather liberal when it comes to clothing, they expect a certain decorum in places of religious importance such as dzongs and monasteries.

Always carry a jacket or a scarf with you because in some places you will need to keep your shoulders and arms covered.

Safety

Bhutan is very safe for women travellers. However, politely refuse if drivers/guides ask you to join them for a party.

SUGGESTED ITINERARY

This is how our journey panned:

Phuentsholing
1 night

Thimpu
3 nights

Punakha
1 night

Paro
2 nights

Haa valley
1 night

Phuentsholing
1 night

Phuentsholing

Accommodation

Consider staying in Phuentsholing (you won't need a permit to stay in Phuentsholing) and not Jaigon as there are much better options available in the Bhutanese town and it is relatively safer.

Things to do

Explore the weekend market.

Things to buy

The national dress Gho and/or Khira.

Suggested duration

Consider staying here only for the permit (no more than half a day).

Recommendations

1. Food: Asian box

2. Accommodation: Hotel New Everest, Jorden Lam.

Phone - 975-5-251222/254871/252588,
email - neweverest2014@gmail.com

3. Shop: For Bhutanese/Tibetan souvenirs, Chey Chaa Tshongkhang in Jaigaon is a must visit. Opposite Balaji telecom, HDFC bank, N.S. Road, Jaigon.

Phone - 9233827271/97517639707



TIP

Get a map of North Bengal from the tourist development board on your way out from Bagdogra airport.

Expenses

Our expenses in Phuentsholing for one person for a day (this covers all expenses made from the time we boarded our flight in Pune to Bagdogra and finally reaching Phuentsholing):

Accommodation – Rs 490

Transport – Rs 200

Food – Rs 550

Thimpu

Next, we took a Toyota coaster bus at 2:30 p.m. from Phuentsholing after getting our entry permit and reached Thimpu at 8:30 p.m.



Accommodation

Hotels in Thimpu are relatively expensive as compared to the other districts.

Things to do / Places to see

1. Trashi chhoe dzong (Thimpu dzong)

Timing: weekdays (4:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.), weekends (9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.)

2. Takin Zoo

Visit the zoo to see the national animal of Bhutan - Takin. Timing: 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

3. Painting school - Zorig chusum

Timing: weekdays (10:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon, 2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.), Saturday – 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon.

Closed on Sundays and during exams.

Location: Close to the immigration office.

4. Buddha Dordenma Statue

This is one of the largest Buddha statues in the world i.e. set in a hill overlooking the entire town.

Timing: 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. every day.

Location: Half an hour drive from the city.



5. National memorial chorten

Location: Approximately 1 km from clock tower, which is the heart of Thimpu district.



6. Zilukha nunnery

Consider taking someone along who speaks Dzongkha - the national language of Bhutan. The nuns here don't speak Hindi or English. Additionally, please seek their permission before taking photographs. If you are lucky, they will let you join them during their prayer ceremony.



7. Tango monastery

It is a 1.5 hour trek to the top. The monks are friendly and speak Hindi and English well. Consider going there on a weekend as it is a day off for the monks and they are willing to show you around. You need to set aside an entire day for this.

Location: On top of a hill in Thimpu valley. The scenic drive to the base of the hill takes about an hour from the town. Consider renting a bicycle instead of a cab.

8. Changlimithang stadium & archery ground

Archery is Bhutan's national sport and has a set of amusing traditions that are unique to Bhutan.

Consider dropping by sometime in the morning when most archers practice.

Location: Close to the clock tower.



9. Nightlife

Thimpu has a buzzing nightlife from what we heard and saw. If you are not dead tired from hiking and walking around like we were, you might want to take a look.

Things to buy

Souvenirs from shops opposite the permit office.

Suggested duration

Consider staying here for 2.5 days.

Recommendations

Food: Ambient café

Expenses

Our average expenses in Thimpu for one person for a day (this excludes expenses incurred during our journey from Phuentsholing to Thimpu):

Accommodation – Rs 850

Transport – Rs 400

Food – Rs 615

Punakha

We were compelled to take a shared cab from Thimpu to Punakha, which is a 3 hours journey, because all buses were full.



If you want to go to Dochula pass, which falls in the way, and spend some time there (which we recommend), take a private taxi. Shared taxis do not stop for more than 10 mins (on request), and buses won't stop at all.

Accommodation

In Khuruthang, which is the main town, accommodation options are limited

and absolutely dreadful. If you are willing to spend, there are some lavish resorts up in the hills.

Things to do / Places to see

1. Punakha dzong

Shared taxis will go from Khuruthang to the dzong and back for Rs 80.



Punakha Dzong

2. Chimi Lhakhang

By a stroke of luck, we got a chance to spend close to an hour with child monks who study here. Other than that, the Lhakhang is only of historical significance.

If you reach Khuruthang by late afternoon, consider visiting the local lhakhang in the evening where you might be able to attend the prayer ceremony conducted by child monks.



A child monk in Chimi Lhakhang Monastery.

Suggested Duration

Consider staying here overnight only if you wish to go further to the east. Otherwise, you can return back to Thimpu after visiting the Punakha dzong, which is absolutely stunning and a must-see.

Recommendations

Travel: There are only one/two buses from Punakha to Thimpu. Consider booking in advance.



A prayer ceremony in a monastery in Punakha town.

Expenses

Our average expenses in Punakha for one person for a day (this excludes expenses incurred during our journey from Thimpu to Punakha):

Accommodation – Rs 375

Transport – Rs 300

Food – Rs 450

Paro

From Punakha, we took a bus to Thimpu and then a shared cab to Paro. The entire journey took us about 6 hours.

Accommodation

There is an abundance of decent budget accommodation options in Paro.

Things to do / Places to see

1. Paro dzong

At night, the dzong is lit and looks exquisite. It can be seen from various vantage points in the main town if you are adventurous enough to find them.

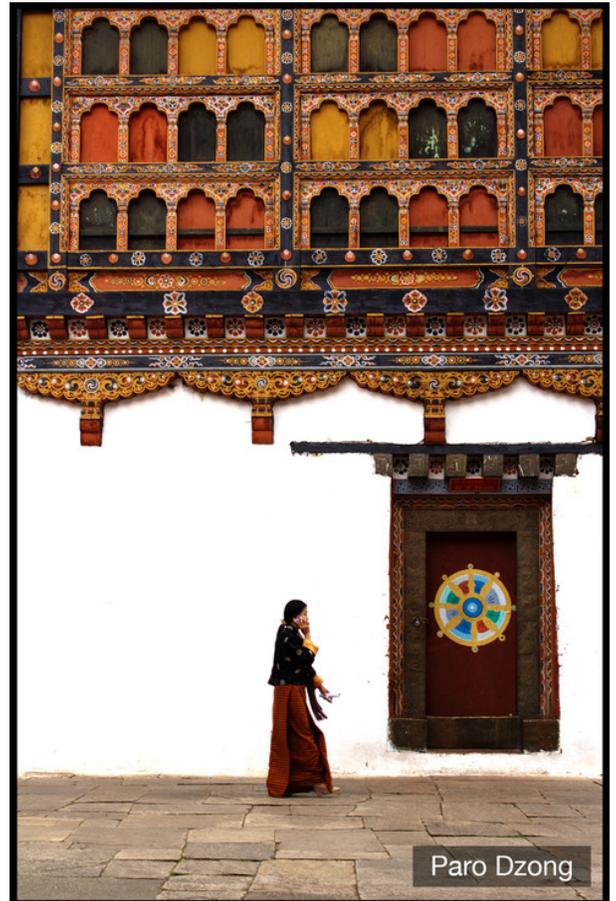


TIP

Carry a jacket. You won't be allowed inside the dzong with exposed arms or shoulders.

2. Zurig Monastery

It is a 1 hour trek through the forest. There is no obvious trail, you need to find your way through the forest. The



monastery, which once served as a watch-tower, is hidden by 400-years-old Cypress trees that stand out prominently. The monastery is old and not as striking as other monasteries. As a result, it hardly attracts any visitors.

Location: The trail starts from Paro Dzong.



3. Tiger's Nest / Paro Takstang

The trek takes 3 hours by foot, 1 way. Start as early as you can. You can also rent a horse for 3/4th of the way.

Timings:

Winter timing (October - March) - 8:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m.

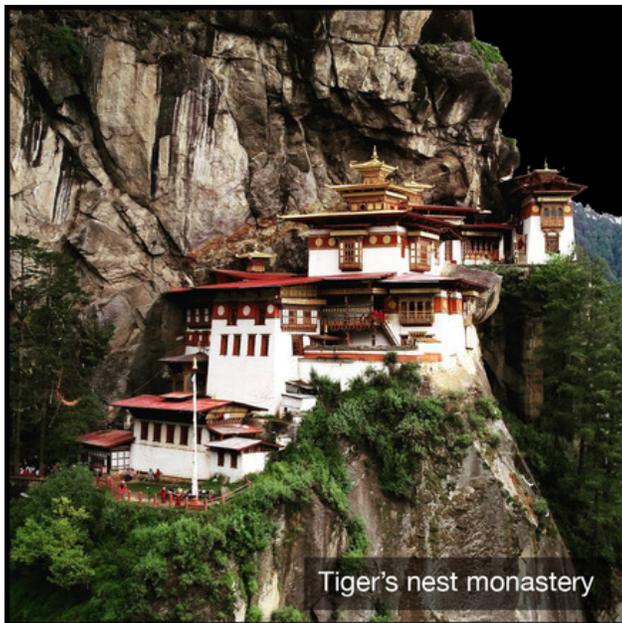
Summer timing (April - September) - 8:00 a.m to 6:00 p.m.

Lunch break - 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m



TIP

You won't be allowed to carry any electronic item inside. Carry a lock with you to store valuables in lockers provided.



Suggested duration

Consider staying here for 2 days.

Recommendations

Food: Champaca Café

Accommodation: All Seasons, Main Town, Paro. Phone- 00975-8- 272065,

Expenses

Our average expenses in Paro for one person for a day (this excludes expenses incurred during our journey from Punakha to Paro):

Accommodation - Rs 350

Transport - Rs 250

Food - Rs 500

Haa Valley via Chele La Pass

From Paro, we took a private cab to Haa valley. The only bus that travels from Paro to Haa valley on alternate days was full and there were no shared cabs available.

Accommodation

There are only a handful of homestays.

Things to do/Places to see

Walk around the valley. It is gorgeous and you get an intimate view of the Bhutanese way of life. This place has barely changed from the way it was probably a hundred years ago.

Suggested duration

Consider staying here for 2 days.

Recommendations

Accommodation: Ugyen homestay
(haavalleyhomestay.com/ugyens-house)

Expenses

Our average expenses in Haa for one person for a day (this includes expenses incurred during our journey from Paro to Haa valley):

Accommodation - Rs 500

Transport - Rs 700

Food - Rs 700



OTHER

Our total expenditure for the trip (9 days) came out to be Rs 15,000 (excluding airfare).



TIP

Fly to Paro (en route, you get the stunning visual of the Mt. Everest) and return by crossing the border by land. It is remarkable to watch how the border between the two countries functions.

DIRECTORY

Bhutan Country code: +975

Paro

Hotel Phunshum: 77290274

Hotel Peljorling: 08-271365

Hotel Jigmelling: 08-271444

Hotel All Seasons: 08-272065 / 17630533

Punakha

Punatshangchhu cottages: 02-481 942

Meri Puensum Resort: 17777771

Hotel Yeosel Rabtenling:

17641733 / 16935149

Hotel Sher Ling:

02-584670 / 17110847 / 77110847

Haa Valley

Ugyen / Chimi's homestay:

Website: <https://haavalleyhomestay.com/ugyens-house/>

Phone: 17111116

Lechuna Heritage Lodge: 17347984

Phobjikha/Gangtey

AP Sigay Dorji's Farm House:

Location: 2 km from Monastery

Email: hotelp1@gmail.com

Phone: 02-334970 / +975-17600690

Phub Gyeltshen's Farm House:

Location: Near Gangtey Monastery)

Phone: 01-7879831

Hotel Dewachen: 17117508

Gakiling Guest House

+975-77651577 / 77868677 / 17651577

Deki Gatseling Homestay

+975-1-7734049, +975-1-7983106

Thimpu

Hotel Shantideva:

Email: hotelshantideva@gmail.com

Phone: 1711988 / 02-336066

BUS TIMINGS FROM THIMPU

To Phuentsholing

There is a bus every half an hour from 7 a.m. till 5 p.m.

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Sernya	6:30 am	7:00 am	Daily
Khorlo	7:00 am	7:30 am	Daily
Meto	7:30 am	8:00 am	Daily
Khorlo	8:00 am	8:30 am	Daily
Peylab	8:30 am	9: 00 am	Daily
Bumpa	9:00 am	9:30 am	Daily
Dhug	9:30 am	10:00 am	Daily
Dhug	10:00 am	10:30 am	Daily
Khorlo	10:30 am	11: 00 am	Daily
Dhug	11:00 am	11:30 am	Daily
Meto	11:30 am	12 noon	Daily
Dhug	12 noon	12:30 am	Daily
Meto	12:30 pm	1: 00 pm	Daily
Meto	1:00 pm	1:30 pm	Daily
Dhug	1:30 pm	2:00 pm	Daily

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Meto	2:00 pm	2:30 pm	Daily
Khorlo	2:30 pm	3:00 pm	Daily
Dhug	3:00 pm	3:30 pm	Daily
Khorlo	3:30 pm	4:00 pm	Daily
Meto	4:30 pm	5:00 pm	Daily

To Paro

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Dhug	8:30 am	9:00 am	Daily
Dhug	1:30 pm	2:00 pm	Daily

To Bumthang

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Meto	6:30 am	7:00 am	Daily except on Monday
Meto	7:00 am	7:30 am	Daily

To Punakha

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Bumpa	1:30 pm	2:00pm	Daily

To Phobjikha

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Sernya	7:00 am	7:30 am	Every Saturday

To Haa

Transport Service	Reporting Time	Departure Time	Frequency
Sernya	8:30 am	9:00 am	Daily

Contact information

Sernya Transport Service: 17859311

Dhug Transport Service

Thimpu: 322198

Phuentsholing: 259333

ABOUT US

Darbadar is a travel blog documenting the journeys of two women travellers and friends (yes, Harsha is a girl), a manifestation of our love for culture, life and story-telling. When we decided to travel to Bhutan, we realized that information about how to get there, among other things, was hard to find and scattered. When we came back, upon requests from friends and colleagues, we decided to work on an elaborate guide, an effort that would eventually consume several months.

This guide is free to download so it is obvious that morons will try to pass off some of the content on this guide as their own on other websites. We forgive them all.

Now that you have read this guide, you are obviously and inexplicably drawn to my writing prowess so head on over to our blog to read our travel stories about Bhutan and other places. You are most welcome.

Connect with us

