

Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Tour operators should book you into Department of Tourism (DOT) approved hotels. Since most visitors effectively pay the same rate whether staying in a budget or midrange

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hotel, it makes sense to ask for the best when you make your travel arrangements. During the high season, particularly at *tsechu* (festival) time, you may not get the hotel you have asked for, and you may be accommodated in a hotel that caters primarily to local travellers. Still, these can be comfortable, though the toilet facilities may not be what you're used to.

The prices in this book are for standard rooms at normal foreign-tourist rates and do not include the usual 10% tax and 10% service charge. For a guide to price ranges used in this book, see the inside front cover.

Hotels

There is a variety of hotels in Bhutan, ranging from simple huts that cater to Bhutanese yak herders to five-star luxury resorts. All rooms in the DOT-approved, midrange hotels in Thimphu, Paro and Phuentsholing have electricity, telephone, private bathroom and hot water. Every hotel has a restaurant that serves buffet meals when a group is in residence and à la carte dining at other times. Restaurants invariably serve alcohol and often have a bar. Several hotels advertise IDD, but this can mean that the phones simply connect to the front desk and the hotel operator will then dial the international number.

All the hotels publish their room rates, which usually just apply to Bhutanese, Indians and project staff. Many have various rates for standard, deluxe or suite accommodation, although the difference between standard and deluxe in most hotels is minimal. When you book a trip, you may specify which hotel you wish, but unless you are particularly charming to the agent, you'll probably get a standard room. If you want fancier accommodation or a single room, you may be asked to pay a little more than the standard tourist tariff. If you are travelling off season you can often pay less for a special room; if it's *tsechu* time, you may pay more. The handful of top-end hotels all provide international-standard accommodation and services and charge a substantial additional cost to the usual tourist tariff.

A confirmed hotel reservation does not always guarantee a booking in hotels as small as those in Bhutan. A large tour group can exert

PRACTICALITIES

- The biweekly national newspaper of Bhutan, *Kuensel* (www.kuenselonline.com) is available on Wednesday and Saturday mornings in English, Dzongkha and Nepali editions. The *Bhutan Times* (www.bhutantimes.com) is a privately owned newspaper published every Sunday in English. The *Bhutan Observer*, the second private newspaper, is published on Fridays in Dzongkha and English. Indian newspapers and magazines are available in Phuentsholing and Thimphu two to three days after publication.
- Bhutan Broadcasting Service (www.bbs.com.bt) broadcasts radio from 4pm to 8pm on the 60MHz band (5030kHz) and FM 96 Monday to Saturday. On Sunday it broadcasts from 10am to 4pm on the 49MHz band (6035kHz) and FM 96. Programmes are in Dzongkha, English, Nepali and Sharchop. The English news is at 11am and 2pm daily. BBS TV broadcasts from 6pm to 11pm daily with news in English and Dzongkha, and additional locally produced programming. Cable companies serve Thimphu and other large towns with feeds from satellite broadcasts including the BBC, CNN and a vast array of Hindi channels.
- The voltage in Bhutan is the same as India: 230V, 50 cycles AC. Bhutan uses the standard Indian round-pin sockets and multi-adapters are available in Thimphu.
- The metric system is used throughout the country. In villages, rice is sometimes measured in a round measure called a *gasekhorlo*. There is a scale called a *sang* that is used for butter and meat.

a powerful influence and you may discover that there is an extended negotiation taking place between your guide and the desk clerk when you check in. Don't worry; *something* will be arranged.

It's *cold* at night in Bhutan and central heating is rare. In Thimphu and Paro there are small electric heaters, and in Bumthang many hotel rooms are heated by a wood stove called a *bukhari*, which often has a pile of rocks on the top to retain the heat. All hotels provide sheets, blankets or quilts, and a pillow. Unless you are trekking, you won't need to carry bedding or a sleeping bag, but in the winter you may find yourself wearing all your clothing to bed. Hotel pillows tend to be extra firm and mattresses on the thin side.

If there is an electric water heater (called a geyser) in the room, turn it on as soon as you check in. The water flasks in hotel rooms are not always filled, and there is no assurance that the water they contain is boiled (see p272).

Some hotels have a *dotsho* (traditional hot-stone bath), a simple wooden structure containing water warmed with fire-heated rocks. The red-hot rocks tumble and sizzle into the water and a grill protects the bather's skin. Expect to wait up to two hours for the rocks to heat up and to pay extra for the experience.

ACTIVITIES

There are lots of things to do in Bhutan after you have had your fill of dzongs and temples, and several tour operators are developing activities in an effort to convince visitors to stay longer and discover more about Bhutan. For details of companies offering activity-based tours in Bhutan, see p262.

There are many possible day hikes, particularly in Thimphu, Paro and Bumthang, and these are described in the relevant destination chapters. For serious treks ranging from three to 25 days, see the Trekking chapter (p199). Horse riding is available in Paro and on some treks, but remember the Bhutanese adage: It is not a horse that cannot carry a man uphill, and it is not a man who cannot walk downhill.

Bird-Watching

Bhutan is rightly celebrated for its wintering populations of the vulnerable black-necked crane, but with over 600 recorded species and a spectacular range of habitats (see p87) this tiny country is a bird-watchers' paradise.

Although several companies specialise in bird-watching tours (see p262), Bhutan's plentiful mature forests and lack of hunting makes any travel a bird-spotting opportunity.

General wildlife viewing is generally confined to Royal Manas National Park in the south, currently off-limits because of the dangers posed by separatist groups in India,