

# Treks

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## Treks in This Book

All told, there are more than 25 treks in Bhutan that are officially approved by the government. However, not all are open at the same time, so double-check with your operator before zeroing in on an itinerary. Apart from approved treks, alternate routes are constantly explored by the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), and may be walked with prior permission obtained by tour operators. Variations within prescribed itineraries are also possible, and many routes can be trekked in the reverse direction, logistics permitting. This chapter details 14 major treks across the country, including two brand-new trails, the itineraries for which are still in the process of being finalised. Between them, these trails offer everything that a trekker could want, including what is claimed to be the world's most difficult trek. All were open at the time of research.

## Route Descriptions

The route details in this chapter provide a comprehensive overview of the terrain and cultural background, but are not self-guiding trail descriptions by themselves. Once on the trail, it's your guide who knows best. Some treks that follow old trade routes are seldom used by people today. Since there is usually no one around to ask for directions, you need to stay reasonably close to your guide or horsemen to ensure you are on the correct path.

## Daily Stages

Route descriptions are divided into daily stages, and give an estimate of the number of days required for each trek. The stages are marked by campsites designated by TCB, and the rules state that you must camp at these places, although new campsites are sometimes identified.

Before you start out, make sure you have a detailed itinerary, including rest days, worked out in advance. While discussing the trek with your staff, be careful to ensure that everyone agrees on the places where you will camp. In the past, horsemen have sometimes set off for a campsite beyond the expected stage, leaving trekkers stranded in the

wilderness. Besides, some Bhutanese trekking staff have a rather relaxed approach to schedules, and late morning starts are common – often resulting in arrivals to camp after dark.

### Times & Distances

The route descriptions list approximate daily walking times, based on personal experience and information produced by TCB. The estimates are ‘tourist times’, factoring in a leisurely pace with plenty of breaks and sightseeing. Bhutanese horse-men and over-enthusiastic trekkers can reduce walking times considerably. The distances shown are those published by TCB. They are estimates and have not been determined by any more empirical method of measurement.

### Rest Days

The route descriptions are based on a reasonable number of days needed to complete the trek. You will enjoy the trek more if you add the occasional day for rest, acclimatisation or exploration – even at the cost of an extra US\$200 (US\$250 from 2012).

### Maps in this Chapter

The maps in this chapter are based on the best available maps of each region. To make them legible, only those villages and landmarks mentioned in the text are marked. The maps show elevations for peaks and passes only – other elevations, including camps, are given in the descriptions. Trails and roads follow the general direction indicated on the maps; small switchbacks and sharp twists are not marked.

Instead of contour lines, the maps depict ridge lines, or the line of the highest point on a ridge. If the trail crosses one of these lines, you walk uphill. If the trail leads from a ridge line to a river, you’re going downhill.

### Altitude Measurements

The elevations given in this chapter are composites, based on measurements with an altimeter or GPS and checked against maps. There is no definitive list of elevations or names of peaks and passes in Bhutan, and various maps and publications differ significantly. In most cases, peak elevations are those defined in the mountain database produced by the Alpine Club in Britain. All other elevations are rounded to the nearest 10m.

### Directions & Place Names

Bhutan is a complex maze of valleys and rivers that wind around in unexpected twists and turns. It is, therefore, difficult to define the exact compass direction of a river at a particular spot. So instead of referring to north or south banks, the slightly technical ‘river right’ or ‘river left’ have been used. This refers to the right or left side of the river as you face downstream, which is not necessarily the direction you are walking. In the route descriptions, right and left in reference to a river always refers to river right or river left.

Several mountains and places in the descriptions do not match names in other descriptions or maps of the same route. The variance occurs because most maps were made before the Dzongkha Development Commission produced its guidelines for Romanised Dzongkha. This book uses the Romanised Dzongkha standards for all place names in Bhutan.

Many streams and landmarks remain nameless in some trail descriptions. Most routes go through sparsely populated country, where there is less formality about place names. Although some places have official, historically accurate names, many camping places are in meadows or yak pastures, the names of which were made up by local herders or trekking guides and now appear on maps. Numerous small streams, valleys and other landmarks do not have names at all. Even if they do, there is usually nobody nearby to ask.

## Druk Path Trek

The Druk Path is currently the most popular trek in Bhutan. The main draws are a nice mixture of monasteries and fine alpine scenery, a convenient length and the compelling sense of journey that comes from walking between Paro and Thimphu, Bhutan’s two most popular destinations.

The trek is possible from late February to May and from September to December, although snow sometimes closes the route in late autumn and early spring. Afternoon showers are common in April and May. Days are normally warm, but nights can be very cold and you should always be prepared for snow. Avoid the monsoon season of July and August.

It is quite possible to shorten the trek to four days, but then you must walk six to