



Bhutan



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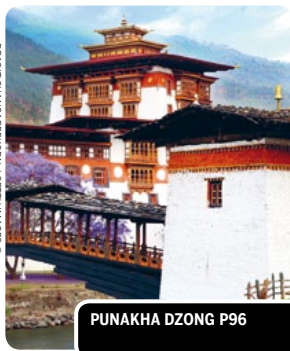
Lindsay Brown,
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PLAN YOUR TRIP

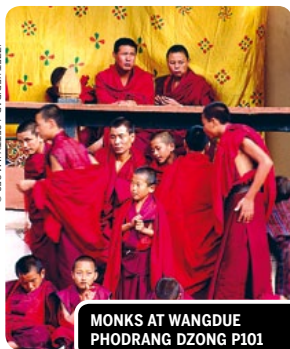
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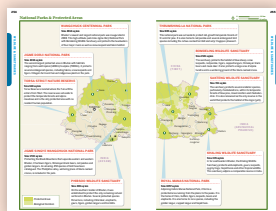
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On the Road



Bhutan



Thimphu Valley

Hillside monasteries and fine hiking trails (p68)

Thimphu

Crafts, antiques and a busy weekend market (p48)

Jhomolhari Trek

Bhutan's finest mountain scenery (p164)

Upper Paro Valley

Spectacular Taktshang Goemba and Kyichu Lhakhang (p85)

Paro

Excellent dzong and the National Museum (p77)



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

OUR WRITERS



Lindsay Brown

Coordinating Author, *Thimphu, Western Bhutan, Treks* Spring in Bhutan is the time for spectacular rhododendron blossoms on the high passes and for sunny days and cool nights. It is also the time for some of Bhutan's more colourful festivals. All the makings for another wonderful adventure in a country that is like no other. A former conservation biologist and Publishing Manager at Lonely Planet, Lindsay has spent the last decade or so writing guidebooks and photo-

graphing in Asia and Australia. He has trekked, jeeped, ridden and stumbled across many a Himalayan mountain pass and contributed to Lonely Planet's *South India & Kerala; India; Rajasthan, Delhi & Agra; Nepal and Pakistan & the Karakoram Highway* guides, among many others. Lindsay also wrote the *Welcome to Bhutan*, *Bhutan's Top 17*, *Need to Know*, *Festivals*, *Booking Your Trip*, *Regions at a Glance*, *Bhutan Today*, *History*, *The Bhutanese Way of Life*, *Traditional Arts, Architecture*, *Mountains & Valleys* and *Wildlife & Sanctuaries* chapters, and wrote the *Survival Guide* section.



Bradley Mayhew

Central Bhutan, Eastern Bhutan, Treks A self-professed mountain junkie, Bradley has been trekking in the Himalaya for almost 20 years. For his third time working on this title, he focused on the centre and east of the country, exploring new places in Gelephu, Mongar, Dungkhari, Bomdeling and Zhemgang. Bradley is the coordinating author of Lonely Planet guides to *Tibet*, *Central Asia* and *Nepal*, and in 2010 was featured in a five-part Arte TV documentary retracing the route

of Marco Polo. See what he's up to at www.bradleymayhew.blogspot.com. Bradley also wrote the *If You Like...*, *Month by Month*, *Itineraries*, *Planning Your Trek* and *Buddhism* in Bhutan chapters.

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Itineraries



A Long Weekend in Paro & Thimphu

If you have limited time or money, you can get a good impression of Bhutan in just four days by concentrating on Thimphu and Paro. Count on two full days in picturesque **Paro**, visiting Paro Dzong and the National Museum. On the second day, hike up to the dramatic Tiger's Nest at **Taktsang Goemba** and visit lovely Kyichu Lhakhang. After lunch make the three-hour drive to **Thimphu**, stopping at the charming **Tamchhog Lhakhang** en route.

On day three you could squeeze in a long day trip over the **Dochu La** to **Punakha Dzong**, the most beautiful dzong in the country. In March, budget an hour to walk through the colourful rhododendron forests above the Dochu La pass. On the way back to Thimphu, pop into the nearby **Chimi Lhakhang**, the temple of the 'Divine Madman'.

Day four is in **Thimphu**. Go to the weekend market and visit **Cheri Goemba** or **Tango Goemba** in the upper Thimphu valley. If handicrafts are your thing, hit the National Textile Museum and National Institute for Zorig Chusum. Late in the afternoon drive back to Paro; most flights depart early in the morning.



To Bumthang

A 10-day itinerary should just about allow you two or three days in Bumthang, with overnight stops in Paro, Thimphu and Wangdue Phodrang and quick stops in **Punakha** and **Trongsa**, but a full two weeks will let you see the same places in more depth and at a much more relaxed pace, with time for a couple of great day hikes.

Follow the four-day itinerary for your first days. From **Thimphu**, a night in the **Phobjikha valley** will give you a chance to see Gangte Goemba and also view the rare and endangered black-necked cranes (November to February). If you like to explore places on foot, set aside an extra half-day's hiking in Phobjikha.

From Phobjikha it's a day's drive over the **Pele La** to the superb dzong and museum at **Trongsa** and on to **Jakar** in Bumthang. Leave early, as there's lots to see en route, including the Nepali-style **Chendebji Chorten**, which is a perfect place for a picnic.

If you have two full days in Bumthang, spend one day doing a loop in the **Chokhor valley**, taking in the Jampey Lhakhang, Kurje Lhakhang and walking to Tamshing Goemba. Your second day here should be spent exploring the **Tang valley**, visiting Membartsho (Burning Lake) and the interesting Ogyen Chholing Museum near Mesi-thang. If you have an extra day, overnight in the Ogyen Chholing Guest House and hike down to the road via the remote rural chapels of Choejam Lhakhang and Narut (Pel-phug) Lhakhang.

The Bumthang valley is another good place for some hiking, so budget half a day to stretch your legs after a week's driving. From Jakar it's a two-day drive back to **Paro**, so spend a night at **Wangdue Phodrang**. Alternatively, fly back on the new Druk Air flight from Bumthang to Paro, if it's running.

If you intend to visit India in conjunction with Bhutan, consider driving from Thimphu or Paro to **Phuentsholing** instead of flying, which will add a day to the itinerary. From here you are only a few hours from Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim, as well as the airport at Bagdogra, which has frequent flights to Delhi and Kolkata (Calcutta).



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Above: Punakha Dzong
(p96)

Left: Chortens at the
summit of Dochu La
(p94)

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DAYS

Haa to Punakha

If you're thinking about a four-day trip, consider a seven-day trip. It's not that much more money and, really, when are you next going to be in Bhutan? A week gives you more time to get a feel for Bhutanese culture and enables you to get off the beaten track in either the Haa or Phobjikha valleys, while still seeing the major dzongs and monasteries of western Bhutan.

With the extra days you can definitely add an overnight trip over the mountains to **Punakha**. This way you'll have time to make the 1½-hour return hike to the nearby **Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten**, as well as visit Chimi Lhakhang, and maybe even a short rafting or mountain-biking trip if that's your thing.

To get off the beaten track, add on an overnight trip to the **Haa valley**, on the road that links Paro to Thimphu. The road goes over the highest motorable pass in Bhutan, the **Cheli La**, and it's worth the couple of hours hiking to visit Kila Nunnery. Arrive in Haa at lunchtime, and spend an afternoon and maybe the next morning exploring the Juneydrak Hermitage and **Chhundu Lhakhang**, before continuing on to **Thimphu**.

Figure on two full days in **Paro**, including visits to **Taktshang Goemba**, Kyichu Lhakhang and Drukgyel Dzong in the Paro valley, and a full day (or two) in Thimphu. A few tips: try to be in Thimphu on a Saturday or Sunday to see the weekend market and avoid Paro on Monday, when the National Museum is closed. If you're lucky, you may be able to catch a weekend archery tournament, most likely in Thimphu.

If you don't visit Haa, you might be able to add on a day trip to the **Phobjikha valley**, especially worthwhile in winter (November to February) when the valley's black-necked cranes are roosting. Bring some warm clothes and a torch (flashlight).

At some point during your trip ask your guide to arrange a Bhutanese hot-stone bath, available in most tourist hotels (for a charge). Throw in a festival and you have the perfect introductory visit to Bhutan.

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DAYS

Eastern Explorations

It takes at least two weeks to make a trip out to the little-visited far east and we'd suggest throwing in a couple of extra days to allow for some rest and recuperation. There's a lot of driving involved (up to five hours a day in eastern Bhutan) but it is now possible to fly back to Paro from **Yongphula** (near Trashigang). With this itinerary you can also avoid the long drive back to Paro by exiting Bhutan at Samdrup Jongkhar, as long as you have arranged an Indian visa in advance. This is a particularly good trip if you're interested in traditional weaving.

Follow the earlier itineraries from **Paro** as far as Bumthang, from where you can see the highlights of the east in five or six days. From Bumthang, day one takes you on a dramatic drive over the **Thrumshing La** (3750m) and Bhutan's wildest road to **Mongar**. Stay here for two nights and make a scenic day trip up to remote **Lhuentse Dzong** and the nearby traditional weaving village of **Khoma**. To cut down on the driving, consider instead a day's hiking off the beaten track around Mongar.

Day three takes you on to funky **Trashigang**, with an optional two- or three-hour detour along the way to **Drametse Goemba**, Bhutan's most important Nyingma monastery. Accommodation standards in the east are not as good as western Bhutan, so bring a sense of humour as well as bug spray.

Figure on two nights at Trashigang, with another great day excursion to **Trashigang Yangtse**, with stops en route at the pilgrimage site of **Gom Kora**, the old Trashigang dzong and the Nepali-style Chorten Kora. March and April bring two important pilgrimage festivals to this region. Spend a second day here to go crane-spotting in Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary or to hike here via Dechen Phodrang pilgrimage site.

From Trashigang it's a full day's winding drive down to the plains at steamy **Samdrup Jongkhar**; stop to check out the traditional weaving at the National Handloom Development Project in **Khaling**. From Samdrup Jongkhar, take a three-hour taxi ride to Guwahati (check in advance for planned strikes) then fly to Kolkata, Delhi or Bangkok, or take the overnight train to West Bengal for Darjeeling and the Nepal border.

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