

# Treks

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## Why Go?

Almost two-thirds of Bhutan still lies beyond the reach of any road. Composed of rugged Himalayan summits, high passes, pristine forests, turquoise lakes, rolling yak pastures, traditional villages and a healthy sprinkling of exotic wildlife from hornbills to snow leopards, this is perhaps one of the world's best preserved (and least explored) landscapes.

Bhutan offers a wide range of treks, from tough high-altitude expeditions to the base camps of snowcapped Himalayan giants to relaxing community-based village trails linked by subtropical forest. And with walks ranging from two days to one month, there's a trek for everyone.

Perhaps the best part of all is that you can trust your Bhutanese tour agent, guide and cook to take charge of every conceivable camping chore, leaving you to simply relax, enjoy the trail and soak in the extraordinary scenery. Shangri-La indeed.

## Top Tips

- ➔ You'll enjoy your trek much more if you are in decent physical shape, so spend a month or more beforehand doing some training hikes and breaking in your trekking shoes.
- ➔ During the day you won't have access to your main bag on a trek, so always carry the following items in your daypack: sun hat, rain shell, spare T-shirt, camera, MP3 player, fleece, water bottle and purification, and trail bars.
- ➔ For the same reason always have the following emergency items on your person: toilet paper, blister kit, sunscreen, first-aid kit, headache tablets, acetazolamide (Diamox), whistle and torch (flashlight).
- ➔ You won't find much electricity on longer treks so consider a solar-charging device such as a Solio ([www.solio.com](http://www.solio.com)). During particularly cold nights keep your batteries in your sleeping bag to stop them from draining.

## Trek Routes

The Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) sanctions around two dozen official trekking routes across the country. Moreover new routes and variations are popping up all the time. Many routes can be trekked in the reverse direction, logistics permitting.

In recent years road construction has taken a real toll on trekking routes and several former routes such as the Gangte trek and Samtengang winter trek are no longer recommended. You'll have to check with your agent to see how road construction is affecting your proposed route and which new routes are fully functioning.

## Route Descriptions

Some treks that follow old trade routes are seldom used 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 alternate campsites are sometimes identified.

Before you start out, ensure 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 horsemen 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\$250.

## Our Maps

Our maps 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.

## Altitude Measurements

The elevations given 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

### YAK & JIM

Westerners tend to oversimplify the yak's many manifestations into a single name, yet it is only the full-blooded, long-haired bull of the species *Bos grunniens* that truly bears the name yak. In Bhutan, the name is pronounced 'yuck'. Females of the species are called *jim*, and are prized for their butterfat-rich milk, used to make butter and cheese.

Large, ponderous and clumsy looking, yaks can move very quickly when startled. If you are trekking with yaks, give them a wide berth, and don't put anything fragile in your luggage. If an animal becomes alarmed, it charges up a hill, and your baggage could fall off and get trampled while the yak bucks and snorts, even as its keeper tries to regain control.

Though some yaks are crossbred with local cows, there are many purebred yaks in Bhutan – massive animals with thick furry coats and impressive sharp horns.