



Western Bhutan

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Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Gangtey Palace (p81)
- ➔ Lechuna Heritage Lodge (p92)
- ➔ Dewachen Hotel (p105)
- ➔ Uma Punakha (p100)

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Bukhari Restaurant (p84)
- ➔ Sonam Trophel Restaurant (p84)
- ➔ Phuenzhi Diner (p100)

Why Go?

Whether you arrive by air at the dramatic, mountain-bound Paro valley or by road at steamy Phuentsholing, it soon becomes clear that you have arrived at a special destination. Prayer flags flutter from nearly every rooftop, men and women dress in traditional garb, chortens and stupas decorate river and road junctions, and fortresslike monasteries command the mountain tops.

The west is the region of Bhutan that most tourists see and for good reason. It's the heartland of the Drukpa people and is home to the major airport, the capital, the most popular festivals and the most spectacular dzongs (fort-monasteries) in the kingdom. Throw in the trekking, the scope to get off the beaten track and the minimal driving times, and the appeal is obvious. Whether it's the beginning of your trip or the only part of Bhutan that you will explore, the west is a spectacular introduction to this magical country.

When to Go

- ➔ September to November are the ideal months to visit Bhutan. You'll get great weather, clear mountain views from Dochu La, and dramatic festivals at Thimphu and Wangdue Phodrang.
- ➔ Black-necked cranes arrive in the Phobjikha valley in late October and early November. March and April are also popular, with the Paro tsechu a major draw, as lovely spring rhododendron blooms decorate the high passes.

Western Bhutan Highlights

- 1 Explore the picturesque dzong at **Punakha** (p96), the capital of Bhutan from the 17th to the 19th centuries
- 2 Hike to the dramatic cliff-hanging **Taktshang Goemba** (p87), Bhutan's most famous sight
- 3 Visit the hulking **Paro Dzong** (p77) and take a crash course in Bhutanese culture and history at Paro's **National Museum** (p79)
- 4 Spot black-necked cranes or hit the hiking trails in the remote **Phobjikha valley** (p103)
- 5 Make the pilgrimage to the **Kyichu Lhakhang** (p85), one of Bhutan's oldest and most beautiful temples
- 6 Hunt for rare Himalayan flowers and visit remote monasteries in the little-visited **Haa valley** (p92)
- 7 Be blessed with a 10-inch penis, if only for a day, at **Chimi Lhakhang** (p96), the monastery of the Divine Madman!

