

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 very 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 up 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.
- ➔ You won't find much electricity on longer treks so consider a solar-charging device such as a Solio (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 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 have 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, 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 at 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 useful villages and landmarks are marked. The maps show elevations for peaks and passes only. Trails and roads follow the general direction indicated on the maps; small switchbacks and sharp twists are not marked.

THE SHY PREDATOR

Locally referred to as *chen*, the critically endangered snow leopard is a solitary and elusive creature that lives in rocky mountain folds above the treeline, descending to lower altitudes during winter. While its white fur works as a wonderful camouflage in its icy habitat, the snow leopard is also extremely agile in high terrain, and can effortlessly walk through nearly 3ft of snow. Preying on blue sheep and the occasional yak calf, it can sometimes stray into human territory in search of food. However, direct confrontations with humans are rare.

The holy grail of an entire generation of wildlife photographers and filmmakers, the snow leopard remains one of the most pursued creatures in the wild, although there's very little data on hand to portray the animal accurately. If you manage to spot one of these cats on your trek, consider yourself blessed.