



# Western Bhutan

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## Best Places to Eat

- Tou Zaiga Restaurant (p88)
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## Best Places to Sleep

- Gangtey Palace (p85)
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## 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 fortress-like monasteries command 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 Western 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.

## PARO DZONGKHAG

The Paro valley is without doubt one of the loveliest in Bhutan. Willow trees and apple orchards line many of the roads, white-washed farmhouses and temples complement the green terraced fields, and forested hills rise on either side to create a beautiful, organic and peaceful whole.

The fertile land, clement climate and network of trade routes from Tibet have provided the people of Paro with a solid economic foundation. For most of the 19th century, Paro held the seat of government and was the commercial, cultural and political centre of the country.

Several treks begin in or near Paro. The Druk Path Trek climbs east over a 4200m pass before descending to Thimphu. The Jhomolhari, Laya-Gasa and Snowman treks all lead west from Drukgyel Dzong on to Jhomolhari base camp and the spectacular alpine regions of Gasa and Laya.

### Paro

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The charming town of Paro lies on the banks of the Paro (or Pa) Chhu, just a short distance northwest of the imposing Paro Dzong. The main street, only built in 1985, is lined with colourfully painted wooden shop fronts and restaurants, though these appear under threat as the town grows and multistorey concrete buildings continue to propagate. For now Paro remains one of the best Bhutanese towns to explore on foot and is worth an hour or two's stroll at the end of a day of sightseeing.

### 👁️ Sights

#### ★ Paro Dzong

DZONG

(Rinpung Dzong; Map p82; ☀️ 8am-6pm, until 4.30pm Nov-Feb) Paro Dzong ranks as a high point of Bhutanese architecture. The massive buttressed walls that tower over the town are visible throughout the valley. It was formerly the meeting hall for the National Assembly and now, like most dzongs, houses both the monastic body and district government offices, including the local courts. Most of the chapels are closed to tourists but it's worth a visit for its stunning architecture and views.

The dzong's correct name, Rinchen Pung Dzong (usually shortened to Rinpung Dzong), means 'Fortress on a Heap of Jewels'. In 1644 Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal ordered the

construction of the dzong on the foundation of a monastery built by Guru Rinpoche. The fort was used on numerous occasions to defend the Paro valley from invasions by Tibet. The British political officer John Claude White reported that in 1905 there were old catapults for throwing great stones stored in the rafters of the dzong's verandah. The dzong survived the 1897 earthquake but was severely damaged by fire in 1907.

The dzong is built on a steep hillside, and the front courtyard of the administrative section is 6m higher than the courtyard of the monastic portion. The road to the National Museum branches down to the dzong's northeastern entrance, which leads into the *dochey* (courtyard) on the 3rd storey. The *utse* (central tower) inside the *dochey* is five storeys tall and was built in the time of the first *penlop* (governor) of Paro in 1649. To the east of the *utse* is a small **lhakhang** dedicated to Chuchizhey, an 11-headed manifestation of Chenresig. The richly carved wood, painted in gold, black and ochres, and the towering whitewashed walls reinforce the sense of established power and wealth.

A stairway leads down to the monastic quarter, which houses about 200 monks. The **kunrey**, which functions as the monks' classroom, is on the southern side (to the left). Look under the vestibule for the mural of the 'mystic spiral', a uniquely Bhutanese variation on the mandala. The large **dukhang** (prayer hall) opposite has lovely exterior murals depicting the life of Tibet's poet-saint Milarepa. The first day of the spring Paro tsechu is held in this courtyard, which fills to bursting point. The views from the far windows are superb.

Outside the dzong, to the northeast of the entrance, is a stone-paved **festival ground** (Map p82) where masked dancers perform the main dances of the tsechu. A *thondrol* – huge *thangka* (painted or embroidered religious picture) of Guru Rinpoche, more than 18 sq metres, is unfurled shortly after dawn on the final day of the tsechu – you can see the huge rail upon which it is hung. It was commissioned in the 18th century by the eighth *desi* (secular ruler of Bhutan), also known as *druk desi*, Chhogyel Sherab Wangchuck.

Below the dzong, a traditional wooden covered bridge called **Nyamai Zam** (Map p82) spans the Paro Chhu. This is a reconstruction of the original bridge, which