

Bhutan

Spirit of the Himalayas

November 6 to 30, 2021



Tiger's Nest Monastery
© Debbie Thompson

SAFARI OVERVIEW

Discover this most scenic and nature-rich region situated on the edge of the vast Himalayan range. Join the quest for the rare black-necked crane, white-bellied heron, vibrant pheasants, acrobatic langurs, and more. This mountainous gem between India and China engulfs you in Bhutan's strong culture, not only in its unique architecture and abundant prayer flags, but also in its adoration and respect for nature. Visit dzongs and monasteries, including a hike to the famous cliff-side Tiger's Nest Monastery. Discover the diverse range of species inhabiting the sub-tropical southern regions. Experience the wonder and beauty of Bhutan through the eyes of our Bhutanese leader, Hishey Tshering.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spend almost three weeks in the highlands and lowlands of Bhutan beholding its vibrant bird life and impressive landscapes.
- Explore Bhutan's largest wetlands in the "Valley of the Cranes," the wintering ground for endangered black-necked cranes.
- Search for over a dozen intriguing mammals, including the endemic golden langur.
- Watch a Buddhist festival with colorful costumes, brightly painted masks, and traditional folk music.
- Visit the Tiger's Nest Monastery and other temples to experience Bhutan's Buddhist culture.

LEADERS: Hishey Tshering plus an assistant guide and driver.

DAYS: 25, including estimated travel time.

GROUP SIZE: 10.

COST: \$9,325 per person, double occupancy, not including airfare (except for one-way flight between Bumthang and Paro), singles extra. See the *Costs* section on page 5.

Date	Description	Accommodation	Meals
Nov 6–8	Travel to Bangkok, Thailand.		
Nov 9	Fly from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan and drive to Thimphu.	Hotel in Thimphu	L, D
Nov 10–28	Spend 19 days exploring the natural and cultural wonders of Bhutan.	Various lodges in Bhutan	B, L, D
Nov 29	Fly from Paro to Bangkok for overnight or late flight homeward.		B
Nov 30	Arrive home.		

LEADER

Hishey Tshering

Hishey has spent his lifetime promoting and preserving nature in Bhutan through many guiding and conservation efforts. He worked for the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature and the International Crane Foundation on bird issues. His belief in “Gross National Happiness” and extensive knowledge of culture, birds, and wildlife have made him one of the most sought-after guides in Bhutan for over 15 years.



DETAILED ITINERARY

Nov 6–8 ~ Travel to Bangkok, Thailand

Fly to Bangkok, Thailand for an overnight.

Nov 9 ~ Fly from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan

Fly from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan with views of Himalayan peaks towering through the clouds. Hishey will meet you in Paro to start your journey through Bhutan.

Nov 10–28 ~ Explore the natural and cultural wonders of Bhutan

Bhutan is a country and culture that embodies in living in the moment. It is a nation experiencing rapid growth and a newly emerging tourist industry, so the itinerary too must be flexible to take advantage of the best Bhutan has to offer. Your trip will start and end in Paro, driving through seven districts (or dzongkhag) to visit the best regions for bird watching, acrobatic langurs, beautiful mountain scenery, and unique cultural experiences. Hike to Bhutan’s famous Tiger’s Nest Monastery and see many other unforgettable sites. Read on for highlights of each district you visit.

Paro ~ Chele La Pass, Paro Valley, Tiger's Nest Monastery

Scenic Chele La Pass is the highest road in Bhutan (close to 13,000ft) with excellent views when skies are clear. A pre-dawn departure could uncover nocturnal species such as gray nightjar or leopard cat. Explore different habitats as you climb to the pass and search for three different species of pheasants. Explore beautiful Paro Valley and the ruins of the Drukgyel Dzong. The valley's blue pine forest is home to laughingthrushes (black-faced and chestnut-crowned) and chestnut-tailed minla, ibisbill may also be seen patrolling the Paro River.

Bhutan's most famous site is the Tiger's Nest Monastery, impressively built on the side of a cliff just west of Paro. Halfway up you may relax at a cafe and enjoy the view of the monastery across a gorge. If you continue, you will discover increasingly dramatic views leading to a picturesque waterfall and bridge just below the monastery. You may tour the inside and see the rocks protruding from within, however photography is not permitted inside. Keep an eye out for monkeys playing in the trees near the trail.

Thimphu ~ Dochu La Pass, Capital city of Thimphu

Dochu La, at 10,000ft, is one of the most scenic passes in Bhutan. On a clear day, Dochu La affords superb views of the Himalayan range to the north. In addition to the natural scenery, visitors to the Dochu La are drawn to the 108 Buddhist stupas (a place for meditation) built on a hill decorated by colorful prayer flags. In Bhutan's capital city of Thimphu, you will have an opportunity to explore more natural and cultural attractions. Visit a weaving shop and traditional papermaking workshop to witness students learning these respected crafts. See the national mammal, the takin, protected in an extensive nature reserve on the edge of town or take an optional hike up to the Cheri Monastery.

Jigme Dorji National Park

Explore Jigme Dorji National Park, the second largest national park in Bhutan, covering parts of five districts (Gasa, Thimphu, Punakha, Paro, and Wangdue Phodrang). You may encounter Assam macaques, common grey langurs, and goral (a native goat), as well as many birds, such as the crested kingfisher, rufous-bellied woodpecker, and oriental and large hawk cuckoos. With luck, you'll see the rare yellow-rumped honeyguide feeding on the honeycomb of rock-bee hives.

Punakha ~ Punakha Dzong, search for White-bellied Heron

Travel alongside the mighty Puna Tsang Chu River to the town of Punakha, home to the majestic Punakha Dzong, the winter residence of the central monastic body. Search along the river for Pallas's fish eagle and the white-bellied heron, the world's rarest heron. In the semi-tropical zone of this district, look for mountain hawk eagle, great barbet, and the rare Ward's trogon.

Wangdue Phodrang ~ Pele La Pass, Phobjikha Valley

Take in spectacular views over Pele La Pass between the districts of Trongsa and Wangdue Phodrang. Monals, a type of pheasant, and the great parrotbill are possibilities here. You may also encounter mammals, like goral and serow, wild herbivores that do well in these habitats around Pele La. Descend into the glacial valley of Phobjikha, known as the "Valley of the Cranes." Phobjikha Valley has the largest wetland in Bhutan and is one of the winter homes of roughly 350 rare and endangered black-necked cranes. These cranes typically start to arrive here in the end of October and migrate back to Tibet in early March. The annual presence of the cranes has made Phobjikha one of the most important wildlife preserves in the kingdom. Listen to the cranes calling through the pine forest and flying overhead to return to their roost.

Trongsa ~ Trongsa Dzong, Golden Langurs

Trongsa is best known for the Trongsa Dzong, the largest dzong in Bhutan. Take in the beautiful surroundings and impressive architecture, learn about the dzong's historical importance, and perhaps see Assam macaques climbing the walls. If open, you'll also visit the Tower of Trongsa Museum. The watchtower, up on the hill, has great views and interesting cultural and historical artifacts. The district is also a good place to find rare golden langurs, a primate found only in Bhutan and parts of India.



Himalayan Monal
© Sonam Dorji

Bumthang ~ Orgyenchoing Palace, Chumey Valley

In addition to spectacular landscapes, a highlight of your exploration of Bumthang will be the Orgyenchoing Palace, which has been converted into a fabulous museum providing an insight into the times prior to the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907. Search for new bird species in the blue pine forests of Chumey Valley including the stunning, iridescent Himalayan monal, a pheasant that frequents the Tharpaling Monastery. Beautiful rosefinches and rufous-breasted accentor may be seen foraging in the open fields with the Himalayan griffon soaring above.

Mongar ~ Bird diversity in lowland forests, Thrumsingla National Park

Mongar is the easternmost and lowest elevation of the districts on your trip and is one of the best places for birding in Asia with its rich, subtropical, broadleaf forests. Look for blood pheasants and flocks of snow pigeons flying across the valley or foraging in the farmlands. Travel through Thrumsingla National Park and a variety of ecological zones between Bumthang and Mongar, stopping for a hike through rhododendron forest at Thrumsingla Pass. Search for satyr tragopan and rufous-necked hornbill and other birds that flourish in the lowlands of Bhutan. Hishey loves birding in this area so much he built Trogon Villa, so his tour groups would have a comfortable base, from which to explore this wildlife-rich region of Bhutan. In addition to abundant bird life, search for capped langurs swinging playfully in the trees. A night drive offers us the opportunity to see nocturnal species.

Zhemgang District

During your time in the Zhemgang District, along the Zhemgang-Tingtibi Road, you may find many special species, like fire-tailed myzornis, cutia, sultan tit, yellow-cheeked tit, several species of fulvettas and laughingthrushes, golden babbler, rust-fronted barwing, red-headed trogon, beautiful nuthatch, blue-bearded bee-eater, pin-tailed pigeon, white-browed and speckled piculet, and more. Spend time watching the endemic golden langur that is common in this region and encounter the black giant squirrel and yellow-throated marten while exploring the mixed broadleaved evergreen forests at elevations from 2,000 to 8,000ft.

Gelephu Region

The majestic Indian peafowl is quite common around the Gelephu region, which borders the Indian State of Assam. You may encounter all four species of hornbills found in Bhutan - the rufous-necked, great, oriental pied-hornbill, and wreathed hornbill. Other large colorful birds you may see in this

region are the Indian roller, dollar bird, red-naped ibis, parakeets, and several waterbirds.

Panbang and Nganglam

This region has recently become accessible to tourists now that new roads connect it to the rest of Bhutan. The Royal Manas National Park, the oldest park in Bhutan, lies in this region and is situated along the magnificent emerald Manas River. This park is known for its remarkable, diverse flora and fauna where more than 70% of Bhutan's bird species are found, three of which are critically endangered: white-bellied heron, white-rumped vulture and red-headed vulture. The number of species within the park includes 558 species of flora, 65 species of mammals, 60 species of fish, and 180 species of butterfly. You'll experience the dense towering mountains punctuated with rivers and small streams in extensive tropical monsoon forests, patches of natural grasslands, moist tropical forest, and dense oak forest.

Bhutan's festivals and Buddhist culture

Bhutan is a country of festivals. The most important are the religious dance festivals, known as Tshechus, which are held in different districts throughout the year. In a swirl of color and noise, the gods and demons of Buddhist mythology come to life. Masked and sword dances and other rituals are performed by monks and villagers. The performances have deep religious significance but are not somber affairs. The atsaras (traditional clowns of the Tshechu) add color and merriment to the festival with their bawdy antics.

The Buddhist culture of Bhutan is visible throughout the country, with prayer flags and stupas adorning hillsides and mountain passes. Hishey will enlighten you with stories of his country's history, including the arrival of Buddhism and Bhutan's peaceful transition from monarchy to democracy. He'll interpret tales depicted in the brightly painted murals covering walls in monasteries and dzongs. Because of the strong connection to nature, the country's cultural history is strongly tied to its natural history.

Nov 29 ~ Fly from Paro to Bangkok

Hishey will transfer you to the airport for your group flight from Paro back to Bangkok. Overnight in Bangkok or connect with a late-night flight homeward.

Nov 30 ~ Arrive home

COSTS (ALL COSTS ARE IN US DOLLARS)

Cost

Type	Cost per Person
Trip Cost, double occupancy	\$9,325
Single Supplement	\$1,200

Costs are per person, double occupancy, not including airfare (except for one-way flight between Bumthang and Paro), singles extra. See *Included* and *Not Included* sections for more details.

If you are a single traveler, we will find a roommate for you, but if we cannot find you a roommate, we may charge you a single supplement. Single rooms cost extra and are subject to availability.

Payment Schedule

Payment	Due Date	Amount per Person
Deposit	Due now to reserve your space	\$500
Second	December 31, 2020	\$2,000
Final	August 31, 2021	Remaining Balance

Payments are due based on the schedule above. All reservations require a deposit to confirm reservation of your space.

Cancellations

Until the Final Payment due date, deposits are refundable except for a cancellation fee of \$150 per person, which can be applied toward another trip if reserved within six months of the cancelled trip's departure date. Cancellations are non-transferrable. No refunds are given after the Final Payment due date.

Included

- All leaders, transport, park entry fees, and permits for all activities unless described as optional.
- One-way flight between Bumthang and Paro.
- Airport transfers in Bhutan.
- Accommodations for the nights of November 9 through November 28.
- Meals from lunch on November 9 through breakfast on November 29.
- Bhutan visa fee.
- Drinking water in the bus and during all included meals.
- Gratuities to airport and hotel porters in Bhutan.
- Trip Materials - information about flights, packing, entry and departure requirements, airport transfers, gratuities, etc.

Not Included

- All airfare (except flights listed as included), airport and departure taxes, and excess baggage fees. Round-trip airfare is approximately \$600 to \$1,800 between the US and Bangkok, depending on origin, plus approximately \$995 for round-trip flights between Bangkok and Paro.
- Accommodations, transportation, and meals in Bangkok.
- Gratuities - tipping is always discretionary. However, we will add a gratuity of \$300 per participant (\$15 per participant per day for November 9 to November 28 with Hishey's staff) to your final payment.
- Emergency medical and evacuation insurance and trip cancellation insurance. For more information see www.cheesemans.com/travel-insurance.
- Items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone calls, medical costs or hospitalization, room service, beverages other than water, items not on the regular menu, etc. If you have special dietary needs, please indicate them on your Reservation Form.

SIGN UP

Please contact us first to check availability, reserve your space, and obtain a Reservation Form. To confirm your reservation, we require a deposit and signed form from each participant.

Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris

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OTHER DETAILS

Climate

The weather in November-December is generally dry with clear skies but be prepared for a slight chance of rain or snow. Temperatures can vary greatly throughout Bhutan, so be prepared for both cold and hot temperatures. Expect daytime temperatures in the 50s°F (10°C) at higher altitudes to the 70s°F (21°C) at lower altitudes in the southern region. Expect early morning and nighttime temperatures around 10 to 40°F (-12 to 4°C) at higher altitudes to the 50s°F (10°C) at lower altitudes in the southern region.

Fitness Level and Elevation

You will visit high elevations; your overnights at these high elevations range from about 4,500ft at Punakha and Yongkhola to about 9,500ft at Phobjikha. Most walks are under a mile with some up to 2mi at a slow pace with stops to observe wildlife. The most strenuous activity is the optional hike up to the Tiger's Nest Monastery (10,240ft). Most of the trail is steep with switchbacks or stairs, but you can stop halfway at a viewpoint and decide if you want to continue or just enjoy the view from there. The hike up and back can take about 3–4 hours depending on your pace and how much time you spend at the monastery.

Accommodations

All lodges and hotels have electricity and private bathrooms with showers and flush toilets. Lodging throughout the trip is comfortable and ranges from deluxe hotels to simple and rustic lodges in remote locations. All have the architectural style characteristic of Bhutan and many have beautiful grounds and/or views to take in.

Transportation

You will drive across Bhutan in Hishey's "Grus Mobile," a roomy, 22-seat Toyota Coaster bus with large windows that open. Although you'll often stop to enjoy the pristine Himalayan air and to photograph the stunning scenery, you may at times have to photograph from the vehicle. Expect winding mountain roads and sometimes slow, bumpy drives, depending on road conditions. In Bhutan distances are usually estimated by time rather than by mileage (the average driving speed is 15mph), and roadwork is widespread in developing Bhutan. Because you look for birds along the roads you may spend a full day traveling from one destination to another.

Flights

Unless listed as included, airfare is not included in trip costs. Detailed logistical information and the contact information for our recommended flight-ticketing agent are included in the Trip Materials we will send you.

Please let us know if you are arriving earlier or staying later as we are happy to assist you with any extra overnights that you might want to arrange.

Flights you (or a travel agent) book: Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand (BKK) in time for an overnight on November 8 to connect with your early-morning group flight to Bhutan on November 9. Depart Bangkok, Thailand (BKK) anytime on November 30.

Flights we book for you: The round-trip flights between Bangkok, Thailand and Paro, Bhutan; we'll add the flight cost to your final trip balance. The one-way flight between Bumthang and Paro is included in the trip cost.

Terms and Conditions

Read our current Terms and Conditions at <https://cheesemans.com/terms-and-conditions>.

Conservation

Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris is passionate about conserving the precious regions that we travel to and supports many conservation efforts. By visiting these areas, we contribute to sustainable conservation of these valuable wildlife habitats. We urge you to support conservation organizations that protect and restore natural habitats and write letters to tourism and government agencies to promote work in preserving wildlife.

We aim to make all our trips carbon neutral by splitting the cost of carbon offsetting with our participants. For your convenience, the optional donation amount for your half of the carbon offset will be indicated on your invoice. We source high quality offsets through CarbonTree Conservation Fund, a non-profit we helped found, supporting pioneering forest conservation in the Rio Bravo Reserve in Belize, a Nature Conservancy project (www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/latin-america/belize/rio-bravo-conservation-area/).

FAQS

Why is visiting Bhutan so special?

The Kingdom of Bhutan is the size of Switzerland, nestled between Tibet and India, and is truly one of Earth's most remote countries. Over 60% of the country is still forested with farms dotting the countryside. Bhutan has 20 peaks over 23,000ft, a wonderful place to photograph stunning mountain scenery, while also seeing spectacular birds and charming mammals. The Buddhist philosophy of respect for all living things alongside a progressive governmental approach to environmental preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique culture and traditions have maintained an environment where wildlife flourishes.

Until recently, Bhutan's remoteness, steep terrain, and tightly controlled tourism ensured that its incredible beauty and fascinating people remained known only to a few. Bhutan was closed to outsiders until 1960; its first roads were built in 1961 and no tourists were officially permitted until 1974. Bhutan is a developing country, yet its unique agrarian Buddhist culture is still intact. You will encounter red-robed monks and herders with their cows or yaks on the road along with vehicles.

What wildlife can you expect to see?

Bhutan lies in an area designated as one of the world's top ten biodiversity hotspots. Over 600 species of birds live in Bhutan, including some of the most exotic and rare species in the eastern Himalayas. Because of

their abundance, birds are the large majority of wildlife we encounter. Bhutan is also home to at least 165 species of mammals, including langurs, macaques, red pandas, Himalayan black bears, alpine musk deer, and in the alpine meadows, takins (endangered) and yaks grazing on grasses along mountainsides. You may find tiger tracks along the bases of the foothills to above the tree line, although this predator is seldom seen.

When is the best time to visit Bhutan?

Generally, October to December and March to May are the best times to visit Bhutan – rainfall is low, and temperatures are conducive to active days of sightseeing. The monsoon season occurs June to August. Choosing spring or fall will depend on your priorities. In the fall, days are usually very pleasant with clear skies and sunshine, providing the best opportunities to view Himalayan peaks. November to December is the best time to see black-necked cranes, and spring is the best time to spot a satyr tragopan. In the spring, the mountains are covered with blooming rhododendrons and the bird life is more numerous and more active, although overcast skies and wind are more common, especially at passes. Spring trips tend to yield about twice the number of bird species compared to fall.

What is a dzong?

A dzong is a fortress, which continues to serve as Bhutan's administrative and religious center. You'll also see monasteries, including the famous Tiger's Nest, and smaller chortens (stupas), all of which are important features of Bhutan's religion and culture. You will have opportunities to examine traditional Bhutanese arts and crafts, which represent a vital aspect of Bhutan's living heritage as well as its spiritual and intellectual life.