

Bhutan

Spirit of the Himalayas

October 31 to November 24, 2024



Trekking
© Namgay Tshering

SAFARI OVERVIEW

Discover this most scenic and nature-rich region situated on the edge of the vast Himalayan range. Join the quest for rare, black-necked cranes, white-bellied herons, 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 nearly 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 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: \$9,670 per person, double occupancy, not including airfare, singles extra. See the *Costs* section on page [6](#).

Date	Description	Accommodation	Meals
Oct 31–Nov 2	Fly to Bangkok, Thailand.		
Nov 3	Fly from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan and then 90min drive with birding stops en route to Thimpu to spend two nights. Look for enigmatic Isisbill and Wallcreeper along the drive. Altitudes will be between 7,300 and 8,000ft.	Hotel Eutsholing Boutique, Thimpu	L, D
Nov 4	Birding and cultural sightseeing around the capital of Thimpu and the forest of Jigme Dorji National Park. Maximum altitude 9,000ft.		B, L, D
Nov 5	Thimphu to Punakha. The drive is 2hrs with stops en route. Drive over Dochu La pass at 10,200ft and descend all the way to Punakha at 4,000ft. Visit the Punakha Dzong, hike to the Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Temple, and enjoy evening birding.	Dragon’s Nest Resort, Wangdue (near Punakha)	B, L, D
Nov 6–7	Punakha to Gelephu along Puna Tsang Chu River for 180km drive. Visit the White-bellied Heron Captive Breeding Center and other stops en route for birding and wildlife viewing. Look for Nuthatch, Rufous-necked Hornbills, Great Hornbills, Indian Pea Fowl and more, as you make your way to enjoy the flatlands of Gelephu.	Hotel Marigold, Gelephu	
Nov 8–9	Optional birding excursion in Gelephu before breakfast and 3hr drive to Tingtibe, a birding hotspot also known for golden langurs. Accommodations are basic for these two nights.	T Wang, Tingtibe	
Nov 10–12	Tingtibe to Bumthang District for a nearly full day of driving and occasional stops to enjoy birding and scenery en route and if time and interest allow, enjoy a visit to Trongsa Dzong. Spend three nights in Bumthang which is considered the cultural heartland of Bhutan. Visits to the Jakar Dzong for a Buddhist Festival and the Ogyen Choling Museum are highlights over the next two days.	Kaila Guest House, Bumthang	
Nov 13–15	A fairly long drive to Yongkhola will take you over the Thrumshing La pass at about 12,500ft and descend all the way to Yongkhola at 5,500ft where you will be based for three nights. Look for Himalayan Pheasants along the way. Birding,	Trogon Villa, Yongkhola	

	photography, and encounters with capped langurs are of focus for the stay here. Red panda sightings are also possible.		
Nov 16	Yongkhola to Chumey. Backtrack northwest for a longer drive with stops en route to view and photograph high-altitude birds that might have been missed on the way down.	Chumey Nature Resort, Chumney	B, L, D
Nov 17–18	Drive several hours from Chumey to Phobjikha to spend two nights in Bhutans’ largest wetland area in the valley of the Black-necked Cranes.	Namgayling Cottages, Phobjikha	
Nov 19	Phobjikha to Dochu La Pass for 100km drive. Enjoy views of the Bhutanese Himalayas at 10,000ft.	Dochula Resort, Dochula	
Nov 20–22	Wake up early to see sunrise over the mountains before continuing to Paro with optional short stop at Thimpu en route and then a visit to the National Museum. Spend three nights in Paro. Hike the Tiger’s Nest Monastery and take an excursion to Bhutan’s highest motorable point, Chele La Pass at 13,000ft over the next two days. You will also have time to shop and spend some leisure time in Paro on your final day.	Janka Resort, Paro	
Nov 23	Fly from Paro to Bangkok to connect with flights home.		B
Nov 24	Arrive home.		

LEADER

Hishey Tshering

Hishey Tshering is an avid birder, a football (soccer) fanatic, and a keen conservationist. Prior to establishing the company (Bhutan Birding & Heritage Travels), Hishey worked for the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) as its Communications Officer. During his years at RSPN, he played a pivotal role in the protection of the black-necked cranes. In 1998 he worked with Dr. George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation, on the first-ever color-banding and radio-collaring of the black-necked cranes to study their migratory route.



DETAILED ITINERARY

Oct 31–Nov 2 ~ Travel to Bangkok, Thailand

Fly to Bangkok, Thailand for an overnight. Lose a day if traveling east across the International Date Line.

Nov 3 ~ 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 4–22 ~ Explore the natural and cultural wonders of Bhutan

Bhutan is a country and culture that embodies living in the moment. As this nation is experiencing rapid growth and a newly emerging tourist industry, the itinerary must be flexible to take advantage of the best Bhutan has to offer. Your trip will start and end in Paro. Leaving Paro to begin your journey through the country, have binoculars and camera ready in hand as the beauty of Bhutan unfolds immediately. Keep an eye out for the enigmatic Isisbill, one of the most sought-after Himalayan shorebirds, and the beautiful Wallcreeper as you venture further into the country. You will drive through many districts (or dzongkhag) to visit the best regions for bird watching, acrobatic langurs, beautiful mountain scenery, and unique cultural experiences. Among many unforgettable sites along the way, you will return to Paro and hike Bhutan's famous Tiger's Nest Monastery. Read on for highlights of each district you may visit.



Golden Langur
© Namgay Tshering

Thimphu ~ Capital city of Thimphu

In Bhutan's capital city, Thimphu, you will explore more natural and cultural attractions. Visit a weaving shop and traditional papermaking workshop to watch students learn 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), plus many birds, such as the Crested Kingfisher, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Oriental Cuckoo, and Large Hawk-cuckoo. With luck, you'll see the rarely-seen Yellow-rumped Honeyguide feeding on the honeycomb of rock-bee hives.



Langur
© Namgay Tshering

Punakha ~ Dochu La Pass, Punakha Dzong

Drive from Thimphu through Dochu La Pass, and then 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 the river for Pallas's Fish-eagles and the White-bellied Herons, the most critically endangered heron species in the world. In the semi-tropical zone of this district, look for Mountain Hawk-eagles, Great Barbets, and Ward's Trogons.

In Punakha, you will visit the majestic Punakha Dzong and later hike to the Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Temple for spectacular views of the valley, followed by a birding opportunity in the evening.

Tsirang Region ~ Puna Tsang Chu River, search for the White-bellied Heron

Proceed to drive along the Puna Tsang Chu River towards the district of Tsirang and on to Gelephu. Continue to search along the route for the critically endangered, White-bellied Heron before stopping along the way to visit the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN)'s White-bellied Heron Captive Breeding Center, dedicated to the species conservation. It is estimated there are less than 60 individuals existing in the wild and Bhutan is host to 45% of the world's population.



Rufous-necked Hornbill
© Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris

Gelephu Region

The majestic Indian Peafowl is common around the flatlands of the Gelephu region, which borders the Indian State of Assam. You may encounter all four species of hornbills found in Bhutan - the Rufous-necked Hornbill, Great Hornbill, Wreathed Hornbill, and Oriental Pied-hornbill. Other large colorful birds you may find here are the Indian Roller, Dollar Bird, Red-naped Ibis, parakeets, and several waterbirds.

Zhemgang District ~ Tingtibe

During your time in the Zhemgang District, and 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. Watch for the endemic and rare golden langur, well known for its presence 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. Tingtibe is a birding hotspot, however the overnight accommodations are very basic here with hopes the prolific wildlife present and authentic experience are an even exchange.

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 of the traditional fortress, learn about its 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 an ideal place to find golden langurs, an increasingly endangered primate found only in Bhutan and parts of India.

Bumthang ~ Jakar Dzong, Tang Valley

Bumthang is considered the cultural heartland of Bhutan. Here you will also visit the picturesque Jakar Dzong and attend a Buddhist Festival. Witness rare masked and folk-dance performances during the festival. It is believed one acquires merit by simply attending the festival and Hishey will enlighten you on the traditions and customs you are immersed in. A visit to the nearby Tang Valley offers breathtaking mountainscape views and freedom to roam the famous Ogyen Choling Museum to admire displays and artifacts showcasing traditional life. Once a palace, it has been converted into a fabulous museum providing an insight into the times prior to the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907.

Yongkhola

The drive to Yongkhola will take you through some of the most pristine high altitude montane forests along one of the best birding circuits in all of Asia. Keep watch for the beautiful Himalayan Pheasant as

you weave through the landscape over Thrumshing La pass at 12,500ft and down into the Yongkhola at 5,500ft. If lucky, you might even spot a red panda. Hishey loves birding in this area so much he built Trogon Villa, so his tour groups would have a comfortable base 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 you the opportunity to see nocturnal species.

Chumey Valley

Ascend back up through the mountains and search for high altitude bird species you may have missed on the way down. Scout for birds in the blue pine forests of Chumey Valley including the stunning, iridescent Himalayan Monal, a pheasant that frequents the Tharpaling Monastery. In the open fields, you may see beautiful Rosefinches and Rufous-breasted Accentor with Himalayan Griffon soaring above.

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 Great Parrotbills are possible sightings here. You may also encounter mammals, like goral and serow, wild herbivores that do well in these habitats around Pela La. Descend into the glacial valley of Phobjikha, known as the “Valley of the Cranes.” This valley has the largest wetland in Bhutan and is one of the winter homes of about 350 black-necked cranes. These cranes typically start to arrive at 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 in the pine forest while flying overhead.



Birdwatching
© Namgay Tshering

Dochu La Pass

Dochu La, at 10,200ft, 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. Wake up early to watch the sun rise over the breathtaking Bhutanese Himalayas.



Drukgyel Dzong Ruins
© Debbie Thompson

Paro ~ National Museum, Tiger’s Nest Monastery, Chele La Pass, Paro Valley

Make your way back to Paro with time to visit the National Museum of Bhutan. View over 3,000 pieces of the country’s finest specimens and masterpieces including art, bronze statues, and paintings that cover 1,500 years of cultural heritage.

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 to 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.

Scenic Chele La Pass is the highest road in Bhutan (close to 13,000ft) with excellent views when the skies are clear. A pre-dawn departure could uncover nocturnal species such as gray nightjars or leopard cats. Explore different habitats as you climb to the mountain pass and search for three different pheasant species. Explore the 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, and you may find Ibisbill patrolling the Paro River.

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.



Festival
© Cheesemans’ Ecology Safaris

The Buddhist culture of Bhutan is visible throughout the country with prayer flags and stupas adorning the 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 23 ~ 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 24 ~ Arrive home

COSTS (ALL COSTS ARE IN US DOLLARS)

Cost

Type	Cost per Person
Trip Cost, double occupancy	\$9,670
Single Supplement	\$500

Costs are per person, double occupancy, not including airfare, singles extra. See *Included* and *Not Included* sections for more details.

If you are a single traveler, we will try to find a roommate for you, but if we cannot pair you with 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
Final	May 24, 2024	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

- Carbon offsets for the duration of this trip.
- All leaders, transport, park entry fees, and permits for all activities unless described as optional.
- Sustainable Development Fee.
- Transfers in Bhutan.
- Accommodations for the nights of November 3 through November 22.
- Meals from lunch on November 3 through breakfast on November 23.
- Bhutan visa fee.
- Drinking water on the bus and during all included meals.
- Gratuities to airport and hotel porters in Bhutan.
- Trip Planning Materials – information about entry requirements, flights, packing, gratuities, etc.

Not Included

- Carbon offsets for your flights to/from this trip.
- 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 \$1,400 for round-trip flights between Bangkok and Paro which we will book and add to your final trip balance.
- 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 20 days with Hishey's staff) to your final payment.
- Mandatory [Emergency evacuation insurance and trip cancellation 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](https://www.cheesemans.com)

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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 come prepared. 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

You will visit high elevations; your overnights at these elevations range from about 4,500ft at Punakha and Yongkhola to about 9,500ft at Phobjikha. You will need to get in and out of a Toyota Coaster bus and walk from 1mi to 2mi at a slow pace with stops to observe wildlife. This high elevation makes typically manageable activity more difficult. The most strenuous walk 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 to 4 hours depending on your pace and how much time you spend at the monastery. Please contact us if you have any health concerns that may make this trip challenging.

In summary, when you fill in your Reservation Form, please answer the following:

1. Describe recent experiences you have hiking or visiting locations at altitude.
2. Are you fit enough to walk up and down a moderate hillside daily?
3. Are you physically able to hike for sustained lengths of time that may last 2 to 4 hours?
4. What activities and exercises do you currently do now that will help prepare for this trip?
5. Do you have pre-existing heart and lung issues that you should consult your doctor about before booking this trip?

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; some may have only a squat toilet. 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. Because you look for birds along the roads, you may spend a full day traveling from one destination to another.

Flights

Detailed logistical information is included in the Trip Planning Materials we will send you.

Flights you book

- Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand (BKK) by 11:59pm on November 2 to connect with your early-morning group flight to Bhutan on November 3.
- Depart Bangkok, Thailand (BKK) after 12:00am on November 24.

Flights we book

- The round-trip flights between Bangkok and Paro; we'll add the flight cost to your final trip balance.

Terms and Conditions

Read our current [Terms and Conditions](#).

Conservation

Our company ethos has always regarded conservation as inseparable from responsible tourism. We struggle with the dilemma that traveling worldwide expends climate-changing carbon. However, we wholeheartedly believe that traveling with us will cultivate your passion for conserving our beautiful world while stimulating each destination's local economy. We encourage you to explore the various ways in which Cheesemans' operates within this context:

- [Ecotourism and Conservation for Bhutan](#).
- Cheesemans' Trips are [Carbon Neutral](#).
- **Offsetting your Travel to/from our Trip:** We ask you to pledge to offset the carbon emissions for your travel to and from our trips. You can purchase offsets with most airlines (Delta includes them automatically), use our handy [carbon calculator](#) and donate to Sustainable Travel International, or contribute to your favorite offsetting organization.

FAQS

Where is Bhutan?

The Kingdom of Bhutan is the size of Switzerland, nestled between Tibet and India, and is truly one of Earth's most remote countries. More than 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 respecting all living things alongside a progressive governmental approach to environmental preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique culture and traditions has maintained an environment where wildlife flourishes.

What wildlife can you expect to see?

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

their abundance, birds are the main wildlife you will encounter. Bhutan is also home to at least 165 mammal species, 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. In spring you tend to find about twice as many 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.

What is Gross National Happiness (GNH)?

GNH is a government index that not only measures the happiness and well-being of the Bhutanese people but also intentionally guides policy. The four pillars of the GNH are fair and sustainable socio-economic development, conservation and promotion of culture, environmental protection (including constitutionally protecting 60% of the nation as forest land), and good governance.

Why is visiting Bhutan so special?

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.