



Top 10 things to do in Bhutan

BHUTAN & BEYOND

Bhutan nestled in the Himalayas is a very special place that is a true privilege to visit.

When planning your trip, there are many must see places, and to assist you we have listed below our **Top Ten Places** you must see, during your visit to Bhutan.

❖ Buddha Dordenma – Thimphu valley

Aka 'the Golden Buddha statue'. We love this visually spectacular work of art and the statue can even be seen from space! At 54 meters tall it took 9 years to construct and was finally completed in 2015. With wonderful views over the Thimphu city & valley it is both spiritually & scenically an essential site to visit, being purposely built to bring 'peace & prosperity' to planet earth! Additionally there is a terrific 3 km hike (1 hour) through the adjacent Kuensel Phodrang National Park that circumambulates the statue and its lhakang (temple). HINT – Visit early as the crowds build up by mid-morning.

❖ Royal Textile Academy Museum – Thimphu City

Sounds pretty boring but this little gem is a must-see. Bhutanese weavings & textiles are considered some of the best quality in the world. Brilliantly displayed in the high walled museum are traditional garments; many styles still worn today. You'll only need to be there 45-60 mins to be rewarded with essential knowledge of Bhutan's artistic past & present that will greatly help your understanding of how Bhutan ticks. HINT – There is a retail shop on site and the popular Craft Bazaar outside, on the main street through Thimphu, so factor in some extra time for a wander. The Bhutanese are not into 'hard-sell' so you can wander comfortably without hassle.

❖ Punakha Dzong – Punakha valley

A combination of a fortress, a monastery and an administrative centre, for the surrounding region, Dzongs are a ubiquitous feature in almost every valley in Bhutan. Originally constructed to repel constant Tibetan invasions they are still functioning extremely well in the modern age. Punakha Dzong is Bhutan's finest dzong, dating back from the 12th century, and the second oldest in the Kingdom. Wandering through the dzong's labyrinth-like alleys and temples one comes across monks chanting and learns a little of the Buddhist 'Circle of Life' from learned & passionate guides. A delightfully true story is the 4th King spied his 4 future wives (all sisters) from the top of the entrance stairway and the rest is history. HINT – very steep stairs up to the Dzong entrance but worth the effort!

❖ Chimi Lhakhang – Punakha valley

A short walk across rice paddies, from the little village of Sopsokha, brings you to Chimi Lhakhang; arguably Bhutan's temple with the most 'colourful' history. Legend has it a notoriously eccentric, albeit very clever monk, named Drukpa Kunley, built the temple as a 'fertility symbol' and it is adorned with phalluses inside and out. Those women wishing to conceive still visit the lhakang for a 'wang' – which involves being struck on the head by a large 10 inch phallus by the resident monk! Not surprisingly Drukpa Kunley was also known as the 'Mad Monk' or the only slightly more polite 'Divine Madman'! Don't miss it. HINT – do take the 20 min walk each way if you can however there is now a road to the lhakang for those with limited fitness.



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❖ The Phobjikha Valley

This whole valley area is just so special many don't want to leave. At 3000 metres altitude this relatively remote spot offers a tantalising mix of scenic beauty; a very revered monastery called Gangtey Goemba; some extremely traditional villages; some of the best hiking in the Kingdom and the visitation of the rare Black-Necked Cranes from Tibet between OCT and MAR. And for those wanting a special treat the Gangtey Lodge or Amankora Luxury Lodge are the perfect places to lap up the unique atmosphere in this most delightful location. HINT – Consider a farm-house stay with a local family in this valley between APR and OCT. It's a little too cold in the winter months.

❖ The Royal Heritage Museum, Tower of Trongsa, Trongsa

Trongsa is the birthplace of Bhutan's royal family – the Wangchuck dynasty. This excellent museum has been built into the ancient watch tower overlooking the Trongsa Dzong. Wonderful views of the Dzong & forested valley complement an engaging audio-visual introduction. Then time to wander up the spiralling stairs and floors of the museum displaying a wealth of historical artefacts. Also a great place for lunch and a comfort stop!! Not to be missed. HINT – The museum is closed on Govt holidays, Sundays and sometimes Saturdays in the off-peak months, so make sure you are passing through or stopping over on other days.

❖ Chumey Handicraft Centre – Chumey valley, central Bumthang region

This area is the heart of weaving and handicrafts in Bhutan. Here you can chat with the lady weavers and relish in the handicrafts shop which has 'something for everybody' from weavings & fabrics to jewellery, masks, carpets, paintings, Thangka's and more. It is a most engaging spot and the proprietor makes a very tasty, albeit fiercely strong, arra (local spirit) which he happily plies complimentary to all who will take it. HINT: Allow an hour at least here. On occasions we have struggled to get our travellers out of the shop within the 40 mins allotted time.

❖ Kurjey Lhakhang – Choekhor valley, central Bumthang region

With a gathering of three temples – to the 108 stupas surrounding them – and then the imprint in rock of the Guru Rinpoche in a temple shrine – the Kurjey Lhakhang has it all from a historic and spiritual perspective. The central Bumthang region is as far east as most Bhutan visitors venture and it consists of the four valleys of Chumey, Choekhor, Tang & Ura. Choekhor valley is the home to this revered Lhakhang and this is where three of Bhutan's former Kings remains are housed. You are in the heart of Buddhism in this region of the Kingdom. HINT – for the more active hike back from Kurjey (approx 4 km) to your hotel or nearby Chamkhar Town for lunch.

❖ Taktsang Goemba & Hike – Paro Valley

It is only fitting that Taktsang, aka Tigers Nest Monastery, is Bhutan's most iconic image & monastery. It's rich legend & history, and the fact it burned down in the late 1990's and was completely rebuilt within 7 years, all make the pilgrimage



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hike to Taktsang a most rewarding endeavour. Not only that, but its location 800 metres above Paro valley and enveloped into a sheer rock face is nothing short of astonishing. Best not to attempt this, at times strenuous hike, at the beginning of your Bhutan stay as you'll be better prepared after acclimatization and it makes for the perfect end to your Bhutan experience. You'll need at least 1.5 hours to hike to the monastery viewpoint which is a convenient turnaround point for the less fit and also comes with a traditional Bhutanese vegetarian café. A delightful spot to gaze at the monastery in comfort. For those undertaking the full round trip hike into the monastery itself please allow up to 5 hours including time in the monastery. All Bhutanese desire to make this pilgrimage at least once in their lives with each step earning merit points towards their next incarnation. HINT – Start the hike very early to avoid the crowds – the last section of the hike into the monastery has many, many steps and can be quite hard going unless you are at least moderately fit.

❖ Kila Nunnery – Chele La near Paro valley

If you are looking for an ancient way of life go no further than the Kila Nunnery, Bhutan's oldest. Situated at around 4000 m in a forest at Chele La – a pass between Paro & Haa valleys, the nunnery previously housed 50+ nuns at any one time, now only has a few in residency. Visitors are welcomed you are going right back in time on this excursion; the nuns lead an extremely simple, basic lifestyle. Choose to hike to the nunnery through the forest or drive close by for a short ascent to the nunnery carved in to the base of a rock face. Choose to return to Paro or continue down into the remote Haa valley for the afternoon or stay a night. The more adventurous can return from the pass to Paro on mountain bikes. HINT – you are high up! So the less fit will be better driving to the nunnery.



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