

# Visiting Bhutan: Formalities

Tourism has been strictly limited in Bhutan so that traditional culture can be preserved and nurtured. The Bhutanese are highly religious people and therefore it is important to show respect and understanding for local customs and way of life, especially while visiting places of religious significance.

The tourism industry in Bhutan is founded on the principle of sustainability, meaning that tourism must be environmentally and ecologically friendly, socially and culturally acceptable, and also economically viable. For these reasons, tourism is carefully monitored and the number of tourists visiting Bhutan is kept to an environmentally manageable level.

Visitors may experience Bhutan only on all-inclusive package tours for which a fixed tariff is set by the Royal Government of Bhutan.

This tariff covers the following services: accommodation & all meals, transport, guide, entrances fees to museums, monuments and cultural sites, and additionally a cultural program for visitors traveling in a group of three or above.

## Visa

Visas are required for traveling to Bhutan, and applications are processed in conjunction with tour booking. The visa fee is US\$40 (included in the package) for unlimited duration of stay, paid on arrival. No foreign mission abroad grants Bhutan tourist visas.

All information as mentioned on the visa application form must be forwarded to us for processing with the concerned authorities at least three weeks prior to date of travel, but note that for all FITS / GITs traveling during festivals, details should be sent at least 6 weeks prior to date of travel, as this is the peak time for tourism.

Visa applications are cleared in advance, and visa clearance numbers issued, and clients' passports are stamped on arrival at the port of entry.

## Connectivity

The most convenient way of entering Bhutan is by Druk Air, the country's national (and so far only) carrier. As flights can be delayed due to weather conditions (particularly during the summer months), it is advisable to allow 24 hours before any onward connection. As flights can be delayed due to weather conditions (particularly during the summer months), it is advisable to allow 24 hours before any onward connection. Druk Air flies regularly between Bhutan and the following countries: Bangladesh (Dhaka); India (Calcutta, Delhi, Bagdogra); Nepal (Kathmandu); Thailand (Bangkok)

Arrival/departure by land is also possible, through the southern border town of Phuentsholing. The nearest airport is at Bagdogra, West Bengal, about 4 hours drive away. Phuentsholing is a convenient entry/exit point for travelers wishing to visit the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal along with Bhutan.

## Climate

The southern part of Bhutan is tropical, and in general the eastern region of the country is warmer than the central valleys. However, bear in mind that the higher the altitude, the cooler the weather, and that with a brisk wind blowing down off the mountains, even a low-lying valley can become quite chilly.

The central valleys of Punakha, Wangduephodrang, Mongar, Tashigang and Lhuentse enjoy a semi-tropical climate with cool winters, whilst Paro, Thimphu, Tongsa and Bumthang have a much

harsher climate, with summer monsoon rains and winter snowfalls which may block passes leading into the central valleys for days at a time. Winter in Bhutan is from mid-November till mid-March, and at this time of the year the climate is dry and sunny for the most part, temperatures peaking at around 15C. in the daytime and falling below zero at night. The monsoon usually arrives in mid-June, with light rain falling mainly in the afternoons and evenings. At the end of September, after the last of the big rains, autumn suddenly arrives, and is a magnificent season for trekking until November.

## **Language**

Dzongkha, “the language of the Dzong”, belongs to the Tibetan linguistic family. Originally spoken only in western Bhutan, Dzongkha is now Bhutan’s national language. English is commonly spoken in the main towns and is the principal medium of instruction in schools throughout the kingdom.

## **Time**

Bhutan time is 6 hours ahead of GMT and there is only one time zone throughout the country.

## **Health**

No vaccinations are currently required for traveling to Bhutan. However, visitors coming from an area infected with yellow fever are required to have had a yellow fever vaccination at least 10 days before their arrival.

## **Money**

Bhutan’s currency is the Ngultrum (Nu.), with 100 Chetrum = 1 Ngultrum. The Ngultrum is fixed to the value of Indian rupee.

Tourists are advised to carry their money in the form of traveler’s checks (preferably American Express) with some cash (US dollars would be best) which might be used for incidental purchases/expenses. There are bank branches in all major towns.

## **Electricity**

In Bhutan, electricity runs on 220/240 volts, with round hole two-pin and three-pin power outlets. If you bring electrical appliances, also pack appropriate adapter plugs. Thimphu electrical appliance shops stock adapter plugs, but they are unlikely to be available elsewhere.

## **Photography**

The photographic opportunities on all trips are immense. The natural scenery is superb, and you will also wish to record the local people, their houses and shops etc. Always ask by a gesture if it is ok to do so.

Photography is usually permitted in public areas, such as courtyards and dance grounds, but not permitted inside the chapels of religious complexes. Check first with your guide to avoid inadvertently giving offence, and at all times take care not to intrude upon the social space of others when taking photographs. Never stray onto the dance ground at a festival in search of the perfect shot – this is the height of bad manners and will definitely give offence to all Bhutanese who see you!

## **Shopping**

Hand-woven textiles, carved masks, woven baskets, wooden bowls, handmade paper products, finely crafted metal objects, thangkha paintings and Bhutan’s exquisite postage stamps are the items mostly purchased by travelers in Bhutan. The buying and selling of antiques is strictly forbidden.