

# Bhutan Homestay Travel Information

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## FLIGHTS/DOCUMENTS

### *Drukair flights*

We strongly advise a layover of at least 6 hours between Drukair and connecting flights. Due to operational requirements and difficult terrain, Drukair flights might run late or early from their scheduled departure.

*Can I check through luggage to/from Bhutan?*

Your luggage cannot be checked through from your country of origin to Bhutan. You must reclaim your luggage and then recheck it with Drukair prior to your flight to Bhutan. Similarly, after departing Bhutan, you must reclaim your luggage after your Drukair flight, and recheck it with the airline flying you home.

**Transiting** is possible in all major airports. However you will **require your boarding pass** for your connecting flight. **Drukair has now introduced online check in 48 to one hour before flight departure time.** Once you pass through transit, you can contact the Drukair staff who will collect your luggage after the check-in counter opens for your flight to Bhutan.

### *Customs*

Please check with your airline about specific regulations concerning hand- and check-in luggage and items!

*Tourist Duty Free Allowance into Bhutan*

- a) Spirits: 1 bottle no larger than one liter
- b) Cigarettes: 1 carton (containing 200 pieces) subject to 100 percent customs duty and 100 percent sales tax (nominally at 1,600 Nu per carton)

### *Passport*

Passports must be valid for **at least 6 months after the departure date from Bhutan.** We recommend bringing along 2 passport copies to be kept in different bags just in case.

### *Visa*

**Please make sure you have a valid visa for any of the countries you enter Bhutan from and exit to.**

**India:** Please note that **e-visa is not valid in case of entry or exit by land in Samdrup Jongkhar, Phuntsholing and Gelephu**. In this case it is compulsory to apply for a regular visa (no e-visa!). If you are unsure please contact us!

**Visa for Bhutan:** Carry a printed copy of your visa. You will need to show it during the check-in at the Drukair or Tashair counter or at the border gates to Bhutan (Phuntsholing and Samdrup Jongkhar).

**Flight tickets:** Carry a printed copy of your Drukair or Tashair flight tickets.

## CURRENCY & CREDIT CARDS

### Currency

Bhutan's currency is the Ngultrum (Nu.) It is at par with the Indian rupee (INR) which is also accepted as legal tender in the country.

*Note: INR denominations of 500 and 1000 are not accepted in Bhutan.*

The exchange rate is uniform for all banks in Bhutan under the directives of the *Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan*. The exchange rates are revised every 2 days. See this website for BOB (Bank of Bhutan) rates: [www.bob.bt](http://www.bob.bt)

### Changing money

You can exchange all major foreign currencies for local currency at Bhutanese Banks. If you inform us in advance, Bhutan Homestay can change **USD, EUR, GBP, AUD** for you upon your arrival in Bhutan.

### *How much cash do I need?*

You will need cash only for soft and hard drinks, tips for guide/driver/trekking staff /homestay hosts, souvenir shopping, and to pay for services which are not included in the tariff (e.g. pony riding, rafting, hot stone bath, workshops, meals at high-end hotels).

### **EC-Maestro / ATMs/ VISA card**

The number of ATMs in Bhutan has increased, but because they can be unreliable, we strongly urge that you do not rely solely on ATMs, and that you enter the country with some cash. Furthermore, you might have to check with your bank whether your ATM card will work in Bhutan, since many banks block access to the accounts as a security measure.



**NOTE:** ATM facility for EC-Maestro debit card has been disabled for Bhutan since 2019.

In addition, POS (Point of Sale) services are available nationwide, meaning visitors can pay by credit card at most hotels and handicraft stores. Please contact your credit card provider in advance of your trip to ensure that charges from Bhutan will be accepted.

## CLIMATE & ITINERARY

### Temperatures

Variations in climatic conditions and average temperatures in Bhutan can be attributed to two main factors: the vast differences in altitude and the influence of the north Indian monsoon.

**Spring:** March-April – warm with occasional rainfall.

**Summer:** End of June – end of September, warm/hot and wet weather.

**Autumn:** October-November – Sunny, bright days (early snowfall in mountains)

**Winter:** December-February – Cool and dry (snowfall common above 3'000 m asl)

Climate change has resulted in unpredictable and changing weather patterns during the past few years, so treat the following as reference only:

Month	C °	Paro	Thimphu	Punakha	Trongsa	Bumthang	Mongar	Trashigang	Gasa *
January	Max	9.4	12.3	17	13	10.8	15.5	20.4	9.6
	Min	-5.8	-2.6	4.3	-0.2	-5.1	8.2	10.5	-5.6
February	Max	13	14.4	19	13.9	10	15.9	21.7	11.3
	Min	1.5	0.6	7.8	0.4	-1.4	8.3	11.5	-3.3
March	Max	14.5	16.4	22.8	16.7	16.2	20	24.8	14.2
	Min	0.6	3.9	10.4	4.4	3.5	11.6	14.4	0.1
April	Max	17.6	20	26.2	20.1	18.7	22.8	28.3	17.4
	Min	4.6	7.1	12.9	6.6	3.9	14	17	4.2
May	Max	23.5	22.5	29.1	21	21.3	25.1	30	19.8
	Min	10.6	13.1	17.7	11.6	9.5	17.4	22.6	7.7
June	Max	25.4	24.4	29.2	22.2	22.5	26.1	30.7	21.4
	Min	14.1	15.2	20.1	13.6	13.5	19.5	22.6	11.3
July	Max	26.8	25.9	30.4	25.3	24.1	27.1	31.5	21.6
	Min	14.9	15.6	20.5	15.3	13.6	19.8	23.1	12.5
August	Max	25.3	25	29.1	23.8	23	25.4	30.2	21.1
	Min	14.7	15.8	20	15	13.7	19.6	22.7	12.1
September	Max	23.4	23.1	27.5	22.6	21.6	24.7	30	20.3
	Min	11.7	15	19.1	14.2	12.1	19.4	21.9	10.5
October	Max	18.7	21.9	26.1	21.8	19.5	22.7	29.1	17.9
	Min	7.4	10.4	14.7	11.7	5.9	15.8	17.7	4.6
November	Max	13.9	17.9	22.6	19.8	16.1	19.9	26.1	6.5

	Min	1.4	5	9.6	6.4	-0.5	11.2	13.6	-1
December	Max	11.2	14.5	19.1	18.2	12.3	17.7	23	3.2
	Min	-1.7	-1.1	6.3	2.5	-2.3	9.5	11.6	-4.5

Source: TCB Website (March, 2018). \* <https://en.climate-data.org/country/74/>

## Infrastructure

Due to current on-going **national road widening projects**, at times, Bhutan's steep and winding roads can be in poor condition. Please understand that we cannot predict driving times exactly. Transportation may be taking longer due to ongoing construction works that result in road blocks. Currently, roads are much better in Western Bhutan than in Central and Eastern regions. Please bring motion sickness medicine if you are prone to carsickness.

## Ad-hoc changes

We cannot predict weather (unfortunately!) and ad-hoc changes can occur due to unforeseen circumstances (landslides, heavy rain, road blocks, etc.). In the villages, sudden events can also lead to a change of plan (death of a host's family member, etc.).

## Flexibility

Please inform your guide about any specific interests. If our guides know what you are looking for, they will be able to do their best to tailor the trip to accommodate your interests as long as activities comply with the rules & regulations of the country. Whilst overnights have to be fixed, your daily programme can have some flexibility. Every evening your guide will lay out the next day's programme options for you as mentioned in the itinerary, and you can decide together what plans to make. If something interesting comes up while travelling, feel free to tell your guide so that it can be incorporated in your daily programme.

## HEALTH

### Vaccinations

Before embarking on a trip to Bhutan, please seek advice from your doctor with regard to vaccinations and appropriate medications to have on hand. As a minimum, you should have tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis A inoculations. We also recommend polio, diphtheria and measles immunizations before coming to Bhutan.

In specific situations, the following vaccinations are also recommended: Hepatitis B, Typhoid, rabies, and Japanese encephalitis.

## Hospitals

The largest hospital in Bhutan is the National Referral Hospital in Thimphu:  
<https://www.jdwnrh.gov.bt/>

There are smaller district hospitals and over 207 basic health units in villages where broad spectrum antibiotics and pain killers are available.

## Personal Medications

Please **bring your personal medications with you** if you need to take them regularly. Limited first aid kit care, and basic pain killers and broad-spectrum antibiotics are also advisable. For details, see our packing list.

## Travel Insurance

Travel insurance during your trip to Bhutan is advised and mandatory for treks. Please bring a copy of your travel, luggage, health, accident, and rescue insurance policy document with you.

## Food & Drink

Water should not be taken directly from the tap. Mineral water is available and also provided by Bhutan Homestay in the car. During treks, water will be boiled.

**Chili** is used in large amounts in Bhutanese cuisine. A basic meal consists of rice, buckwheat or *karang* (rice mixed with grounded maize), and 2-5 curries (veg and non-veg) as well as soup. Usually food is much tastier and more authentic in homestays than in tourist restaurants and hotels. However, the restaurant scene in Thimphu has improved greatly over the years.

**If you have allergies or special dietary restrictions, please inform us in advance.**

Bhutanese most commonly drink hot water, black tea with milk and sugar (*ngaja*) or butter tea (*suja*). If you prefer herbal tea, please inform us in advance, tell your guide or bring your favorite brand with you from home.

*Can I get good coffee in Bhutan?*

**For individual and small group travelers** who love coffee but do not like instant coffee (Néscafe): Coffee in most hotels and restaurants in Bhutan is not what we are used to in the West. Especially Europeans like a good and strong cup of coffee in the mornings and afternoons. If you let us know in advance, **we can send an espresso cooker (Espresso-Kocher) and coffee powder along with you**. You can also bring your own brand.

However, for large groups it will be difficult to prepare coffee with a coffee cooker. You might want to bring your own favourite instant coffee powder with you.

## Where to eat?

Please remind your guides about **allergies and food preferences**. Also let them know whether you prefer to eat at **local restaurants and homes** rather than in tourist restaurants or in your hotel. We try to offer homestay meals wherever possible.

## TECHNICAL DATA

### Measures, Weight & Time

Bhutan ascribes to the metric system and most weights are measured in gram (g) and kilogram (kg). The standard time is 6 hours ahead of GMT.

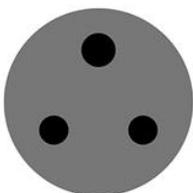
In Bhutan, measurements of time and distance, as given in various info materials (guidebooks, maps, etc.), might not be entirely accurate. Please use them as references only. Even altitude indications might differ in maps!

### Electricity

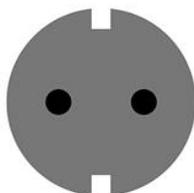
In Bhutan plugs of type D, F, G, and M are used (see pictures below). However, the coverage is not 100%. To be safe, you should bring a plug adapter.

Standard voltage in Bhutan is 230/240 Volts, alternating at 50 cycles per second. If you travel to Bhutan with a device that does not accept 230 Volts at 50 Hertz, you will need a voltage converter.

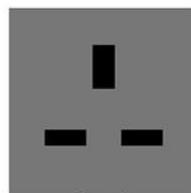
Plug types:



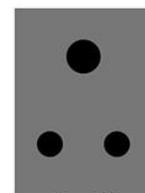
- Typ D -



- Typ F -



- Typ G -



- Typ M -

### Communication

The country has a good network of telecommunication facilities. Most hotels and cafes offer Wi-Fi internet access. Bhutan has a comprehensive mobile (cell) phone network with global roaming also assessable. A local tourist SIM-card can be obtained upon arrival or in the nearest town with the help of your guide. Social media apps (whatsApp, wechat, messenger, etc.) work well in Bhutan.

## INFO-MATERIAL/GUIDEBOOKS/MAPS

### Travel guidebooks

**Guidebooks** on Bhutan are best used as **references only**. Authors of travel books are subject to the same travel restrictions in Bhutan as other guests and frequently the information therein is not first-hand. Moreover, changes are taking place at a very fast pace in the kingdom, and thus information might differ yearly, even monthly. You can **trust your local guides** to be more up to date regarding walking distances, timings, footpath directions, hotels, how to go about things, etc.

English/French:

**Bhutan.** Françoise Pommaret. Edition Temmen. ISBN 978-3-86108-810-3

English:

**Bhutan. A complete guide.** Sonam Phuntsho (author) ISBN 9789993689348

**Bhutan - Culture Smart! The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture Paperback.** Karma Choden (Author), Dorji Wangchuk (Author) – February 1, 2018

**Lonely Planet Bhutan.** Lindsay Brown (Author), Bradley Mayhew (Author)

German:

**Reiseführer Bhutan.** Andreas von Hessberg. Trescher Verlag. ISBN 978-3-89794-350-6

### Maps

**Reise Know-How**-Verlag. Massstab: 1:250'000. ISBN: 978-3-8317-7333-6. Reiss-und wasserfest

### Further reading

Please check out our website (section "Travel Tips & Books"):

<http://www.bhutanhomestay.com/travel-info/>

## HOMESTAYS

### Traditional hospitality

Contrary to some assumptions, farm/homestays are not discounted accommodations (or by default cheaper than hotels or guesthouses). Bhutan Homestay wants to **"give back"** to the local communities by embedding visits to farm- and home-stays into long standing traditions of hospitality, which include gift exchange practices. We also make a point that the "priceless" hospitality you receive in the villages should be **reciprocated fairly**. You are privileged because Bhutanese families are opening their homes to you and are happy to let you take part in their daily lives whilst you are there.

### Gift exchange

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Following local traditions, Bhutan Homestay will organize a **welcome present** (*chhom*) for the hosts upon arrival (usually items that are needed depending on which ecological zone the household is located in). Also, unlike hotels and guesthouses, we give a **traditional soelra (tip)** to the hosts for extending hospitality to our driver and guide. We endeavor to keep such local traditions alive as it corresponds with the Bhutanese concept of “keeping good relations” (*thuenlam*), which is said to undergird a harmonious social life.

## Giving back

Bhutan Homestay also retains a small percentage (approx. 2%) of your tour price in a fund which is utilized to support rural households with small development projects. These include as providing a semi-manual washing machines to help save water and reduce busy daily workloads, organic veg and flower seeds, toilet construction contributions, mattresses, etc.

For more information on traditional hospitality in Bhutan you can also read our blog: [www.bhutanhomestay.com/category/bhutan-homestay](http://www.bhutanhomestay.com/category/bhutan-homestay)

**Your stay at farm-and home stays will ensure the direct flow of revenues from tourism to the local communities.**

You are also most welcome to talk to the families about Bhutan Homestay's approach. We are also happy to hear your feedback.

## Contingencies

**Homestays:** Staying at private homes may occasionally lead to ad-hoc changes. In the event of an unexpected emergency or incident faced by the host family/community/village, the agency will arrange accommodation at another home or in a hotel nearby, whichever is preferable to the guest. An emergency or major life event in a home within a village can become the entire community's affair (e.g. death of a villager/relative).

## Homestay facilities

Our homes are of **varied standard**, some with mattresses on the floor, some with beds. Some have attached bathrooms, some don't. In some cases bathrooms might not be indoors, but outside. In some homes you will be sharing the bathroom with the family, and in others there are separate guest bathrooms. We advise you to bring **head torches** if you are using homestays, just in case. For the bathrooms in homes, we recommend you bring waterproof slippers (flip-flops) as the bathroom floors are mostly wet. Mind that floors can be slippery!

Note that in many homes **bathroom equipment is limited**; often there is no Western style pot but a **squatting-style toilet**. Showers or bucket baths are taken on the floor but not necessarily in bath tubs or shower trays. If you are 4+ in a group, please consider that you might have to **time your access** to showers/bucket baths, and cannot rush to the bathroom all at once 😊

Showers are mostly facilitated in form of bucket bath, with exceptions. **A bucket bath** means that you dip a small container into a large bucket of hot water (to be mixed with cold water according to your preference) and then pour the water over your body. Bhutanese bathroom floors can get wet, unlike in the West, so you can take your bucket bath by standing or squatting on the floor.

Please inform us about your minimum standard requirements so as to not be disappointed about bathroom facilities when reaching the homes.

*How will I communicate with my homestay hosts?*

Some hosts speak English, but many don't. **Your guide's job is to mediate your interaction with your homestay hosts**, including translating and interpreting conversations. Please feel free to always ask your guide if you want something communicated. Also feel free to remind your guide in case he/she neglects his/her duty to interpret for you.

## Gift giving

Gift giving is traditional practice in Bhutan including "gift money" (tips). Some suggestions for potential gifts to homestay hosts:

- Gardening implements & equipment of quality (gloves, etc.)
- Vegetable peeler (good quality, stainless steel, etc.)
- Pocket knives (Swiss, hunting, fishing or else)
- Dried fruits for children (sugar free)
- Children's books in English language
- Braille books in English language
- Leather goods: Purse, bags...
- Stockings for men (to wear with the traditional dress, go)
- Pencils, crayons (made of wood, not plastic)
- Fashion accessories for girls (e.g. hairclips, nice large safety pins for decoration, jewelry)
- Hot water bags (good quality)
- SWATCH watches
- Sunglasses
- Trekking clothes\* (can be second hand but good quality)
- Shoes\* (second hand trekking or casual)
- Reading glasses
- Head torches
- Thermos bottles large as Bhutanese like to carry tea around when going for field work or traveling
- Perfume, scented creams, sun blockers, after shave for men, nicely scented soaps, etc.
- Long raincoats for farmers to wear during monsoon
- Flower- and vegetable seeds: this is **up to you** as it is illegal to import seeds. However, most guests risk it anyway as the worst thing that can happen is that they are confiscated by customs. If you decide to bring seeds, pack them in your check-in luggage in between clothes... (the farmers will be delighted about seeds!)
- **Raw sheep wool pillows (to support Bhutan Network farmers):** Bhutan Network suggested sending pillows stuffed with raw sheep wool with our European guests to Bhutan. The guests find the little pillows very comfortable during flights and our farmers in Bumthang are happy to receive raw wool (from Switzerland) which they process into thread for the traditional *yathra* weaving. These days they also use it for felting. Sheep rearing in Bhutan has been largely abandoned due to wildlife encroachment issues and the lack of labor force (kids, who used to look after the sheep, are sent to school now).

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Bhutan Network Europe: <http://www.bhutan-network.org/>



Bhutan Network Switzerland: <https://www.bhutan-network.ch/>

\*Second hand clothes you can leave with us and we will distribute them accordingly

## MISCELLANEOUS

### **Dresscode and behavioural code for Dzongs and Taktsang**

Your guide will advise you on local dress code and etiquette prior to visiting Dzongs and temples. Some places are stricter than others so the following are just approximate guidelines:

- Wear long sleeve shirts (in some cases short sleeve with collars are allowed)
- Cover ankles (long pants or long skirts, no shorts)
- INSIDE temples/Dzongs: No hats, umbrellas, shoes, short skirts or knee length skirts or t-shirts

The Bhutanese appreciate foreigners wearing their traditional dress which you can get in local shops. **However, please mind that if you wear traditional dress while visiting Dzongs the outfit has to be complete.** Women will have to wear a *wangju* (blouse) and *togo* (jacket) and a *raju* (ceremonial scarf). Men will have to wear a blouse underneath their *gho* as well, or at least *lagey*, and a *kabney* (ceremonial scarf).

**Your guide will help you with these dressing details!**

### **Clothes while traveling**

**Rule of thumb:** be prepared for all weather conditions (short- and long sleeve, wind jacket and warm jacket, hat and gloves in winter, functional and quick-drying underclothes).

We recommend the **“onion method”**: wear layers of clothes so that you can quickly take them off and on.

Bring one set of appropriate/a bit more formal clothes in case of festival- and temple visits: e.g. long sleeve shirts and long pants/dresses. This is mainly for guests with audiences (e.g. with officials and religious authorities), and during religious festivals where trekking pants and dusty shoes as well as shorts and too much cleavage are inappropriate.

Temple socks: you have to take off your shoes before entering temples, so some guests like to have socks to wear so as not to be barefoot (floor can be very cold!).

## Where to wash clothes?

Many hotels offer laundry services for a fee. Some homestays have semi-manual washing machines or you can hand wash items in a sink.

## Photography

Bhutan offers immense opportunities for photography, especially during outdoor sightseeing trips. However, you should check with your guide before taking pictures or filming inside Dzongs, temples, monasteries and religious institutions as in some area photograph/filming is not permitted or at the very least considered rude or inappropriate.

You are free to capture images of the landscape, the panoramic views of the mountain ranges, rural life, flora and fauna, distinctive exteriors of Bhutanese architecture (e.g., Dzongs and Chortens in particular).

**Please respect people's privacy and ask before taking pictures of them.**

## Luggage

Please bring a **smaller backpack** for daily trekking/hiking days or in case you have to **walk to farm/homestays** where the car cannot go and you need only essentials (toiletries, etc.). Your luggage is always safe with our home owners, guesthouse/hotel hosts and drivers as we will never leave it unattended. For trekking please bring **large backpacks or duffle bags**—not suitcases—as mules cannot carry those. On cultural tours, **hard shell cases** are fine as they will be transported in the car.

## Tipping

Tipping has become the norm in Bhutan for guides & drivers, hotel staff and trekking staff. We are of the opinion that the amount is up to you and depends on how happy you were with the tour. However, because we are frequently asked about how much to tip, we offer the following guidelines:

The minimum reference value per day is approx. 10\$ for guide and 8\$ for driver (1-3 PAX). Depending on group size, the amount can be adjusted.

The tip amount also depends on how happy you were with the service provided, on the group size and the length of your tour. You can always tip more if you want, and keep in mind that especially free-lance guides and drivers depend on tips to survive on in the low season.

Trekking staff: Minimum 8\$ per person, per day. You can also handover a lump sum to your guide to be distributed among the trekking staff. Again, it varies depending on your satisfaction, group size and length of trek.

# Let's Wander...

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## **Emergencies**

Prior to your departure, please find out your relevant embassy addresses and contact information in case of an emergency.

## **Ear plugs**

There are many stray dogs in Bhutan (especially in Thimphu) roaming the streets at night. The barking and howling can be extremely disturbing, so if you are sensitive to noise, bring ear plugs.

## **DISCLAIMER**

Bhutan Homestay is not liable for the compliance of customers with passport-, customs-, and visa- and health regulations.