

Cultural Immersion Pilgrimage Tour into the Kingdom of Bhutan

UAAA Tour Sept. 22-Oct. 3, 2017

“There are few mysteries left in the world... Bhutan is one of them”.

-Katie Hickman, author

Join us in a rare Pilgrimage of discovery, in the land of the Dragon Kingdom. Bhutan is the last in-tact Buddhist kingdom in the Himalaya. With thousands of years of Buddhist tradition, Bhutan is also the world's youngest democracy. Limited to 29, this is a small-group experience for travelers and wisdom-seekers.

Day 1. Friday, Sept. 22.

Early morning flight from Bangkok to Paro, in western Bhutan.

Welcome to the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon. Sightseeing in the majestic Paro Valley: Monasteries, ancient fortress-like Dzongs, and the National Museum, and a talk by celebrated author and Museum Director, Khenpo Phuntsock Tashi, putting into context, Bhutan's 2,000 year old traditions and Buddhist cultural identity.



This will include commentary on the role of Buddhism in achieving Bhutan's societal aspirations for protecting all sentient beings through 'spiritual ecology', and Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Day 2. Saturday, Sept. 23.

After breakfast we will journey to the enchanting Haa Valley, isolated until recently from the rest of Bhutan. We will visit the village of Dumchoe and the White (Lhakhang Karpo Temple) and the Black (Lhakhang Nagpo Temple). We will observe the national sport, archery. We will encounter the nomadic Haaps people, and gain insight into the agricultural life of an

organic farming society. A treat few Westerners experience: Optional traditional hot stone bath in the late afternoon.



Talk by Distinguished Professor Emeritus Dr. Celestino Fernandez from the University of Arizona.

Day 3. Sunday, Sept. 24.

Hiking in old growth forest, hemlocks, blue pines, oak, possible encounters with monkeys and mountain goats and birds such as Laughing Thrushes, Magpies, Nutcrackers, and Pheasants along the sublime Balakha Chhu River, the ancient Haa Planter's Trail.

From here we will have spectacular views of Mount Jhomolhari, altitude 23,993 feet, which borders Tibet and Bhutan. Visit Paro town. Evening talk by Dr. Celestino Fernandez.

Day 4. Monday, Sept. 25.

After breakfast drive toward Punakha, ancient capital of Bhutan, built in 1637, and the winter “Palace of Great Happiness”, to the Wangchuk dynasty and spiritual home to the Monk Body. On the way we will stop at Dochula Pass, elevation 10,171 feet, where there is a profound memorial of 108 stone chortens or stupas built by the Queen Mother, usually shrouded in mysterious cloud forest.

Arriving in Punakha, we will explore the glorious Punakha Monastery- home to many sacred relics, at the confluence of the Mo Chuu and Pho Chuu Rivers, and also a walk through red rice paddy fields to the sacred Chhimi Lhakhang.

Day 5. Tuesday, Sept. 26.

After breakfast we will visit the extraordinary 300 meter suspension bridge, and then tour the breath-taking Punakha Valley. At 3,700 feet, we will visit Ritsha Village, where papaya and citrus are organically grown.

We will be immersed in typical and distinctive rural and Dzong architecture (duality of power between spiritual and civil administrative branches of government), found in the present and former Buddhist kingdoms of the Himalaya, and particularly profound in Bhutan.

Evening talk by experts in Bhutan’s initiative called Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index, introducing us to their nine domains of well-being metrics, which is being embraced by Scandinavia, Japan, and U.S. cities of Santa Fe and Seattle.

Day 6. Wednesday, Sept. 27.

After breakfast we will visit Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Lhakhang Nunnery in a pristine forest, with spectacular views of mountains, valleys, and broad leaf forests. Sightseeing in Punakha town, meeting artisans, and painters of traditional Buddhist Thangka paintings.

Onward to Wangdue and Phobjika, in the Gangtey Valley, a vast stunning glacial valley in the Black Mountain National Park. The Valley, a 63-square mile protected area, managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, is home to 14 globally threatened species of wildlife. We will visit the Monastery established by Pema Trinley, grandson of Pema Lingpa in 1613.

Talk by cultural expert on the Teschu’s Sacred Mask Dance Festival rituals and profound living legacy.

**Day 7. Thursday, Sept. 28.**

After breakfast we will spend the day at the annual Sacred Mask Dance Teschu, a rare ritual dance festival, of offerings... Offering is an essential part of Buddhism. It leads to the broadening of one’s spirit in an ever expanding dimension.

People come from all over the world to experience the authentic, luminous devotion and the ritual celebrations, and to receive blessings from high ranking lamas and monks in the sacred 2,600 year old Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Day 8. Friday, Sept. 29.

Breakfast in Trongsa town. Talk by Dr. Celestino Fernandez. We will continue driving east, to the weaving village of Chhumei, where textiles fabrics, and art is created from woven Yak hair. We will briefly visit Tharpaling Monastery, founded in 1352 by dzogchen master Longchen Rabjam, the pilgrimage place where he wrote part of “The Seven Treasures”.

Arrival in Bumthang, the spiritual heart of Bhutan and afternoon visit to Mebar Tsho, Burning Lake, a sacred place for Pilgrimage. It is here that Terton Pema is believed to have jumped into the lake with a burning butter lamp in 1475 and emerged with sacred relics, while the lamp remained lit.

Day 9. Saturday, Sept. 30.

After breakfast a visit to the Queen's Monastery, a profound complex of prayer halls and hidden temples and devotional rooms. Talk by cultural guide, on the significance of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. Afternoon visit to Jakar town. Evening talk by Dr. Celestino Fernandez.



Day 10. Sunday, Oct. 1.

Breakfast presentation on "The Practice of the Bodhisattva", cultivating compassion, by the cultural guide. Morning flight from Bumthang back to Paro.

Afternoon in the capital, Thimphu, and visits to Zorig Chusum, The School for the Sacred 13 Arts, a joy to see this training school in fine arts and traditional crafts, where spiritual ecology and Buddhist faith is deeply rooted and encouraged, in Bhutanese art. Visits the the National Textile Museum.

Drive back to Paro and evening talk by Dr. Celestino Fernandez.

Day 11. Monday, Oct. 2.

After breakfast gentle hike up iconic Tiger's Nest, called Paro Taktsang, altitude 10,240 feet. It is here that Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava is said to have flown, on the back of a tigress consort, from Tibet, and to have meditated in the caves in the 8th Century.

Guru Rinpoche is the reincarnation of the Buddha and is credited with introducing Buddhism to Bhutan. It is believed that those that arrive at Tiger's Nest will have auspicious and abundant blessings and merit in their lives. Late afternoon shopping and sightseeing in Paro town for souvenirs, gifts, and folk art. Farewell dinner. Astonishing memories of encounters with farmers, artisans, wisdom-keepers, monks and nuns, musicians, civil society leaders, and newly met, dear new friends.



Day 12. Tuesday, Oct. 3.

Morning flight back to Bangkok, Thailand and onward back to the USA.

'Thailand Interlude'

Sept. 16-21, 2017

UAAA Pre-Bhutan Optional Add-On to the 2017 Bhutan Cultural Immersion Tour Sept. 22-Oct. 3, 2017

Day 1. Saturday, September 16.

'Sawadee ton chao Welcome breakfast orientation.

Breakfast orientation. Early morning departure for day trip to Ayutthaya, ancient capital of Siam, home to 33 Kings.

Ayutthaya is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. From 1350 until its demise from the Burmese invasions of the 1700's, Ayutthaya, known as Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, was the center of commerce and diplomacy, and the trading capital of Asia, on the route between China, India, Japan, the Malay Archipelago, the Arab world, and Europe. In 1700 it was the largest city in the world, with over 1 million inhabitants- a treasure-trove and window into Asian antiquity, wisdom, and beliefs. We will spend the day walking these astonishing ruins.

Day 2. Sunday, September 17.



Early morning visit to Wat Phra Kaew, the 61-acre Grand Palace, which includes the most venerated holy site in Thailand, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (the jade sculpture was created in the 14th Century). This astonishing sacred site will give us an introduction into the various forms of Buddhist architecture, painting, sculpture, and antiquities.

Visit to The Jim Thompson House, an elegant compound of seven traditional Thai teak wood houses; Jim Thompson revived the Thai silk weaving industry in the 1950's and 1960's, his home is now a private museum. The gardens, brimming with his collection of antiquities, include 6th Century Buddhas and 19th Century paintings and pottery, and weaving from all over Asia.

Late afternoon visit to the Chatuchak Weekend Market, a glorious, well-thought out 35 acres, with vast sections devoted to silk fabrics and textiles, jewelry, collectibles, and antiques. There are DHL and FedEx services, to pack and ship 'gotta-have' purchases.

Day 3. Monday, September 18.

Early morning flight to Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, the cradle of Thailand's Buddhism.

Here we will visit Wat Mahawan temple complex, with its series of monumental elephants, surrounding the chedi, and its serene gardens. We will explore the gated ancient walled village of Chiang Mai and also visit artisans and weavers at Studio Naenna, and a traditional umbrella parasol-making and paper-making studios at Bo Sang Handicraft Centre.

Evening at the famous Chiang Mai Night Market.

Day 4. Tuesday, September 19.

Journey to the Thai Farm Organic Cooking School out in the verdant, lush country-side. Sawat, master Chef and wisdom-keeper of



Buddhist approaches to life, will lead us in visiting the authentic and small Ruamchook Market. Our teacher will explain how to choose seasonings and fresh fruits and vegetables. At their organic farm, Sawat will guide us through harvesting in season produce, and then we will, with his instruction, prepare hands on, six dishes, including curry paste, sticky rice and jasmine, Tom Yom with shrimp, chicken with coconut milk, Pad Thai, spring rolls, and mango dishes. These are dishes we will be able to replicate back home.



Then we will eat our culinary creations in a tranquil forest garden, surrounded by jungle sounds and wild orchids. We will be back at our hotel late afternoon, in time for a swim, reading journaling, shopping, before dinner.

Day 5. Wednesday, September 20.

Depart for a tour of the Thai Elephant Conservation Center, a precious elephant sanctuary. View elephant bathing, elephants creating paintings, and observing the elephants in the jungle. Lunch at the conservation Center. Late afternoon visit to Wat Phra That Doi Suthep Temple on top of Mt. Suthep, built in 1383. Housed in the temple is a precious holy relic from Buddha. Dinner and flight back to Bangkok.

Day 6. Thursday, September 21.

After breakfast tour Bangkok's Chao Phraya River by boat cruise, and get a sense of place, geography, and experience all of Bangkok from the river perspective. Then we will visit Wat Pho's College of Traditional Medicine. Perhaps get an inexpensive Thai massage. Visit the Reclining Buddha at Wat Pho and free time late afternoon.

Start of Bhutan Cultural Immersion Pilgrimage Tour

Having settled into Asian culture, spirituality, food, sensory delights, and comfortable travel mode, we now move on and begin our adventure in Himalayan Bhutan, the last in-tact Buddhist Kingdom.

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Notes on Bhutan

Celestino Fernández, Ph.D.

Why does Bhutan limit the number of yearly visitors? Why does the government not want to turn Bhutan into a tourist destination for mountain climbers? Why does Bhutan, a tiny Buddhist country with less than one million people, have such a strong relationship with India (a nation with over 1.3 billion people), such that Narendra Modi's (India's Prime Minister since 2014) first foreign trip was to Bhutan? Why doesn't Bhutan, not even its capital city of Thimpu, have traffic lights? Why did Bhutan resist television and the Internet (only introduced in 2001)? How did Bhutan become a constitutional monarchy (the first parliamentary elections occurred only 10 years ago)? What is Gross National Happiness and how is it being implemented in Bhutan?

The answers to these and many other questions about Bhutan begin to emerge from the moment one lands in Paro. Visitors are immediately overtaken with the pure physical beauty of the pristine landscape as one is allowed to wonder on the tarmac to take photographs after landing.

Bhutan has part of the Himalayas, including the tallest, unclimbed mountain, Gangkhar Puensum at 24,840 feet. With such peaks come gorges and valleys as deep; looking down the Grand Canyon pales in comparison. With the Himalayas to the North, the small kingdom (Bhutan equals the combined size of Vermont and New Hampshire) tilts quickly to the southern jungle plains of India (where the lowest elevation is 318'). As a result of the glacial snows in the Himalayas and the steep drop in elevation across the country to hot jungles, the water flowing down rivers was abundant. In fact, one river disappears underground where hydroelectric plants capture and produce electricity before returning the river back on its way south to India. The sale of electricity to India is the major source of revenue for Bhutan, yet much of the environment remains natural. Indeed, by constitutional obligation at least 60 percent of the nation must remain under forest cover at all times.

All of the sights my wife and I saw were exceptional; besides the mountain vistas, there are elaborately painted houses, Zhongs, Stupas, Temples, Monasteries, exotic birds, and monkeys. On one of our runs we came upon a monkey wondering across the road. When (s)he saw us, it ran up the steep hill and after rolling three small rocks at us, it climbed a tree where we spotted four other monkeys swinging across the limbs.

The architecture in Bhutan is different than anything else in the world (except perhaps nearby Nepal and Tibet) – traditional architecture uses no nails in construction. Add colorful prayer flags hung vertically on 30' tall (or higher) poles in groups of 15 to 30-40 or more, well you might get the picture. Imagine these colorful poles as markers for sacred spots such as mountain peaks, passes and clearings in the forest. At other sacred spots such as the Burning Lake, there might be horizontally strung prayer flags of all sizes and lengths that could be strung about like wild party streamers, sometimes traversing gorges and streams ("How did they get them across?", was a common question. "Perhaps by archers," was a common answer since archery is the national sport and a favorite past-time in Bhutan.)

The picturesque scenery included some of the largest variety of plants, birds and animals found in the world. We were fortunate that our group included a naturalist that helped to sight species and answer our many questions. To name a few, we saw hoopoe and magpie in higher elevations and hornbill and macaque in the southeastern jungles.

Perhaps our favorite sightings were the local people engaged in many aspects of daily living. From men and women planting rice in paddies, farmers using teams of oxen to plough (in 2013 the government announced that Bhutan will become the first country in the world with 100 percent organic farming), monks chanting and blowing strange musical instruments (some made of thigh bones), women weaving magical cloth on big looms, families working to distill Ara (a liquor made of rice or corn) to imported Indian workers hand-building the roads, including women cracking rocks with hammers to make gravel (one has to see this to believe it!).

We supplemented our exhilarating runs with learning and meditation as we experienced Buddhism and how it permeates the nation's culture (Buddhism is the official state religion and 75% of the population practices). Bhutan's geographical location has kept it largely isolated from the rest of the world and the government is trying to control how it opens up and becomes a part of global society without losing its traditional culture, environment and values by succumbing to modern societal ills – a major challenge in the world of satellites and the Internet. A democratic constitution was only just adopted in 2008 (we dined with one of the initial prime ministers involved in the drafting of the constitution). The government believes that GNH (Gross National Happiness, a concept coined by the 4th King of Bhutan) is at least as important, if not more, than GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Therefore, the government tracks nine domains to measure and evaluate progress in GNH. Visit Bhutan and be Happy!