



Sky Mind Retreats

## Sacred Bhutan: Walking and Meditation in the Land of the Thunder Dragon

November 20 - December 6, 2022

### Trip Itinerary

*We will begin our trip by gathering in Bangkok. From there we fly to Paro, and our adventure in Bhutan begins. We will integrate our dharma practice into our travel by practicing sitting and/or walking meditation on most days, and by practicing in action with the people and situations we encounter. Keep in mind that we are entering a more relaxed and spontaneous culture, and some elements of this itinerary may change. Part of our practice will be in allowing things to unfold as they do, rather than as they are planned!*

#### **TRAVEL DAY- Sunday, November 20**

Travel day. Most flights from the US to Bangkok fly east, crossing the date line and arriving on the following day. You may want to travel a day or two earlier, so that you have time to recover from jet lag in Bangkok. Whatever day you travel, we'll arrange transportation for you from the airport to a guesthouse near the airport.

#### **DAY ONE- Monday, November 21**

We'll gather at a small hotel in Bangkok, meeting at approximately 5 pm. An opportunity to meet up - have dinner – and prepare for an early morning departure. . . In-house excellent food: Thai of course!

#### **DAY TWO- Tuesday, November 22**

An afternoon flight from Bangkok takes us along the Himalayas to Paro, a small town at 7,000' that hosts Bhutan's primary airstrip. Paro is located in a beautiful valley, lined with apple orchards and green terraced fields. We will take a leisurely walk through the villages and have a relaxed picnic lunch at Dzongdrakha, a seldom-visited Cliffside temple complex set high above the valley. After lunch, we will have our first opportunity to visit, and quietly sit, in a traditional Bhutanese temple, then hike back through fields and apple orchards arriving in Bondey village. Some afternoon time to wander in the town of Paro.



This day will include orienting us to our journey, getting to know our guides and each other. We will stay at the Gangtey Palace Hotel, which has a beautiful shrine room on the top floor where we will practice in the evening.

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**DAY THREE-Wednesday, November 23**



We will drive to the beautiful Chele La, a high pass with spectacular views of the high Himalayan Peaks and walk among the abundant prayer flags. Our group will then walk across and down through a pristine high altitude forest to Kila Nunnery. After enjoying a picnic lunch, we will visit the Kila Nunnery temple.

**DAY FOUR-Thursday, November 24**

Today we will drive to Punakha, with several stops along the way. We will pass through Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, which is likely the only capital in the world without a traffic light. Here we'll stretch our legs and view the Buddha Dordenma, made of bronze and gilded gold. This magnificent statue is the largest Buddha statue in the world and is located amidst the ruins of Kuensel Phodrang.



The high point of the day's journey is Dochula Pass, at 10,000', where weather permitting, we will have magnificent views of the gigantic, snow covered peaks of the Eastern Himalayas. From the pass we drop down to the lowlands of the Punakha Valley at just 4,000', passing forests of rhododendron and magnolia. For those interested and weather allowing, we will have the opportunity for a walk from the pass.

**DAY FIVE-Friday, November 25**

In the morning, we will hike through villages, farm land and orchards to arrive at the Chorten Nebu Monastery. Built in the eighteenth century, it is a little known treasure, with its magnificent statue of Maitreya (the future Buddha). The monastery is a school for young monks, where these children can study both traditional Buddhist texts and Western subjects. In the afternoon, we visit the Punakha Dzong, built on a river island at the confluence of the Phocho and Mochu rivers, and possibly the most beautiful Dzong in Bhutan.



### DAY SIX-Saturday, November 26



Today we drive (3 hours) to the little visited Phobjikha Valley, nestled at 9,500' on the western slopes of the Black Mountains. En route we'll stop for a half hour walk across rice paddies and past a local village to Chimi Lhakhang, the temple of the 'Divine Mad Man', where Bhutanese come for fertility blessings.

In the afternoon, we'll explore the Phobjikha Valley on foot-following the Khewa Chu stream through open meadows to a small, seldom visited monastery built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and recently brought back to life as an active monastery for about 30 young monks. We stay at the remote Dewachen Inn, a luxurious wood-heated hotel.

### DAY SEVEN-Sunday, November 27

Today we head to Bumthang province, known as the spiritual heart of Bhutan. A dramatic drive takes us through the town of Trongsa, where we will stop to visit the Trongsa Dzong, considered the most impressive masterpiece of Bhutanese architecture. We will spend the night in the Chumey Valley at the Chumey Nature Resort. The Chumey Valley is the home of Bhutan's famous yathra weaving- a geometrically complex weaving of hand-spun wool.



### DAY EIGHT-Monday, November 28



We will spend the morning at Tharpaling Monastery, perched high above the Chumey Valley. This goemba houses over 100 monks and several temples, including the high hermitage of Choedrak Goemba, above Tharpaling at 12,400'. This location was a primary retreat place for Longchenpa, Dzogchen master of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and author of many significant Dzogchen texts. After visiting the monastery, we hike to KiKiLa Pass, a remote high pass that is the home to a glass-encased golden statue of Longchenpa.

### DAY NINE-Tuesday, November 29

We will drive to the Tang Valley, deeper into Bumthang. Along the way, we will first visit the mystical Mebar Tsho (Burning Lake) which is riddled with deep Buddhist history and mythology. Bhutanese history states that in the late 15th century, the great treasure hunter, Pema Lingpa had a premonition about hidden relics at the bottom of Tang Valley. However the ruler and the local people of Tang were skeptical about Pema Lingpa's vision. The



courageous treasure hunter wanted to prove that his vision was real and jumped into the lake, holding a fully lit butter lamp in his hand. He then resurfaced holding a scroll and a treasure chest in one hand and the butter lamp in his other hand was still burning bright. After a short drive from the burning lake, we will then visit the the Pema Choling Nunnery, where over 100 nuns, mostly teenagers and young women, study and practice. Our guide's sister has lived at Pema Choling monastery, and Susie has dharma friends here we will visit. We will spend the morning with them, sitting as they practice their daily chants and talking with them in the stone courtyard in the center of their dormitories and classrooms. Khempo Tsenzín Thinley, the leading monastic will visit with us if he is in residence. Collectively we will contribute to a gift for the nuns or their monastery, which we will present to them as part of the morning. We will arrive at the Ogyen Choling Palace where we will stay for three nights.

#### **DAY TEN Wednesday, November 30**

We will settle in to Ogyen Choling Palace for a day of practice. The palace was the home of a noble family until recent times and includes fabulous temple rooms separately dedicated to Tara, the Buddha, and other deities. The central tower of the complex is now an extensive and well curated museum (with English explanations).



#### **DAY ELEVEN-Thursday, December 1**

For our third day at Ogyen Choling there will be the option of visiting the Thowadrak Goempa (2-3 hour hike uphill). This remote cliff temple is also a long-term retreat place under the direction of the delightful Pema Sherab Dorji Rinpoche with whom we will ask for an audience. For those desiring a mellower walk, there are three private lankhangs to be seen via a beautiful walk through the neighboring village, along the river and through the Tang Valley. In addition, above the palace about 15 minutes, is a favorite sitting spot of Longchenpa that is a welcome place to go and take in the wide spaces. We will again stay at Ogyen Choling for the night.

#### **DAY TWELVE-Friday, December 2**

Today we return to the central Bumthang valley of Chokhar. We will visit Kenchhosum Llakhang– a freshly restored and grand temple - and Tamshing Goemba, a deeply sacred temple built in the 1500's. We will spend the afternoon visiting Bumthang's most treasured temples- Kurjey Lhakhang and Jambey Lhakhang. The latter was built here in 7th Century by the Tibetan King Songtsen Goembo, even before the arrival of Guru Rinpoche. A little walk to the north is Kurjey, built around the cave where Guru Rinpoche meditated and left the imprint of his body on a rock. Kurjey is considered one of the holiest places in Bhutan. We will be staying in the Bhumtang Valley.



#### **DAY THIRTEEN-Saturday, December 3**

We will take a flight from Bhumtang to Paro. We will spend the remainder of the day visting Kichu Lankhang (the temple that was Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche's home) and (optionally) the National Museum. We will meet with Director Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi (if in residence). We will return to the Gangtey Palace Hotel for our overnight stay and to prepare for our trek.

#### **DAY FOURTEEN-Sunday, December 4**

Leaving Paro, we will give our gear to the horses and start our overnight trek to Bumdra monastery. A five-hour hike (2500' elevation gain and 5 miles with many rests and a picnic lunch along the way) takes us to our camp at 13,500'. We will spend time at the camp to relax and enjoy the expansive mountain views, or visit neighboring sites. For the curious and still energetic, above the camp, there are sacred sky burial sites worthy of the effort. Our 'luxury camp' will include standup tents with cots, a dining tent with space heaters, and delicious meals prepared by our crew.

For those who choose not to do the trek, there will be the option of visiting Dra Karpo, a cliff temple and sacred rock-mound that is the other place Guru Rinpoche is understood to have visited when he came to Tiger's Nest. The devoted do 108 circumambulations of the large hillside cliff (which takes 3 or 4 days), and the place is rich with stories.

#### **DAY FIFTEEN-Monday, December 5**

We hike approximately three hours, all downhill, visiting several remote monasteries on the way. The highlight of the day is one of Bhutan's most sacred places - Taksang (also known as Tiger's Nest) Monastery. This monastery, perched on the side of a sheer cliff, was built atop the cave where Guru Rinpoche, the father of Tibetan Buddhism, meditated for three months after arriving in the Paro Valley on the back of a legendary flying tigress. We will practice in one of several shrine rooms of this incredible monastery before continuing for another two hours walk down to the road and back to Paro, where we will stay again at the Gangtey Palace Hotel. For those who choose not to do the trek, an early morning departure will allow you to hike uphill to rejoin the group for the visit to Taksang.



#### **DAY SIXTEEN-Tuesday, December 6**

We will conclude our time in Bhutan with sitting, reflection, and goodbyes to our local guides, and catch a late morning flight back to Bangkok.

*Our trip will end in Bangkok, upon our arrival in the airport in the afternoon.*

*Namgay - our guide throughout the journey*

