



Sky Mind Retreats

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

November 19- December 3, 2018

More Information

This trip is a rare opportunity to travel behind the scenes in a country steeped in centuries of Buddhist life and practice. Our focus will be on the active monasteries and temples that are nestled everywhere, into clifffides, ridgetops, and wide open spaces. Wherever possible we will practice in these monasteries, listen to the chanting monks, and meet with the local Rinpoches and Khenpos who guide monastic life, and Tulkus who embody the reincarnation of previous Rinpoches. Some of the temples that we will visit are remote, inaccessible by road, and infrequently visited by tourists.

On most days we will walk-visiting remote temples, exploring villages, or, on one day, hiking from town to town. See below for a description of physical activity. We will stay in comfortable and interesting Bhutanese lodges, plus one night of 'luxury' camping with views of the Himalaya range. See below for a description of the overnight trek that will take us past many remote temples and hermitages.

In the past, this trip has been offered as a meditation and cultural retreat with Susie as a teacher. Our trip will be different in that it will be a group of friends with no one in the teacher role. And yet, each of us will bring our deep practice to a place that is steeped in practice. Bhutan is a deeply Buddhist country where paying attention, being kind and generous, and waking up are the implied invitations at every turn.

With that in mind, we offer a shared intention to be present to our experience, to be open and available to the people we meet and the places we visit, and use all that we experience to soften our hearts and open our minds. At times, there will be opportunities to walk, sit, or explore in silence, but it will be up to the group and individuals how to hold that. While nothing specific is required, openness and willingness to participate with the group, and a desire for spiritual exploration as a part of travel will be helpful.

Bhutan

The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is the only country in the world that makes political and economic decisions that take into account a measurement of Gross National Happiness, and one of the few countries in the world that has successfully resisted the wave of globalization. The country was quite isolated from the rest of the world until the 1960's, televisions were not allowed in the country until 1999, and cigarettes and plastic bags are still banned. The capital city of Thimpu has no traffic lights, the national sport is archery, and residents enjoy a culturally intact lifestyle, complete with well-preserved festivals, traditional food and dress, and traditional architecture.

Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) brought Buddhism to Bhutan in 747AD, and it has flourished ever since, creating a country where wisdom, compassion, and mindfulness are a part of daily life and culture. Temples and stupas arise from the landscape everywhere, and monastic life is active and strong.

Travel in Bhutan

The Bhutanese government has imposed strict travel regulations in an effort to minimize the impact of tourism on their people, and to ensure that tourism is generating adequate revenue for the country. A substantial daily rate is charged for each traveler, which is what makes this trip more expensive than most trips in developing countries. We are required to arrange a custom trip with a travel and trekking outfitter, which means that we will have our own private transportation, a customized itinerary with a focus on Buddhist sites, history and current practices, very comfortable hotels, and our own local guide for the entire trip. Our guide, Namgay Tshering, is outstanding in his knowledge and hospitality. Namgay previously served in the Bhutan Parliament, and has personal connections to teachers at many of the monasteries we will visit. His sister is a nun in residence at a nunnery that we will visit and support with gifts.

About Susie

Along with our Bhutanese crew, Susie will facilitate and guide the trip. She first went to Bhutan in 2005 and fell in love with the country and its people. She has since spent many months there exploring, being a tourist, practicing in remote locations, and guiding groups of Buddhist practitioners. While these trips are usually held in the context of a retreat with her in the role of teacher, she is excited to share her love of the place with a group of fellow dharma adventurers. If you don't know her directly and would like more information about Susie please check out the website.

The Trek, Physical Activity, Fitness, and Altitude

This is an active, walking trip, and to enjoy the physical activity you should be in good health with a reasonable degree of fitness. There is no need for speed-we will walk at a slow and comfortable pace-but you should be able to walk for 2-3 hours at a time, including uphill sections.

The most challenging day will be the first day of our overnight trek, which comes at the end of the trip, after we have acclimatized to the altitude. All gear will be carried by horses on the trek, except for your small daypack with extra clothing and water. The first day of the trek is approximately 5 hours of hiking, with 3,000' of elevation gain. We will camp at 13,400'. The second day will be 4-5 hours of mostly downhill walking, including several steep sections. It is possible to rent a horse to ride for the first day, or as a backup in case you get too tired, at a cost of \$10. Riding horses are not available for the second day of the trek.

If you don't already get some basic walking exercise, we suggest that in the months leading up to the trip you begin to walk several times a week, including some aerobic, uphill walking. Let us know if you would like some guidelines for increasing your fitness, or if you have any questions about the physical activity involved in this trip.

Except for the trek, we will be staying at altitudes ranging from 4,000' to 7,400', with one night at 9,500'. Most of the hiking will be at elevations less than 8,000'.

You can choose to not do the trek and still meet us at Thaksang. If you make this choice in advance all the costs for your hotel, transportation, a guide/driver for the time you are not with the group, food etc will be covered. If you make this decision while we are on the trip, we will ask that you cover the additional night of lodging. (The rest will still be covered) We ask this as we will have already paid the non-refundable trek costs.

Food

Bhutanese food is usually locally grown, unprocessed and healthy, with lots of vegetable dishes. Rice, potatoes, and chilies are the primary staples. Meat, poultry and seafood are usually options, and vegetarians can be easily accommodated. We will most likely see Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese influences in the food, including Tibetan momos and thukpa noodles. The national dish is ema datshi, a spicy concoction of chilies and yak cheese. If you have special food requirements these can probably be accommodated, especially common ones like gluten-free and no-dairy. Be sure to let us know about special food requirements well in advance.

Weather

We will be visiting Bhutan at the very end of fall and the beginning of winter, when crowds are small, and the weather is sunny and cool. The weather is typically pleasant, although a bit of clouds or rain here and there is a possibility. Once the sun goes down temperatures drop sharply and can reach freezing overnight. You will want warm, toasty clothes for this trip. We will send a What to Bring list as the trip gets closer.

Logistical Details

Cost

\$5,100, plus \$800 airfare for RT Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan. Single supplement \$700.

What's Included: (basically everything!)

- Lodging, including the first night in Bangkok
- Three meals a day, starting with dinner on November 21.
- All activities on the itinerary
- Transportation
- Round trip airfare from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan (This flight will be arranged for you, and we will pay the outfitter your \$800 flight cost,)
- Bottled drinking water
- Domestic airfare (Jakar to Paro)
- Carbon offsets for the carbon impact of flying from the U.S. to Bhutan

What's Not Included:

- Round trip airfare to Bangkok. (You will arrange this on your own.)
- Donations to the Nunneries and Monasteries we will be visiting.
- Bhutan Visa- \$40 (we will arrange this for you)
- Final night stay and meals in Bangkok, if your flight leaves the following day
- Alcohol
- Optional tips for local guides
- Medical insurance, as required by Bhutan. (See below.)

Payments

We will be making reservations on Druk Air or Bhutan Airlines, for our flight from Bangkok to Paro, as soon as the minimum number of ten people have registered. Once the reservations have been made, this amount (\$800) is nonrefundable, unless someone else registers to take your place and we are able to transfer the reservation. (Reservations must be made far in advance, as only the national airlines serve Bhutan.) A \$500 non-refundable trip deposit is also due with your registration.

Due with Registration	\$500-non-refundable deposit
plus \$800 for Bangkok-Paro flight (mailed to address on registration form.)	
March 1, 2018	\$1500
June 1, 2018	\$1500
September 1, 2018	\$1640- includes \$40 visa fee

Cancellation Policy * (Please read carefully)

Because we must make non-refundable deposits in Bhutan, we have the following cancellation policy. You will be making nonrefundable deposits for the trip expenses, and we cannot refund payments except according to the following cancellation policy.

The \$500 deposit is non-refundable, and, once plane reservations have been made, the \$800 airfare is non-refundable. Refunds can be made as follows:

- For cancellations between March 1-May 31, 50% of the first payment (\$750).
- For cancellations June 1-Aug 31, 50% of the first two payments (\$1500).
- For cancellations Sept. 1-Sept. 24, 50% of first three payments (\$2300).

*After Sept. 24, no refunds can be made. If Sky Mind Retreats needs to cancel the trip for any reason, all fees, including the deposit, will be returned. Plane flight cost cannot be reimbursed.

Things happen! The Bhutanese government requires all travelers to purchase medical travel insurance, and most of these policies include trip cancellation. This trip insurance, will also generally reimburse your trip cost if you cannot travel due to injury or illness. Be aware that you usually are required to purchase the policy shortly after you register for the trip and make your first payment in order for the trip cancellation insurance to be effective.

Please read carefully the benefits for different plans and you might consider the 'cancel for any reason' clause available in some plans.

Two companies that we like are:

Worldwide Trip Protector, www.travelinsured.com or 1-800-243-3174.

World Nomads, <https://www.worldnomads.com/travel-insurance/>

Getting There

We will begin our trip in Bangkok, the afternoon before we depart for Bhutan. Most flights from the United States arrive late at night, so you will probably arrive in Bangkok the night before. We suggest coming an extra day or two early, if you have the time, so that you can adjust to the different time zone. We can help arrange lodging if needed.

More details on arranging your flights will be sent once you register. As of November, 2017, the round-trip cost from Denver to Bangkok starts at \$950. Please wait to make your flight arrangements to Bangkok until we let you know that we have the minimum number of participants (ten) to make the trip go.

Note: Susie will be meeting the group in Paro. If your travel plans suggest that it would be better for you to come to Paro from Delhi, Calcutta, Kathmandu, or Gaya, let us know and we can arrange to meet you in Bhutan.

*****Remember that you will need a current passport!***
(with at least 6 months, beyond our trip dates, before expiration)**

Kathy Cheney will be handling all pre-trip registration, information, payments, and questions. She has been on this trip and will be able to help with most things. Please feel free to contact her or Susie if you have additional questions at any time.

After you register, we will send more logistical details about travel, vaccinations, and what to bring. Please feel free to contact either of us by phone or email if you have any questions!

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