



Bhutan Mountain Biking 2012

Trip Notes

Adventure Consultants is organising a thirteen day mountain biking trip to ride Bhutan's amazing network of trails in the fall of 2012. Bhutan is known as 'the Land of the Thunder Dragon' and is an ancient Himalayan kingdom. The country is steeped in Buddhist history and has only been open to foreign travellers since 1974.

There is only one main road in Bhutan, a paved single lane that traverses the country over several high passes. To travel anywhere else in Bhutan you are restricted to travel on bumpy roads in vehicles or trekking on foot. Our trip will be unique, on mountain bikes we will be able to explore off the beaten track and enjoy some world-class trail riding while we are at it!

The group will traverse Bhutan from West to East after arriving in Paro, and will explore two of the main valley systems – around the Paro / Thimphu area and the Bumthang region in the East of the country. Many villages that we come across will be operating in the same way they have done for centuries and unlike other Himalayan kingdoms, Bhutan has most of its first growth forest intact.

The Bhutanese are immensely proud of their cultural history and no visit to Bhutan would be complete without exploring their impressive monasteries and learning how Buddhism has shaped the kingdom as it is today. Our visits to various sacred sites will give us an insight into their beliefs, history, architecture, and modern social structure.

Lodging along the way will be in Bhutanese guest-houses and Hotels and a support vehicle able to accommodate everyone and their bikes will accompany the trip throughout Bhutan.

We have taken high altitude issues into account when developing our biking itinerary. We have included rest days at the relevant elevations to allow our bodies to adjust to the thinner air and we carry sufficient medication to deal with most altitude related problems. Experience has shown us that good hydration, rest days at significant elevations and good base fitness help avoid any significant problems when biking at altitude.

This unique departure to mountain bike the trails of Bhutan is a great opportunity to travel through a timeless Himalayan kingdom. Early booking is essential to ensure that processing our permit goes smoothly. We also welcome non-cycling partners or travellers to join the expedition also as they will be able to accompany the trip throughout Bhutan.

Dates

September 25 – October 7, 2012

Itinerary

- Sep 25 Day 1: Meet in Bangkok for trip orientation
- Sep 26 Day 2: Fly to Paro from Bangkok, depart BKK 6.50am, arrive Paro 10.00am. Transfer to Hotel, explore around Paro Valley
- Sep 27 Day 3: Transfer to Thimphu via road, explore Thimphu
- Sep 28 Day 4: Biking to Punakha via the Dochu La
- Sep 29 Day 5: Biking to Phojikha in the Gangtey Valley
- Sep 30 Day 6: Biking to Bumthang region via the Pele La & Trongsa, stay Jakar
- Oct 1 Day 7: Touring Bumthang Chokor Valley, stay Jakar
- Oct 2 Day 8: Visit and explore Ura in Bumthang region, stay Jakar
- Oct 3 Day 9: Explore Tang Valley to Ugyencholing Palace and back to Jakar
- Oct 4 Day 10: Return over Pele La to Chuzom
- Oct 5 Day 11: Explore Punakha, Dochu La to Thimphu, explore Thimphu
- Oct 6 Day 12: Transfer to Paro and visit Taktsang Monastery
- Oct 7 Day 13: Fly Paro to Bangkok, depart Paro 10.50am, arrive 3.15pm. Depart Bangkok for home or onward travel or overnight Bangkok.

DAY 1: BANGKOK

We meet in Bangkok at the Novotel Airport Hotel for an orientation and bike check at 7.00pm today. We will go over packaging of your bike and sort out any gear problems you may have.

DAY 2: PARO

Depart from Bangkok this morning on the Druk Air flight to Paro, Bhutan. If the weather is clear, you may see Kanchenjunga, Mt. Everest and Chomolhari, Bhutan's sacred mountain. Upon arrival in Paro and completing visa formalities, we will be met at the airport by our local tour guides and accompanied to our hotel, the beautifully crafted new Zhiwa Ling Hotel www.zhiwaling.com.

After assembling our bikes we can spend half a day biking to places of interest in the Paro Valley, starting with the Ta Dzong, a 17th century monument, which now houses the National Museum and then the Ugyen Pelri, a small jewel like palace belonging to the Royal Family of Bhutan. Along the way we'll pass one of the innumerable archery grounds. Archery is the national sport of Bhutan and most men grow up learning the sport. If we are lucky, we may catch a match in action.

DAY 3: THIMPHU

We leave Paro this morning on our bikes and follow the winding road beside the Pa chu (chu means river or water) to its confluence with the Thimphu river and onto the Nation's capital, Thimphu and our hotel. After checking in and refreshing ourselves, we will head out to do some sightseeing, and there is the chance to do a ride into the upper reaches of the valley also.

Because a dress code is necessary to be observed in some of the areas in Thimphu, we will continue with our sightseeing programme by vehicle. The first stop will be a visit to the Dechenphodrang Monastic School, which was the original site of the Thimphu Dzong and is now the State monastic School. The National Library will also prove to be an interesting stop as will the Jigme Dorji Memorial Chorten, a beautiful monument erected in memory of the late King. Many religious ceremonies and gatherings take place here throughout the year. The evening is free to explore the streets of Thimphu.

DAY 4: PUNAKHA

We will have an early start today for a full day biking to the ancient winter capital of Punakha. The full distance covered biking on the highway will be approximately 80 kms. It is about 25 kms to reach the pass of Dochu la (la means pass) at an altitude of 10,000 ft. In good weather 300 kms of the Bhutanese Himalayan summits are in view. Until the pass it is uphill all the way. After stopping for lunch and the view, we continue travelling down to the Punakha



valley below, at an altitude of 4,500 ft. It is downhill all the way from the pass with amazing scenery as the valley is the richest agricultural region of Bhutan. The Punakha Dzong built in 1637 by Shabdrung is situated at the confluence of the 'Po' and 'Mo' chus (Father and Mother rivers) guarding the Southern end of the Punakha valley. This huge fortress/Monastery was the capital of Bhutan until 1966.

DAY 5: GANGTEY

The 21 kms between Punakha to Wangdhi is a relatively flat cycle. The impressive Wangdhi Dzong reaches skyward from a strategic spur at the confluence of the Tang and Po chus and has a commanding view of the valley below. Like all Dzongs, it has a section for the monks and another for the secular authorities. After Wangdhi, the road climbs steadily passing through semi tropical vegetation – banana plants and cactus to pine forests and then to an alpine environment home to rhododendrons and dwarf bamboo. As we near the Pele La, we will take a detour onto a side road ('completed' in the late 80's) which leads us to the valley of Phobjikha. With a combination of biking and riding on the tour bus, we will plan on reaching our destination before dark.

Considered one of the most beautiful valleys in Bhutan, it is encircled by pine forests. In the centre of the valley, rising from a small ridge stands one of the oldest private monasteries in Bhutan – Gangtey Gompa. We will have the opportunity to visit the courtyard of the monastery. The head lama of Gangtey Gompa is the ninth incarnation of the body of Pemalingpa- the famous 14th century black smith from Bumthang who is one of Bhutan's most famous Buddhist saints and teachers.

The area is equally famous as the winter home to the very rare Black Necked Crane. Experts estimate that fewer than 800 cranes exist in the wild. The Cranes arrive in November and stay through March.

A short bike ride from the monastery will take us down valley to our accommodation for the evening, which is the rather plush Dewachen Hotel.

DAY 6: BUMTHANG

Again with a combination of part biking and part riding on the tour bus we head for Bumthang. Distance covered will be approximately 160 km. We return to the main road and then climb up Pele La (10,825"). On the way to Tongsa, we will stop for lunch at the Chendibji Chorten, an ancient shrine built on the old walking path across the country. The first sight of Tongsa Dzong, the largest in Bhutan, appears across the valley, but the road winds another 20kms before reaching Tongsa.

We will have a chance to explore the shops of Tongsa, before continuing onto Jakar in Bumthang.

DAY 7: BUMTHANG

A full day's biking tour of the Bumthang Chokor valley, noted as one of the most beautiful and sacred in Bhutan. This valley has a history hallowed by the frequent visits of Padmasambhava when he was bringing the Buddha's message to Bhutan. He meditated in caves around the valley which now have temples and shrines associated with them. The valley is wide, filled with fields and village folk busy with their day's work. We will visit Kurje, a 17th century temple next to which a spectacular new monastery is being built in traditional style. In the late afternoon, there will be time to visit the shops which line the single main street here, famous for some of the fabrics singular to the Bumthang District.

DAY 8: URA

Today we will bike to the highest of the four valleys which make up the Bumthang Valley. From the Tang Valley, the road gradually climbs through the scenic country side to Ura La (11,180 ft) which is marked by a chorten and mani wall. Just before the pass, if the weather is clear, magnificent views of Bhutan's highest peaks, Gangkhar Punsum (23,750 ft) can be seen.

The village of Ura, unlike most Bhutanese villages, is made up of closely clustered houses centered around a new temple recently dedicated to Guru Rimpoche. From Ura we will bike on the recently constructed road leading up to the neighbouring village of Shingkar. This beautiful village is entered around an old temple and manor house that hosts the annual Shingkar festival.

After a packed lunch and a walk through the village, we can visit the manor house to observe rural Bhutanese life. By late afternoon, we will head back to Jakar by a combination of riding and travel on our accompanying bus.

DAY 9: UGYENCHOLING

The aim is to make a full day's biking tour of the Tang valley. We will stop at several important religious pilgrimage sites including Mebartsho, -'the burning lake' and Tang Rimochen Lhakhang.

One track leads up to the base of Ugyencholing Dzong. The valley is named after this lordly residence, which dominates the valley and is one of the most important ancestral manor houses in Bhutan. It is a short walk up to the Dzong from the point we can bike to. After a picnic lunch and a walk through the surrounding village, we will bike back to our guesthouse in Jakar. The distance from Jakar to Ugyen Choling is approximately 35kms.

DAY 10: RETURN OVER THE PELE LA

Today again we will be part biking and part riding on the tour bus. Distance covered will be 190 kms approximately. We return over the Pele La (for the longest downhill of the trip!) and stay at the Chuzom Sa Resort.



DAY 11 : THIMPHU

We are planning on an early morning departure to visit the Punakha Dzong and then travel over the Dochu La for a chance to view the Bhutanese Himalayas. In the early afternoon, we will return to Thimphu. The rest of the day is free to roam Thimphu for sightseeing, shopping or more riding, or we can visit at the Thimphu Dzong.

DAY 12: EXPLORE TAKTSANG

Today we transfer back to Paro and then drive the winding road beside the pa chu (chu means river or water) to Satsam Chorten. From this point, we begin the challenging hike to Taktsang, the Tiger's Nest. A vantage point directly across a gorge from the temple can be reached in about four hours.

This magical monastery clings to a vertical granite cliff 200 ft above the valley floor. Legend says that Guru Padmasambhava flew here on the back of a tiger to meditate. The tiger was actually his favourite consort, Yeshe Tshogyel, whom he transformed in to a flying tiger for the purposes of this journey. They meditated in the cave and when the Guru left he instructed that the monastery be built.

With a relaxing of the restrictions, which were in effect until January of 1991, we may be allowed to enter Taktsang. If so, it must be noted that it is one of the most holy and revered pilgrimage sites in Bhutan. Our behaviour within the temple complex will directly related to future permissions to enter the area. The temple tour guide will notify us of the appropriate behaviour.

Tonight we will have a farewell dinner together as we enjoy our last evening in Bhutan.

DAY 13: DEPARTURE

After breakfast, we return to the airport for our departure from the land of the Thunder Dragon for Bangkok on Druk Air, and then onward travel home.

The Expedition Fee

The cost of the expedition ex Bangkok is: **US\$6,875 per person**

This is an inclusive cost and covers the following:

- * Bhutan government royalty fees
- * All trip organisational requirements
- * Hotel/lodge accommodation and all meals in Bhutan
- * All permits/visas to visit Bhutan
- * Air transport from Bangkok to Paro and return on Druk Air (US\$895)
- * Back up tour bus for the cycling days
- * Local Bhutanese tour guide
- * Mountain bike repair technician and tools
- * Personal baggage allowance of 20kg per person

The trek fee does not include the following:

- * Air travel to/from Bangkok, Thailand

- * Accommodation or meals in Bangkok
- * Mountain bike suitable for off-road riding and travel bag/box
- * Purchases of bottled water while on the trip, gifts or alcohol.
- * Personal clothing and equipment
- * Excess baggage charges on flights to/from Paro, Bhutan
- * Personal travel / trip cancellation / rescue insurance

Deposit

A deposit of US\$500 is payable to secure a place on the Bhutan Mountain Biking 2012 trip.

Balance

The balance of US\$6,375 is payable by 25 July 2012.

Payments

All payments can be made by bank transfer to the following bank and account:

Bank of New Zealand
Offshore Branch
Wellington
New Zealand

for the account of ;

Adventure Consultants Limited

Account # **1000-594771-0000**

Account Type: US Dollars

Or, we can accept a US Dollar bank draft made out to Adventure Consultants Limited.

We can accept payment via Visa, Mastercard or Amex.

Cancellation & Refund Policy

A trip member may cancel his/her participation on the following basis:

- A Prior to 25 August 2012, a refund of 50% of the 25 July payment.
- B After 25 August 2012 there will be no refunds.

Team members should take out private trip cancellation insurance if they wish to be covered against cancellation due to medical or personal or other reasons.

Team Membership

For the Bhutan Mountain Bike trip we will take a maximum of 12 mountain bikers, hence spaces are limited.

Fitness and what to expect

We are cycling in high and remote terrain at moderately high altitudes. It would be best to have a moderate level of fitness to enjoy the experience to its fullest. The trails are sometimes steep and a couple of the days are quite long but it is possible to ride in the accompanying tour bus when you run out of steam. Weather can deteriorate and rain, strong winds and even some snow are possible. However we are travelling at a mild time of the year in the fall to best appreciate the surroundings.

Bikes

We recommend that you bring a mountain bike that you are familiar with, i.e. not too new. The bike should at least have front suspension, but full suspension is not a necessity either. As the trip crosses several high altitude passes, your bike should be suitable for sustained climbing. Tyres suitable for riding on hard packed, off road conditions, are recommended.

It is very important that your bike is in excellent running order before the trip. If you have servicing work done before leaving for Bhutan, make sure you have ridden your bike several times before departure, ensuring everything is working as it should be.

We will be carrying tools and some spare parts for roadside repairs. Do not expect to be able to purchase any bicycle products while in Bhutan. If you are bringing a mountain bike with 29 inch wheels, please let us know this when booking your trip.

Travel to and from Bhutan

There is only one national airline for Bhutan, Druk Air. The airline operates two BAe146-100 series aeroplanes. There is generally only one flight per day out of Bangkok and they are very strict about baggage allowances. We will need to limit the amount of baggage we can take to Bhutan and ideally you should travel with one robust bike bag/box and one smaller travel duffel containing your personal gear. The airline allows 20kg of baggage per person so expect to pay some excess baggage in order to get your bike on to the same flight. Mountain bikes weigh on average 15kg so the excess baggage charge has been about US\$100 per person per flight in the past. Please keep in mind that the extra effort to travel internationally with your bike will be rewarded by being able to mountain bike in Bhutan!

Food and Lodging

Food will be of the highest standard possible, given the remoteness of the situation, but please rest assured that the standard of lodging in Bhutan is in fact very high. Breakfast and dinner will be buffet style meals in the Bhutanese lodges and lunches will be taken in villages along the way or a daily packed lunch. Please inform us if you have any special dietary requirements.

As mentioned, the standard of the lodges and Hotel that we will stay at is very good, for travel in a Himalayan mountain kingdom. Rooms will be on a twin or dormitory share basis and you will not need to bring a sleeping bag as linen is supplied.

Festivals

The dates for festivals in Bhutan change every year. Our trip will overlap with the following festivals and we will endeavour to experience some of these where possible. Please note that the Thimpu Tsechu is the busiest festival in Bhutan so it can be very busy around Paro and Thimphu at this time, but other areas of Bhutan further east where we travel remain relatively quiet.

- Thimphu Drupchen Festival is September 20 – 24, 2012
 - Thimphu Tsechu Festival is September 25 – 27, 2012
 - Tangbi Mani Festival in Bumthang region is September 29 – October 1, 2012
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Equipment List

A list detailing all the necessary clothing and equipment trip members need to bring will be sent to you upon receiving your booking confirmation. If you have any queries about items on the list please do ask, as we can help you source any items you are missing or needing to upgrade with our retail service.

Medical Examination

Trip members will be provided with a medical questionnaire and asked to return this to us prior to the trip. This information will be sighted only by our consulting doctor(s) and treated with confidentiality. Advice on immunisations will be provided at this time.

Documents and Photographs

Trip members will need to provide 3 passport-photographs for permits to travel in Bhutan and a copy of their passport bio-data page.

Recommended Reading

'Kingdoms Beyond the Clouds – Journeys in Search of the Himalayan Kings' by Jonathan Gregson, published by MacMillan, 2000.

'A Baby in a Backpack to Bhutan' by Bunty Avieson, published by MacMillan, 2004.

'Beyond the Sky and the Earth; A Journey into Bhutan' by Jamie Zeppa.

What do I do now ?

If you would like to join us mountain biking in Bhutan, please fill out the an application form and forward to our office along with the deposit. If you require more information please contact us at;

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