

Bhutan's Bumthang Valley

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London	Day 8/13	Trekking
Day 2	Kathmandu	Day 14	Gangtey
Day 3/4	Fly Paro	Day 15	Punakha
Day 5	Punakha	Day 16	Paro
Day 6	Trongsa	Day 17	Fly Kathmandu.
Day 7	Jakar, Bumthang Valley	Day 18	Fly London.

Dates

Tuesday 4th May – Friday 21st May 2021
Tuesday 3rd May – Friday 20th May 2022

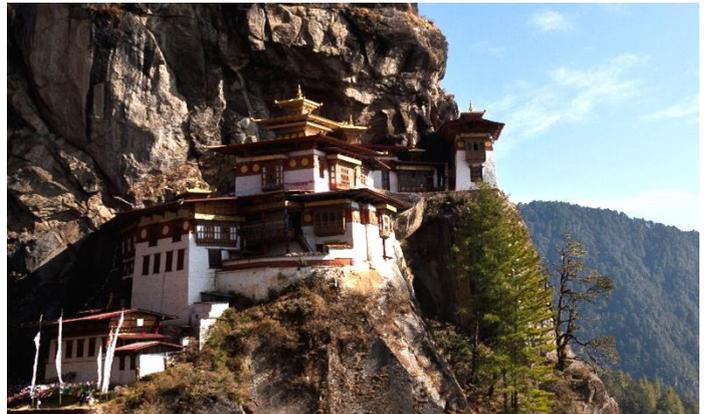
Cost

From £5,495 (London/London);
£4,895 (Kathmandu/ Kathmandu)

Single room supplement
£695

Grading
Grade B. Moderate. Between
2,160 and 4,160 metres

Focus
Plants, birds and culture



The Tiger's Nest (top), *Rhododendron hodgsonii* (left) and Buddhist monk (right)



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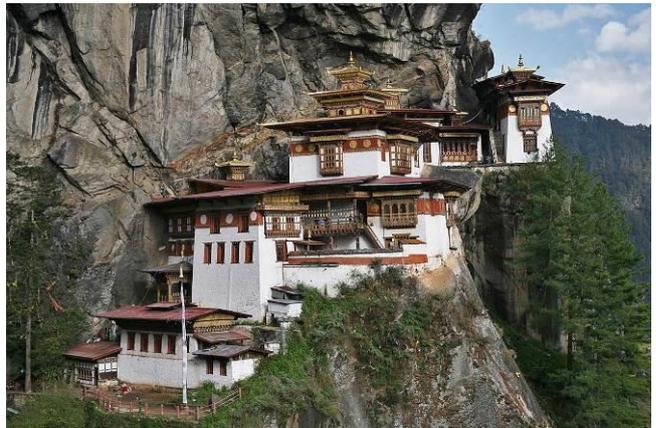
Kiki La



Piptanthus lanuginosus



Rhododendron hodgsonii



Paro Taktsang



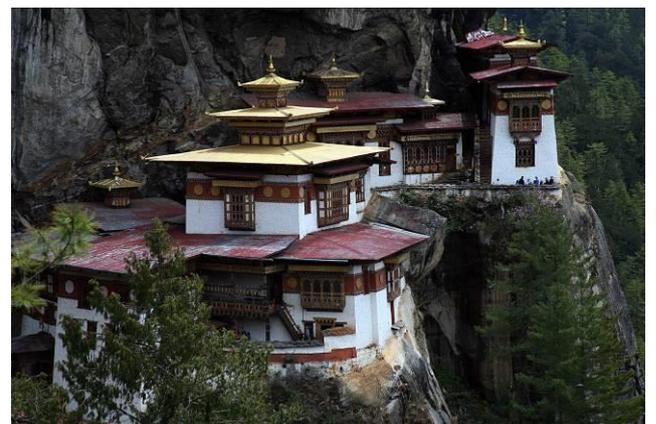
Euphorbia griffithii



Piptanthus lanuginosus



Rhododendron hodgsonii



Tiger's Nest

N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

In Flight

We depart from London this afternoon on board Qatar Airways' scheduled flight to Kathmandu, via Doha. Please note that airlines flying to Kathmandu are very limited and therefore seats get booked up early. We may not always be able to accommodate group members on Qatar Airways, in which case alternatives such as Jet Airways or Gulf Air may be used on some occasions.



Euphorbia griffithii

Day 2

Kathmandu

We arrive in Kathmandu in the morning and transfer to our 5-star hotel, the Yak and Yeti. Site of a former palace, it is extremely comfortable and its pleasant grounds allow us the chance to see some of the commoner birds of the Kathmandu Valley such as Magpie Robins, Common Mynas, Red-vented Bulbuls and Indian House Crows. We have the rest of the day free for relaxation and to venture into the old city.

Day 3

Fly to Paro, Bhutan

Today we will transfer to the airport to board our flight to Paro. Situated in the Paro Valley of the eastern Himalaya, the town is full of legends, heroism, and natural splendour. The capital of Bhutan is Thimphu, but during Bhutan's history Paro has played a more significant role in controlling this part of the country. The town is located at an altitude of 2,250 metres above sea level, surrounded by farmland and forested hills. With a total length of only one mile and just one main street, Paro is one of the smallest towns on earth to have an international airport.

In the late afternoon we may visit the National Museum and the enormous Paro Dzong (a dzong is a type of fortress). The latter is situated in a stunning location on a little knoll, commanding a view of the whole Paro Valley. It is now the seat of the district commissioner and judge and is accessible by a wooden bridge across the Paro Chu. The watchtower, that guarded the valley stands high



Paro Valley

above the Dzong but was damaged during a recent earthquake. The National Museum has been re-housed close-by and contains a magnificent collection of Bhutanese artifacts: costumes, thankas (painted or embroidered Buddhist ceremonial banners used in monasteries or family altars), arms, textiles, a collection of Bhutan's beautiful stamps and a natural history exhibition.

While travelling in Bhutan, we will be staying in comfortable hotels with en suite facilities.

Day 4

Paro

Paro Taktsang, the Tiger's Nest Monastery, is a temple complex, at an altitude of 3120 metres, built on a cliff in 1692 and considered to be the birthplace of Bhutanese Buddhism. It was destroyed by fire in 1998 and rebuilt in 2005. To reach it involves a stiff climb of 520 metres, taking around 2 hours but the views and the trailside flowers make the effort worthwhile.

According to legend, the Guru Padmasambhava, riding a flying tigress, landed on the cliff when he came from Tibet, in the 8th century, and meditated in a cave. The trail is through forest of Blue Pine *Pinus wallichiana*, where we will encounter



Rhododendron

The Tiger's Nest

arboreum, *R. triflorum*, *Pieris formosa*, *Cotoneaster microphyllus*, the bright yellow *Piptanthus nepalensis* and *Primula smithiana*. After lunch in Paro, time permitting, we will explore the rich diversity of forests up to the Chele La, the high pass to the west, where we see countless Primulas, including the deep-blue *Primula griffithii*, endemic to western Bhutan, an exciting range of Rhododendrons and other shrubs and a range of birds, which may include Kalij and Blood Pheasants.

Day 5

Punakha

We will make an early start this morning to drive eastwards to the Dochu La, a pass at around 3,048 metres. The oak and hemlock forest on, and below, this pass is magnificent and so are the views of the distant Himalayan peaks, when the weather is clear. We will leave our coach on top of the pass and spend several hours exploring the forest. During our walk we will find many shrubs familiar to gardeners, such as *Daphne bholua*, *Enkianthus deflexus*, *Skimmia laureola* and *Sarcococca hookeriana*. Towering specimens of *Magnolia campbellii* and *Rhododendron falconeri* may still be in flower, above our heads, while on the ground we will look for Trillium, Arisaema and the huge leaves of *Cardiocrinum giganteum*. As we near the road, we encounter epiphytic orchids and the beautifully scented *Rhododendron griffithii*. After lunch, we continue our descent to Punakha, where, at just 915 metres above sea level, we encounter a completely different flora.



Punakha Dzong

Punakha Dzong was built in 1637, as a palace and fortress and was the country's seat of government until this was transferred to Thimpu in 1955. It is the second oldest and second largest Dzong in the country and arguably the most majestic, sitting, as it does, at the confluence of the Pho Chu and Mo Chu (father and mother rivers). Today, it is the administrative centre of the district and, because of its mild climate, it remains the winter palace for the country's monastic body.



Punakha Dzong

We will spend the rest of the afternoon exploring this magnificent building, before settling in to our hotel.

Day 6

Trongsa

Another beautiful drive takes us down the valley to Wangdue Phodrang and then once again into Bhutan's rugged forested mountains. The high pass en route is the 3,261 metre Pele La, offering another opportunity to set out, on foot, in search of forest plants and bird life. Our walk is dominated by *Rhododendron hodgsonii*, *R. kesangiae* and *R. thomsonii* among lichen-draped *Betula utilis* and here we have our best chance of seeing the elusive Red Panda. We arrive at Trongsa in mid-afternoon and have time to settle into our lodge (2,164 metres) which looks down on the imposing Trongsa Dzong.

Day 7

Bumthang Valley

We will spend the morning visiting Trongsa Dzong, just a short walk from our lodge. This huge structure overlooks the deep gorge of the Mangde Chu valley and is the ancestral home of Bhutan's royal family.

In late morning we will drive to the Yotong La another beautiful pass at over 3,425 metres. We make roadside stops, whenever possible and take a break for lunch. In the late afternoon we arrive in Jakar, settle in to our hotel, just north of the town and prepare for our trek.

Day 8

Ngang Lhakhang – Camp

The Bumthang Valley is the cultural heartland of central Bhutan. It was only accessible by pony or on foot prior to the 1970's and its many ancient temples, monasteries and sacred sites testify to its long-held traditions. Small shrines, prayer wheels and chortens lurk in shady ravines and village architecture and farming practices have changed little in centuries. We visit several of the important sites, before setting off on the first part of our trek, a beautiful and gentle walk through the pine forests and grassy meadows, above the roaring Chamkar

Chu. In the early afternoon we cross to the east bank of the river and make our way to our campsite at Ngang Lhakhang (2,713 metres), with the rest of the afternoon to explore.



Black Eagle

Day 9

Phephe La – Camping

Today we make a gradual ascent towards the Phephe La pass at 3,597 metres. This is one of the longest days of our trek but for the naturalist a most rewarding one. The forest through which we walk today is quite outstanding, blissfully quiet and entirely untouched. We pass through Blue Pines, damp meadows of dwarf bamboo, towering Himalayan Hemlocks and East Himalayan Spruce. As we climb higher, the flora changes and our campsite is a grassy glade surrounded by maples, birch and rhododendron. There will be plenty of time to explore this rich forest. The rare endemic *Daphne ludlowii* grows nearby, under *Rhododendron kesangiae* and many herbaceous plants include *Primula geraniifolia*, *Primula gracilipes*, *Anemone obtusiloba*, *Adonis brevistyla* and *Bryocarpum*



Rhododendron cinnabarinum

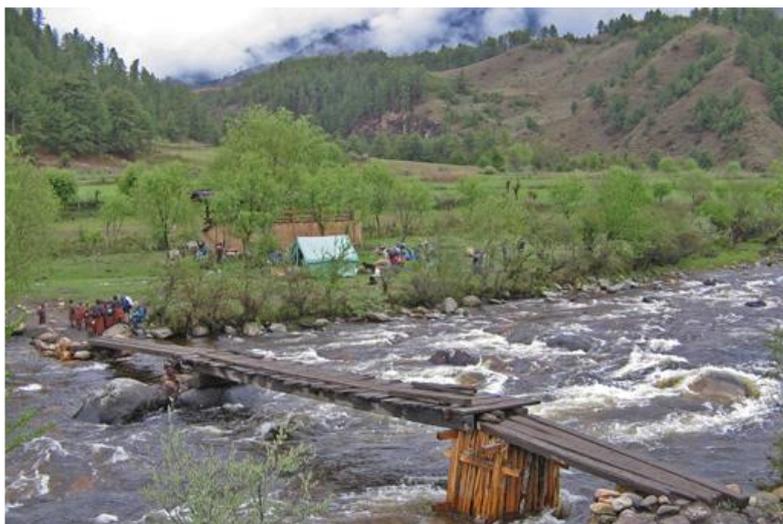
the

himalaicum. Large-eared Pikas live under the logs, in our campsite and Satyr Tragopan, Blood and Impeyan Pheasants can occasionally be encountered in the forest.

Day 10

Mesithang – Camping

A steep initial ascent to the top of the pass introduces us to more rhododendrons, including various colour forms of *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* and the crimson peeling bark of *Rhododendron barbatum*. We then enjoy a gradual descent through forest and



A riverside campsite

meadows into the Tang Valley. Here and there, in the turf are the yellow stars of *Hypoxis aurea* and the purple *Roscoea tibetica*, a member of the ginger family. We camp near the little village of Mesithang (2,652 metres).

Day 11

Phokphey – Camping

Before we leave this morning, we plan to visit the local school, a typical farmhouse and the 16th century manor house at Ogyen Choling, with its interesting museum of Bhutanese artefacts. We then make the long climb to our campsite at Phokphey (3680 metres), a boggy pasture, surrounded by magnificent forest of Bhutan Fir *Abies densa* and rhododendron. New species will include *Rhododendron succothii* and *R. anthopogon* and spectacular drifts of *Primula calderiana*.

Day 12

Phokphey – Camping

Today, we walk slowly through the forest, along an ancient trail, with a final steep climb to the Rudong La, at 4,167 metres. Massive trees of *Rhododendron bogsonii*, give way to *R. wightii*, *R. flinkii*, *R. bhutanense* and dwarf species line the trail. We may be fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of the colourful Himalayan Monal or the resplendent Fire-tailed Sunbird, a high-altitude specialist feeding on rhododendron. If the weather is clear, the views are spectacular and we may be tempted to venture further, before we must return to our campsite.

Day 13

Mesithang – Camping

We have a last look around the campsite, before descending back into the Tang Chu Valley. We have one last night under canvas, by the river, with Plumbeous Water Redstarts and perhaps Ibisbill for company, before we say goodbye to our camp staff and pony-men and are reunited with our coach.

Day 14

Gangtey

We break our long journey back to the west with a night in the wide open landscape of the Phobjikha Valley. The hot showers and wood-burning stove are welcome after our days of trekking! The upland mire, here, as well as being the wintering-ground for the Black-necked Crane, is home to *Rhododendron ciliatum* and the blood-red *R. thomsonii*. The graceful *Larix griffithii* grows in the forest here along with fine specimens of the distinctive *Rhododendron keysii*.



Assam Macaque

Day 15

Punakha

We spend the morning botanising in the vicinity and visiting Gangtey Gompa, a magnificent building, housing the Nyingmapa school of Buddhism. If time allows, we may make more brief roadside stops, on our way back to Punakha, where we stay overnight.

Day 16

Paro

After crossing the Dochu La, we stop at Thimpu, for lunch and sightseeing, before heading back to Paro for our final night in Bhutan.

Day 17

Kathmandu

We depart Paro, this morning, and fly back to Kathmandu. This is one of the most spectacular flights in the world (if the weather is clear!), as it takes us parallel with the Himalaya, past eight of the world's highest ten peaks (including Mount Everest), before descending to Kathmandu. There we will transfer to the Yak and Yeti.

Day 18

London

Today we transfer to Kathmandu airport for our return flight to London. It should be noted that some flights will arrive back into London early the following morning, being an overnight flight. Flight times will be confirmed closer to departure dates.

Trek grading

This trek is graded B. Of six days duration, it is not a long trek, and the altitudes reached should not cause any acclimatisation problems, especially as our progress to our 4,167-metre high-point is extremely gradual. However, two hot and steep climbs of 914 metres will certainly tax anyone who is unfit! Age should be no barrier. Many fit 70-year-olds have enjoyed this trek in the past, and if you have any doubts, we are usually able to hire you a private pony (cost: c. £10 per day), provided that you warn us well in advance of the trek!

Weather

Although Bhutan can boast an annual rainfall to match any in the world, we will be travelling before the monsoon season and expect generally dry weather. Mornings certainly should be clear, though afternoon cloud and occasional rain, sometimes heavy, is likely. On trek we can expect this same weather pattern. Daytime temperatures are likely to be pleasant, at between 15 and 25°C. At altitude it will be cooler and, at our highest camp, light frost or snow is possible.

Entry requirements

All UK passport holders and most other nationalities require a visa for Nepal, which is obtainable in advance from your nearest Embassy. No vaccinations are mandatory for entry, but as recommended in our brochure we think it is wise to be protected against TB, polio, typhoid, tetanus and hepatitis A and take malaria prophylactics. We recommend that you consult your GP or local Travel Health Clinic about your requirements as soon as possible before travelling. For Bhutan according to current regulations, our ground agents in Bhutan are able to obtain your Bhutan visa for you. To apply for your Bhutan visa, please send us a **photocopy of your passport in colour as black and white are not accepted** (clearly showing your photograph, passport number, date of issue, date of expiry and your date of birth).

Food and accommodation

All meals and accommodation are included, except for lunches and dinners in Kathmandu.

Inclusions / Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International and domestic flights in economy class.
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner) except for lunches and dinners in Kathmandu. We use comfortable tourist hotels and lodges with private facilities.
- All transport and guiding.
- All wildlife excursions, park fees and reserve entry fees.

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Nepal and Bhutan visa (currently £35 and US\$40 respectively).
- Drinks (though most lodges in the national parks provide boiled drinking water or a bottle of water with their compliments).
- Discretionary tipping.
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Bhutan. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

Mammal, bird & plant lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

Tour leader

Pema Dawa or another local guide.

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A Bhutanese Christmas in April

Naturetrek client Alison Evans has sent us this wonderful account of her trip to Bhutan with us in April.

It was dark when we crossed the Bhutanese border but the contrast, between the hustle and bustle, the litter-strewn roads and the general disarray in India with the peace and quiet serenity of Bhutan, was already evident. Later, heading further east, we seemed drawn into a time warp.

Arriving at our very comfortable, homely, Paro hotel, we were greeted with refreshing ginger tea. The following morning, well rested, our tour began with an auspicious start - close up sightings of four Ibisbill along the nearby river. Our initial challenge, in preparation for our trek, was the steep but steady climb to the Tiger's Nest monastery. Spurred on by the spectacular views and new floral discoveries from minute gentians to our first rhododendrons, we reached the viewpoint to peer at the monastery clinging alongside pines to the otherwise bare cliff-face.

This trip was so much more than just a botanical tour. Naturetrek's David Tattersfield is an amazing botanist with an encyclopaedic knowledge extending also to birds, geology and local culture. We soon understood why he enthused so much about Bhutan. Travelling along the limited road network, we saw steep-sided valleys with vast unexplored tracts of impenetrable forest. Photographs cannot accurately convey the spectacular panoramas of hillsides covered with flowering rhododendrons, pieris, daphnes, viburnums, cherries, huge magnolias and other fabulous spring blossoms.



David Tattersfield (left)

Everywhere locals took pride in their traditional dress and fiercely maintained their cultural heritage. Small villages retained well-tended vegetable plots, rice terraces and orchards. We visited several unique fortress-like dzongs, the most impressive being Punakha Dzong set between two rivers and surrounded by the emerging purple haze of Jacaranda trees. Here, wildlife was always present: nesting Choughs alongside wild beehives and noisy Assam Macaques.

We walked in meadows amongst drumstick primulas blooming as far as the eye could see. There were anemones, trilliums and weird looking arisaemas. Shrikes were as common as sparrows. Whistling and Laughing Thrushes broke the silence, brilliantly coloured minivets and sunbirds flitted around the forests; Dippers and Water Redstarts hopped besides the clear rivers; Himalayan Griffons, Black Eagles and Snow Pigeons flew high above and secretive Blood Pheasants scurried past as dusk neared.

There were unique cultural elements too. Simple pleasures persist. In Thimpu we watched the accuracy of archers using traditional bows hitting a target we could barely make out. We enjoyed a school visit meeting smiling, polite, well-disciplined children and encountered yak herders in the high pastures. On a farmhouse tour we sampled freshly cooked buckwheat pancakes and butter and were given a loom weaving demonstration. One evening, despite torrential rain, resourceful villagers constructed a canopied area so we should not miss a promised traditional dancing performance.

There were many local characters but my abiding memory is of the unforgettable joy of the deaf and dumb craftsman who grinned constantly after selling us his entire stock of hand-carved wooden spatulas!

David's enthusiasm for the natural world was infectious. While Jatsho, our cultural guide, expanded his ornithological knowledge, Tshering, our personable bus driver, concentrated on the flora. Tshering was so keen to learn he joined us on what was his first trek and delighted in pointing out the newly learned rhododendron names to assist the slower learners in our party - oh for a young memory! He caused great amusement by donning a lichen beard to become 'Bhutanese David'. He and David were photographed like twin Father Christmases – little did we know that a more magical treat was to follow!

We camped at remote Phokphey (3,680 metres) to prepare for the next day's ascent to the highest point of our six-day trek, the Rudong La pass. We awoke to sunshine and a picture postcard scene of Christmas colours – dark green Eastern Himalayan Silver Firs and red bauble-like rhododendron flowers covered in glistening snow. My memories of this magical trip highlight remain as that. I had foolishly forgotten to keep my camera batteries warm overnight and, despite having four, all refused to function until the snow had melted later that day.

As we commenced the climb the group's camaraderie helped providing encouragement to continue upwards to reach the pass. It was not difficult but tiring due to the decreased oxygen levels. We all succeeded, each in our own time, stopping periodically to admire the Himalayas and spot plants emerging as the snow melted. These included dwarf rhododendrons and David's dark purple 'brussel sprout' primula (*Primula calderiana*).

Spring's progress, as we returned to Paro, provided an insight into the next floral spectacle to appear – meconopsis, gentians and more. We had braved the snow, endured a night of torrential rain and, like the early plant hunters, we fought our way through dense bamboo but none of these could dampen the experience of visiting this wonderful last 'Shangri-La'.



'Brussel Sprout' Primula (*Primula calderiana*)