

## **BEAUTIFUL LAYA/GASA TREK**

**Day 01. Arrive Paro:** The flight into Paro on our national carrier, Druk Air, is a befitting introduction to the spectacular beauty of our country. In clear weather, magnificent views of the world's highest peaks give way in the lush green Paro valley as you land. Your Bhutanese escort from Dragon Tours and Adventures will greet you on arrival, and then drive you the short distance to your hotel.

**Day 02. Paro:** Your journey into the Thunder Dragon Kingdom will begin with a drive in the morning to the ruins of the Drukgyal Dzong 16 km up the valley. Built in 1647 by the great Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, father and unifier of medieval Bhutan, the dzong was destroyed by accidental fire and left in ruins as an evocative reminder of the great victories it was built to commemorate. Explore the ramparts and on a clear day experience an unforgettable view of Mt. Jhomolhari. On the way back, visit Kichu Lhakhang that was built in 659 by the Tibetan King Srongsen Gampo and Ta Dzong, an ancient watchtower, which now houses the National Museum. Below the museum is the Paro Rimpung Dzong, the center of civil and religious authority in this valley. A short walk takes you to the base of the dzong and across a traditional cantilevered, covered bridge. nearby is one of the innumerable archery grounds. Archery is the national sport of Bhutan. If we are lucky, we may catch a match in action. The evening ends with a stroll through Paro's main shopping district.

**Day 03. Paro, Excursion to Taktshang Monastery:** This is a very special day with an excursion to view the spectacular Taktshang (Tiger's Nest) Monastery. After breakfast, a short drive takes us to Satsam Chorten, from there a two hour horse ride till the viewpoint point of the monastery. The trail climbs through beautiful pine forest, many of the trees festooned with Spanish moss, and an occasional grove of fluttering prayer flags. We stop for a rest and light refreshments at the Taktshang Jakhang (cafeteria) and then walk a short distance until we see, clearly and seemingly within reach, Taktsang monastery. Built in the 1600s, this incredible monastery clings to the edge of a sheer rock cliff that plunges 900 m into the valley below. Legend has it that Guru Padmasambhava, (Guru Rimpoche) the tantric mystic who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, landed here on the back of a flying tiger. Lunch will be served at the cafeteria, followed by a short walk to Satsam Chorten for the drive to the hotel.

**Day 04. Paro – Shana (Start of Trek):** (Distance 14 kms. Time 5/6 hrs. Altitude 2,820 m, 9,250 ft) Our trek to Shana starts at Drukgyal Dzong. Following the Paro River, we pass cultivated fields and tiny picturesque villages. The forests are alive with numerous birds and brightly colored butterflies. We overnight at camp Shana.

**Day 05. Shana-Thangthangka:** (Distance 21 kms. Time 7/8 hrs. Altitude 3610 m, 11,850 ft) The trail follows the river through a heavily forested area with several isolated farmhouses, narrows and closes-in as it winds up and down along the drainage. We pass a junction enroute, where another path leads north over the Tremo La to Tibet. Overnight camp is in a meadow with a stone shelter.

**Day 06. Thangthangka-Jangothang:** (Distance 15 km. Time 5/6 hrs. Altitude 4,115 m, 13,500 ft) In the morning, after passing a small army post, the trail slowly leaves the forest line and gradually climbs into a beautiful valley passing Tegethang, a winter home

of yak herdsman. Lunch will be served in one of these huts. Lots of yaks will be seen today before we arrive at the Jhomolhari base camp. High mountains overlook the camp and visible nearby are the ruins of an old fortress used to guard Bhutan against Tibetan invasions.

**Day 07. Jangothang:** A rest day. A chance to acclimatize and walk to the Jhomolhari glacier or to the lakes in the opposite direction.

**Day 08. Jangothang – Lingshi:** (Distance 17 kms. Time 6/7 hrs. Altitude 4,700 m. 15,400 ft) A good day's walk today with spectacular views of Jhomolhari, Jichu Drake and Tserim Gang. We start climbing straight away and after some three to four hours reach the Nyelela La. After the pass, we descend to a circular hut just below Lingshi, where we camp for the night. Coming down from Lingshi we obtain our first views of a truly mystical dzong atop a high hill.

**Day 09. Lingshi – Chebisa:** (Distance 12 kms. Time 4/5 hrs. Altitude 3,780 m, 12,400 ft) This is a magical day. Leaving Lingshi behind, we gently climb to reach another delightful village, Gom Yu, which is set right below a cliff. Another hour's walk brings us to a lovely little valley with a huge waterfall at one end of the Shangri La village of Chebisa, where we camp by the side of the river. The walk is leisurely with plenty of reasons and opportunities to linger.

**Day 10. Chebisa – Shomuthang:** (Distance 17 km. Time 7/8 hrs. Altitude 4,500 m, 14,800 ft) We start with quite a stiff climb through high pastures up to Gokula La before we drop through forests of dwarf rhododendron. We climb again, this time gradually, and then head down to the camp near a riverbed.

**Day 11. Shomuthang – Robluthang:** (Distance 22 km. Time 7/8 hrs. Altitude 4,640 m, 15,200 ft) Today there is a long haul over the Jarela La where we once again get stunning views of the Himalayan mountains above us. Then we drop steeply down a forest trail to the Tsarigathang valley where herds of Takin roam and cross a knee-deep river before climbing up Robluthang to camp.

**Day 12. Robluthang – Lemithang:** (Distance 18 kms. Time 6/7 hrs. Altitude 4,870 m, 16,000 ft) This is one of the hardest days of the trek. We climb slowly up to Shinchela La and are rewarded with stunning views of mountains, including the spectacular Gang Chen Ta at the head of the valley. On a clear day practically all the mountains on the northern border are visible. Eagles, griffin vultures, blue sheep and yaks abound in this area. We descend down to camp on a lovely spot by the riverbank.

**Day 13. Lemithang – Laya:** (Distance 10 kms. Time 4/5 hrs. Altitude 3,880 m, 12,700 ft) We walk along the river, one of the tributaries of the Mochu and through a forest of rhododendron and silver fir and then enter the village of Laya. The people of Laya are famous for their vertical stripe yak hair clothing and their strange conical bamboo hats. The women wear their hair long and much turquoise and jade jewelry. The features of the people are more Tibetan/Mongolian than the Bhutanese who live in the central valleys. The rest of the day is spent at leisure or visiting village houses and mixing with the villagers. There are good views of the Masagang and the other peaks.

**Day 14. Laya:** Rest day. Explore the village. You may visit any of the houses around as, by tradition, one can go to any house without an invitation. A cup of tea or Chang (local drink) is always offered.

**Day 15. Laya - Koena:** (Distance 19 kms. Time 6/7 hrs. Altitude 3,300 m, 10,800 ft) The trail winds along the river valley offering breathtaking views of the crashing river, feeder streams and waterfalls. Overnight is camp at Koena.

**Day 16. Koena - GasaTsachu:** (Distance 15 kms. Time 6/7 hrs. Altitude 3,740 m, 12,300 ft) We gradually climb up to Balela La and then descend to Gasa village. The first view of the Gasa Dzong perched on the hillside over the village is one of the great sights of the trip. We then drop steeply down to the river for an hour and camp near the Hot Springs - an opportunity for a good, hot bath!

**Day 17. Gasa Tsachu - Goen Damji - Punakha (End of Trek):** After the climb away from Gasa Tsachu the trail winds through rolling hillsides with the vista of fields, villages and forests of oak and pine. Gasa Dzong will be visible behind you, glued to the valley wall, seeming afloat in space. The trail descends from the high agricultural benches above the Mochu into a lush semi-tropical gorge filled with banana trees, creepers and the sight of an occasional monkey.

**Day 18. Punakha-Thimphu - Paro:** (Distance - 72 km) After breakfast, visit Punakha Dzong built in 1637 by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and situated between Pho Chu (male river) and Mo Chu (female river). For many years until the time of the second king, it served as the seat of the Government. The construction of the Dzong was foretold by Guru Rimpoche, who predicted, "...a person named Namgyal will arrive at a hill that looks like an elephant." At one time there was a smaller building here called Dzong Chu that housed a statue of Buddha. It is said that Shabdrung ordered the architect, Zowe Palep, to sleep in front of the statue. While Palep was sleeping, the Shabdrung took him in his dreams to Zangtopelri and showed him the palace of Guru Rimpoche. From his vision, the architect conceived the design for the new dzong which, in keeping with tradition, was never committed to paper. The dzong was named Druk Pungthang Dechen Phodrang "Palace of Great Happiness." The war materials captured during the battle with Tibetans are preserved here. Punakha is still the winter residence of the Je-Khenpo and King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk convened the first National Assembly here. After lunch, we will drive to Thimphu and enroute visit Chimi Lhakhang also called the "Temple of Fertility," built by Lama Drukpa Kuenley in 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Day 19. Paro:** Early breakfast. Drive to airport for farewell.