Nestled into the lofty Himalayan Mountains between Tibet and India, the Kingdom of Bhutan — “Land of the Thunder Dragon” — is one of the most exotic destinations and one of the most intriguing countries in the world today — a unique place that few outsiders have had the privilege of visiting. In this mystical and mountainous land of deities and demons, awaiting us are ethereal fortress-monasteries, red-robed monks, and a thriving Buddhist culture. The king decrees "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) as the standard by which to measure the country's wealth. For centuries Bhutan followed a policy of self-imposed isolation. Only in the second half of the 20th century did this amazingly beautiful “Shangri-La” open its doors to the world, throwing off its veil of mystery. The Bhutanese government pursues a very cautious and controlled approach to tourism development, as they are extremely keen to safeguard this tiny country’s environment and its amazingly rich, carefully preserved cultural heritage. The effort involved in visiting this unique country is well worth it for the trip of a lifetime — an unforgettable experience of a sacred land and its people.

Bhutanese art and crafts include textile weaving, wood and slate carving, painting, blacksmithing, and pottery, all of which have elaborate techniques passed on through successive generations. The Bhutanese people and their government are also fiercely conservative of their natural heritage. Small wonder then that 72 percent of the total land area is still covered in deep forests. Yaks, Takin (the national animal), and some rare butterfly and bird species abound, as do wild rhododendron, bamboo, and blue pine forests.
Day 1: October 11, 2014, Arrival into Paro; Drive to Thimphu
The early-morning flight out of Bangkok into Paro (elevation 7,800 ft.) on the national carrier, Drukair, Royal Bhutan Airlines, is a befitting introduction to the spectacular beauty of Bhutan. On a clear day you can take in a wonderful view of the eastern Himalayan lofty snow-capped peaks, including Kanchenchunga (the third highest mountain in the world) and Chomolhari, Bhutan's holy mountain. On arrival, we complete visa formalities and proceed through Customs and Immigration to meet our Bhutanese guide and driver in the arrival hall. We’ll proceed to the capital city, Thimphu (elevation 7,400 ft., population 98,000). The 45-minute drive follows the Paro and Thimphu rivers. The drive contours lovely mountain roads through countryside of terraced rice fields and dense rhododendron and pine forests. En route, you see your first examples of Bhutan’s remarkable traditional architecture, one of the country’s unique cultural treasures. Even the most remote village farmhouses are hand-crafted using the same ancient methods used to create Bhutan’s religious fortresses called Dzongs. After checking in to our upscale hotel the remainder of the day is free to rest up or start your initial exploration around the city — the only capital in the world with no traffic lights! It’s a relaxed, friendly, and informal city. This evening we’ll come together to enjoy our welcome dinner in Bhutan.

Day 2: Thimphu
We have much to see in and around Bhutan’s capital today. After breakfast we visit the National Memorial Chorten, built in memory of the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. A large, Tibetan-style chorten (stone Buddhist monument), it is one of the most visible religious structures in Thimphu, and throughout the day people circumambulate the chorten and pray at a small shrine inside the gate. We continue to the hilly suburb of Motithang to get a bird’s eye view of the city. Nearby is a preserve where we will become acquainted with Bhutan’s national animal, the Takin – a rather odd mammal related to goats but resembling more an antelope. Our guide will explain their interesting story and the legend behind them. Also on our itinerary is the National Textile Museum. After lunch in town we’ll visit the School of Traditional Medicine which prepares and dispenses traditional herbal medicines and continue to the very interesting School of the 13 Traditional Arts where we can admire the skill and artistry of Bhutanese youth who come from all over the country to learn drawing, painting, woodcarving, logistically not possible.
embroidery and statue-making. We continue our drive south to Lungtenzampa to visit the Royal silversmiths at work and then stop by at the Bhutanese Paper factory as well as an incense producer.

Days 3-4: Punakha Valley
This morning we’ll leave the ‘big city’ behind and begin our journey eastward through Bhutan. Heading out of Thimphu the road gradually climbs through apple orchards and then forests of blue pine and cedar, festooned with hanging lichen high up near Dochula Pass (10,000 ft.). This pass offers panoramic views of the Himalayan Mountain ranges (visibility permitting). The area around this pass is believed to be inhabited by numerous spirits, including a cannibal demoness. A temple in the Punakha Valley (which we come to a bit later) was built in honor of the Lama Drukpa Kunley who subdued these spirits and demons. After a brief stop to catch the impressive views, we will descend along a series of hairpin bends, dropping down to the fertile valley of Punakha (4,430 ft.) and its balmy, lush, and beautiful landscapes.

Before proceeding further to Punakha town we will enjoy a fairly easy walk through rice fields to the yellow-roofed Chimi Lhakhang temple, built in 1499, perched on a small hill. This temple is dedicated to the great 14th-century Yogi known as Drukpa Kunley or popularly known as the ‘Divine Madman’ in the west. It is believed that this temple blesses women who seek fertility. A popular pilgrimage spot for the Bhutanese, it is frequented by childless couples and parents who have difficulty raising children. Here we may be blessed with a 10-inch penis, if only for a day. During our time in this area we visit the magnificent Punakha Dzong (fortress-monastery), situated between Pho Chu and Mo Chu (the Male and Female Rivers). The gorgeous fortress commands this river confluence and is certainly one of Bhutan’s most impressive and beautiful buildings. It is now used as the winter seat of the Je Khenpo (the spiritual head of Bhutan). This Dzong also served as the capital seat of the Kingdom for more than three hundred years. Elaborately painted gold, red, and black carved woods add to the artistic touch of the fortress.

The winter capital was located in Punakha in part because it is a warm, well-watered valley with a relatively low altitude of 4,000 feet, allowing for the production of two rice crops each year. Oranges, mangos, bananas, and even papayas are grown here. In Punakha, you may see people from the remote village of Laya. The Layap, as they are known, are yak herders who make the three- or four-day walk to Punakha from their high altitude villages in the Gasa district to trade. Women of Laya are recognizable by their
conical bamboo hats with a center spike of bamboo. Laya’s men wear distinctive black woolen cloaks.

**Days 5-6: Phobjikha Valley**

Today we set out early on the wonderful drive to the central valleys of Bhutan through the country’s rich flora. We resume our climbing up towards the next pass but will deviate off the main road and take another route that leads us down into the beautiful and remote Phobjikha Valley. It’s possible that we’ll encounter yaks along the higher elevations of the road. Because it takes extra time to get here, this part of Bhutan sees fewer tourists than in Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha. In fact, until the 1970s the only way to reach this part of Bhutan was on foot or atop a sure-footed horse. This broad, bowl-shaped glacial valley serves as the winter home for the rare and endangered species of black-necked cranes that migrate from the plateau of Tibet when it gets cold. The birds migrate to Bhutan sometime in the fall and return to Tibet in the spring. They occupy a special place in Bhutanese hearts and folklore, inspiring songs and dances. Their arrival usually heralds the end of harvest season and the time when farm families begin migrating to warmer climates. Also in this area live barking deer, wild boar, Himalayan black bear, leopard, and red fox.

The rest of the day and the following day are spent exploring the Phobjikha Valley, including a hike in the valley and a visit to the Gangtey Monastery. Its prayer hall is built in the Tibetan style with eight great pillars and is one of the largest in Bhutan. Much of the woodwork inside and out is in the process of being replaced, so it’s likely that we’ll see craftsmen at work as they carve the wood onsite.

**Day 7: Thimphu**

Today we return to the capital, Thimphu, for some further investigation of what Bhutan’s lively “metropolis” has to offer, including the bustling weekend market. You may also want to see what nightlife is like in Bhutan!
Days 8-9: Paro

The last leg of our journey in this wonderful Himalayan Mountain kingdom takes us to Paro and its environs. When we reach Paro we will first visit the ancient ruins of Drukgyal Dzong, built in 1647 in a location chosen for its control of the route to Tibet. It was named ‘Druk’ (Bhutan) ‘gyel’ (victory) to commemorate the victory of Bhutan over Tibetan invaders. The fortress was featured on the cover of National Geographic magazine when an article about Bhutan was published in 1914! The fortress served as an administrative center until 1951 when a fire brought it down. This wonderful site sits at the very end of the road leading out of Paro towards the Tibetan border. From here clear skies will permit a magnificent view of Mount Jhomolhari (24,355 ft.), Bhutan’s divine mountain, rising above lush rice terraces and apple orchards.

Closer to town we come to Kyichu Lhakhang temple, one of Bhutan’s oldest and most beautiful temples, built in the seventh century by Tibetan King Songtsen Gonpo to pin down, as the story goes, the left foot of a giant ogress who was thwarting the establishment of Buddhism into Tibet. Also on our program is a visit to the excellent National Museum of Bhutan, which contains works of art, handicrafts, costumes, armor, and rare stamps.

An easy hike down from the museum leads us to Rinpung Dzong (meaning ‘fortress on a heap of jewels’), both the religious and secular center of Paro, and certainly the most dominant feature in the valley. It is one of the country’s most impressive Dzongs and is yet another fine example of Bhutanese architecture. We’ll cross the Paro River on a traditional wooden covered bridge and then have a leisurely stroll through Paro town.

On our last full day in Bhutan we’ll spend the morning hiking to the legendary 17th-century Taksang Goemba (Tiger’s Nest), the most famous of Bhutan’s monasteries, miraculously perched on the side of a sheer cliff nearly a thousand feet above the floor of Paro valley. It is believed that in the 8th century Guru Rimpoche, the tantric mystic who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, landed here on the back of a flying tigress to subdue a demon. Guru Rimpoche is supposed to have meditated here for three months, and it is considered something of a ‘Mecca’ for Buddhists. The trail to the monastery climbs through beautiful blue pine forest, many of the trees festooned with Spanish moss, and an occasional grove of fluttering prayer flags. We stop at the wooden teahouse-restaurant (which offers an impressive view of the monastery) for a rest and then continue the hike (if you wish) for another half hour until we see, clearly and seemingly within reach, the imposing Taksang monastery. A spectacular outlook puts us ‘eyeball to eyeball’ with the monastery, which appears to be
growing out of the rock on the other side of a deep chasm. A short descent and ascent finally bring us to the monastery entrance. All together the hike is about two and a half hours going up to the monastery; about an hour and a half coming back. The gain in elevation is about 1,000 feet to the teahouse-restaurant and another 600-foot gain or so from there to the look-out.

We return to our beautiful hotel in Paro for a late lunch and to relax for the remainder of the afternoon -- perhaps indulging in a massage or a hot-stone bath, walking the pretty grounds, or enjoying the tea lounge -- before coming together for our farewell dinner to celebrate our last evening in Bhutan.

Day 10: October 20, 2014, Departure
This morning we’ll drive to the nearby Paro Airport to begin our homeward journey. Our guide will bid us farewell and soon the remote and legendary Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon disappears again behind its majestic guardian mountains.

Logistical Note: The flight from Paro to Bangkok typically arrives in Bangkok in the mid to late afternoon. It is prudent to allow for a very generous connection time in Bangkok in case of a flight delay out of Bhutan.

ITINERARY NOTES
This program is subject to change. While the broad stroke of the itinerary will not be altered, we reserve the right to revise some of the specific sights visited at each stage of the program. This itinerary intends to provide you with a very good idea of the likely trip schedule. However, the itinerary is subject to change either before departure or during the trip. Because of possible changes in air schedules and the complex nature of the itinerary, the possibility exists that the order of events may vary from what is reflected here. Factors such as weather and other conditions may dictate itinerary changes either before departure or while on the tour. We also reserve the right to change this schedule in the interest of the trip participants’ safety, comfort, and general well being.

TOUR LEADER
Our Tour Leader in Bhutan is an American who has made nearly 20 visits to this fascinating country in the past half-dozen years — having led numerous tour groups there. His love of the country and culture is infectious, and owing to his extensive experience we’re able to offer a unique program in which our guests can enjoy a much more intimate experience of Bhutan than that provided by other tour operators by way of a good network of local contacts — including some who are gay and can provide insight into gay life in Bhutan. On our tour we’ll be able to meet local friends and contacts in workplace settings and/or private homes. Accompanying him will be one of Bhutan’s most experienced local guides — an energetic and charismatic man who is full of information, patience, and humility. In the
company of these two remarkable men your Bhutan tour will be comfortable, fascinating, and memorable!

ARRIVAL / DEPARTURE
On Day 1 we will take an early-morning flight from Bangkok (Thailand) to Paro (Bhutan), where our trip leader and local guide will meet us on arrival. The flight may stop en route in India. You will need to arrive in Bangkok on October 10 the latest, and you may want to consider a hotel at or near the airport because of the early departure time the next morning. You may also want to think about scheduling your travel so that you arrive in Bangkok even sooner in case your flight to Bangkok is cancelled or delayed for whatever reason so that you don’t miss the departure from Bangkok to Paro on the morning of October 11. At the end of the trip you will be transferred to the Paro airport for the flight from Paro to Bangkok. This flight typically arrives in Bangkok in the mid to late afternoon. It is wise to allow for a very generous connection time in Bangkok in case of a flight delay out of Bhutan.

The Bangkok/Paro/Bangkok flights are on the Bhutanese national carrier, Drukair, Royal Bhutan Airlines, and are booked by Venture Out through our Bhutanese operator.

PRICING
$4,595 (13-15 participants)
$4,795 (9-12 participants)
$4,895 (5-8 participants)

Single Supplement: $695

Included in Tour Cost
• All accommodations (7 nights in upscale hotels; 2 nights in more standard, but comfortable, accommodation)
• All meals
• All beverages except imported alcoholic beverages
• American tour manager with extensive experience leading tours in Bhutan
• English-speaking, very experienced Bhutanese tour guide with excellent cultural knowledge
• All ground transportation throughout the country in a Toyota Coaster bus or similar
• Airport pick-up and drop-off
• All sightseeing activities and entry fees to monasteries and other sights mentioned in the itinerary
• Government welfare levy for health and education initiatives and sustainable tourism development fund
• Bhutan visa fee
Not Included in Tour Cost

- International airfare and en-route stopovers in Bangkok
- Drukair Royal Bhutan Airlines arrangements to/from Bhutan (Venture Out will coordinate this. Please allow $920 per person for the round-trip economy-class fare
  Bangkok/Paro/Bangkok; $1,120 business class; subject to change.)
- Tipping to tour manager, local guide, and driver
- Imported alcoholic beverages
- Medical immunizations prior to departure, if needed
- Optional travel insurance for trip cancellation, travel delay, baggage, emergency medical evacuation, etc.
- Any costs arising out of unforeseen circumstances such as inclement weather, flight cancellations, or any other factors beyond the control of Venture Out or our operators.
- Items of a personal nature such as small offerings at temples, passport issuance/renewal (if applicable), laundry, phone calls, gifts, and so forth.

Single Supplements

Costs are based on double occupancy. Upon request we will attempt to match solo travelers with a suitable roommate. If no one is available to share, the single supplement charge will apply. If you are traveling solo and your preference is to have your own room, please indicate that on your trip enrollment form. The single supplement will be applied to your final invoice.

No refunds can be made for any unused accommodations, services, sightseeing, etc.

Drukair Royal Bhutan Airlines Tickets

Drukair tickets must now be paid for and issued shortly after the time of your initial tour deposit, and these air tickets are non-refundable. Please see “Trip Cancellation Insurance” further on.

TOURISM REGULATION IN BHUTAN

Tourism in Bhutan is managed through partnership of government regulators and private tour operators under a policy summed up by “limited, high value, low impact.” The Bhutanese government sets a fixed, minimum daily tourist tariff that is applicable to all tour operators in Bhutan. The government regulates the cost in order to manage tourism in a sensible and sustainable way, avoiding negative effects on both the environment and the culture. The major share of the tariff that goes to the government is used for providing health and education services as well as maintaining the infrastructure for tourism.

When you visit Bhutan you become one of the few who have experienced the charm and magic of one of the world’s most enigmatic countries, and you’ll be doing your part in this medieval kingdom’s efforts to join the modern world, while steadfastly balancing that with its distinct and amazing cultural identity.
CLIMATE / SEASON
Although Bhutan is a Himalayan country, it is in a southern latitude so it can get quite warm in the sun. You may be surprised to learn that Bhutan lies at the same latitude as Miami and Cairo, but the climate varies considerably according to elevation. The autumn season arrives in September and lasts until mid-November. At this time, skies tend to be the clearest. Clouds sometimes form in the afternoons, disappearing at night to reveal brilliantly starry skies. The fall is an ideal time for traveling throughout Bhutan, when skies are generally clear and the high mountain peaks rise to a vivid blue sky. While the climate is best at this time of year, there could still be some rain.

In the area of Thimphu and Paro the average daytime high temperature is around 68 F (20 C) during this period, whereas the average overnight low is around 48 F (9 C). The Punakha area, being lower in elevation, sees an average high of around 80 F (27 C) during the day and 63 F (17 C) at night.

ACCOMMODATIONS
Bhutan's tourism infrastructure is still somewhat in its infancy, which is one of the country's greatest draws, but it doesn't make for the most luxurious accommodation at every stage of the way. That said, there have been a number of upmarket accommodations to open in very recent years (even some super luxury ones), and we’ve arranged to stay in high-end properties for almost all of this tour. There is no grading system (star categorization) of accommodations in Bhutan. We arrange the best available accommodation in each local destination (although we do not use the super-luxe lodgings).

Our selected hotels in Thimphu, Punakha, and Paro (a total of seven nights) are beautiful and upscale and offer a great deal of comfort and service. We have two nights in a more typical, standard lodge in the Phobjikha Valley. It’s well situated, cozy, and comfortable but more on the rustic side. The rooms do have private bathrooms.

Most rooms are twin-bedded. Dining is typically buffet-style at the hotels.

TRANSPORTATION
The roads used for some of our itinerary pass through some rugged terrain, which limits speeds to around 15-25 mph. But en route you will have spectacular views of landscapes, snow-capped mountains, lush green valleys, unpolluted crystal clear rivers, farmlands, waterfalls, and villages. Transportation is in a Toyota Coaster bus or similar vehicle.
Bhutan is a small country (about the size of Switzerland) and we do not cover great distances, but movement can be slow because of the terrain. Our longer drives would be around four hours on Day 5 and about five and a half hours on Day 7.

**TRIP DEMANDS**
While this is not an “adventure trip” by any means, this tour will be best enjoyed if you are in good physical condition for the journey because we are on our feet quite a bit, and we also do some easy to moderate hikes during the program. The hike to the ‘Tiger’s Nest’ involves the most physical exertion on the trip, and it comes at the end of the tour when we will be well acclimatized to the altitudes.

This tour entails some long drives on narrow, winding, mountainous roads. Bathroom facilities during some of these drives may be limited, and sometimes the best option is a nearby tree or rock. Anyone who would be uncomfortable in such a situation should not consider this trip.

The number of nights we stay at each accommodation, in order, is 2-2-2-1-2.

**TRAVEL DOCUMENTS**
A valid passport is required for your trip, and it should be valid for at least six months beyond your departure from Bhutan. You will need a visa for Bhutan. Venture Out will help to arrange your visa through our Bhutanese operator. We will need a clear photocopy or scanned email attachment of your passport photo page.

**HEALTH PRECAUTIONS**
Please consult with your physician regarding travel immunizations, such as hepatitis and typhoid fever vaccines as well as a booster for tetanus-diphtheria. Malaria pills are not needed for the areas of Bhutan we’ll be visiting. For those who are prone to discomfort at high altitudes, you may want to consider a medication for that, such as Diamox. The highest point we’ll reach is about 10,300 feet when we drive over a pass, and we have two nights at around 9,500 feet.

Entry requirements and international health situations are subject to change; check with the [Centers for Disease Control](https://www.cdc.gov) for updates. Another useful site is [MD Travel Health](https://www.mdtavelhealth.org).

**TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE**
We highly recommend that all clients purchase trip cancellation insurance. A travel insurance application will be provided with your confirmation when you enroll on the trip. Please review the cancellation policy in the Terms & Conditions that accompanies the Trip Enrollment Form.
CAVEAT
While as accurate as possible at the time of printing, this itinerary should be considered an approximate indication of the schedule and scope of activities, trip routing, and meals, rather than an inflexible schedule of events; it is subject to change due to circumstances beyond our control. We reserve the right to maintain flexibility in order to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities. This trip is subject to the Limitation of Liability and all the Terms and Conditions as detailed in the Trip Enrollment Form.

To realize the maximum enjoyment from your Venture Out trip, we encourage participants to have flexibility, a sense of humor, curiosity and enthusiasm about new people and places, and an openness to the unexpected. With a spirit of adventure and positive attitude, we’re sure you will have a very special travel experience. If you are uncertain about the level of comfort, difficulty, or any of the activities described in this itinerary, please email us or call Venture Out at 1-888-431-6789 to discuss your concerns.

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