



Bhutan. A country of approximately 750,000 people nestled in the Himalayan mountains between India and China is a place with rich tradition and deep connection to the environment where it lies and its deep spirituality. As 90% of the population practices Tantric Vajrayana Buddhism here, with 30,000 monks and 12,000 nuns, there is a calm and peace in Bhutan that can instantly be found when you land in Paro, the country's only international airport. With this Buddhism, they have found that there are three poisons of suffering which are: anger, desire and ignorance. The anecdote to these are compassion, love and tolerance and the way to get there is through knowledge and wisdom.

The country was a monarchy until 2008, but after that a constitutional democracy was introduced with elections held every 5 years while the monarchy is still in place. The country touts free education and health care, and a modern British education system was brought to Bhutan in the 1950's, therefore, all who are educated in the country do speak English.

The idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was introduced into Bhutan, and this philosophy has been studied worldwide, as the country is one of the happiest in the world. The four pillars are:

1. Good government
2. Sustainable social economic development
3. Protection of nature
4. Preservation and promotion of transition and culture

With this idea of GNH, their main GDP is from hydropower and then tourism. But with tourism, the idea here is high value and low volume. While the average salary in the country is merely \$4,000/year, people are happy and well cared-for, and the pride they have for their country is plentiful. Additionally, 63% of the land needs to stay under forest cover to protect both the animals and the country's natural resources, as this is constitutional law.

The average number of children has decreased to 2-3 per family, as although there are still many farmers, Thimphu is a political and economic hub and houses 1/7 of the country's residents.

Thimphu

It was time to begin our FAM with Six Senses Bhutan, who has lodges within 5 valleys of the country. Our advisors made the trek across the world, taking their final flights into Paro from either BKK or DEL, as these routes are most accessible on either Druk Air or Bhutan Air. Once landed, and might I add, one of the most spectacular landings ever through the pristine Himalayas, we were whisked off to Six Senses Thimphu, dubbed “The Palace in the Sky”, as it sits high above the Thimphu Valley with breathtaking mountain views.

Thimphu is the capital and most populous city of Bhutan with a population of 100,000. Formally declared the capital in 1961, this is the 6th highest capital in the world sitting at 7,375 feet. As the political and economic center of Bhutan, it is the official residence of the King and is known for the Tshechu Festival in September/October every year. As we settled into our new home, we warded off the jetlag with healthy eats, time in the spa and lots of rest before we began to learn about this first valley. Day 2 started with an early morning meditation with Khenpo, a Buddhist monk and published author before we made our way down to Thimphu to see Buddha Dordenma (which stands 52 meters tall and is visible from the lodge) and participated in koras at Memorial Chorten with elderly Thimphu residents. We finished the afternoon with the Taa-shing Jha Kang experience at Six Senses Thimphu, which is the traditional tea house on-property that explained the art of making suja, a buttery tea with yak milk, and then created our own tsa tsa's (clay pyramids with prayers that we will eventually leave at Tiger's Nest), and also made our own butter candles (a Bhutanese tradition). We ended our time in Thimphu with a session from Dr. (Lopen) Karma Phuntsho, a leading scholar on Bhutan and author of The History of Bhutan. It was such an education to be able to deep-dive with someone so knowledgeable on this incredible country. We ended with a family style meal prepared by the wonderful chefs on-property.

Punakha

We left the Thimphu Valley to make our way to the second Six Senses lodge on our itinerary, Six Senses Punakha, also dubbed the “Flying Farmhouse”. The 2.5 hour drive is a beautiful one; rich, forested mountains dotted with monasteries and temples along the way. As you come down in elevation in Punakha, you are then brought into the lush, subtropical valley with its charming farmhouses and terraced rice fields. Before coming to the lodge, we stopped at Chimi Lhakhang, a temple of fertility where many people across the world have come in hopes to conceive. From the temple, we took a quick 35-minute ride to descend upon the Six Senses Punakha. This is the lowest lodge in the group at only 5,140 feet, as it ascends over the beautiful landscape of rice fields and mountains. We had lunch, checked-in, and were ready for our first hike of the trip to Khamsum Yulley Namgyel Chorten. This temple was built by the Queen Mother Ashi Yshering Yangdon to bring peace to the world. It is about a 45-minute climb to the temples throughout local rice fields as you admire the hard-working farmers who tend to them.

It was then back at the lodge for a little rest before our morning hike. The next day, it was an early morning as we had a 2-hour hike to the hilltop monastery called Chorten Ningpo. The hike was approximately 3 miles with 1100 feet in climb to get to this monastery with breathtaking views. We had the opportunity to have breakfast with the monks, which was not only educational but entertaining. Here, they have monks starting from age 6, and as we watched their interactions, it was wonderful to see how human, fun and affable they all are! We perused the grounds and temple before making our way down the lodge. We had a wonderful momo making class at the lodge; dumplings filled with veggies and chicken, and then made our way to the Punakha Dzong which is revered to be the most important Dzong, out of the 24 in the Kingdom, as even the King was married here. Built in the 17th c., this Dzong is the winter residence of Bhutan's central monastic body led by Je Khenpo. We ended the day with a walk across Bhutan's longest suspension bridge, and a beautifully set sundowner, complete with pomegranate martinis, snacks, and even a little light rain with the sound of the river rushing in the background.

Gangtey in the Phobjikha Valley

It was time for the 3rd valley, so we loaded into the vans and made the 2.5 hour drive to the Phobjikha Valley where Six Senses Gangtey is housed, dubbed the "Bird Watching Bridge". Standing at an elevation of 9,395 ft., this lodge has the most beautiful views of the valley, and yes, there are birds everywhere! This lodge has just 8 suites and a 2-bedroom villa, so it is perfect for buy-outs or even multi-gen families. After a lovely lunch, we headed to the Black Crane Visitor Center, as this valley is home for 400 of these beautiful birds in the winter months when they migrate from Tibet. In Bhutanese culture, the black crane symbolizes peace, purity and the connection between the spiritual and natural worlds, so it is inherent to Bhutan to protect these animals. After our education on the black crane, we took a lovely nature walk along the valley floor and had another sundowner complete with hot chocolate and hot toddys. Returning to the lodge, we did a classic Bhutanese beer tasting.

The highlight of our time in the valley was the next morning, as we executed one of the Kingdom's classic hikes on the Loma Longtey Trail. We climbed more than 1400 feet in elevation to 12,140 feet to be entranced by the stunning views of the Valley and Gangtey Village. It took up a good portion of our day and was an intense hike but well worth it! We even were able to hang our own prayer flags at the summit to forever mark our own stamp here in Bhutan. It was definitely a celebration when we reached out the summit, complete with Diet Coke toasts!

We finished our time in Gangtey with a special prayer service at Damchen Lhakang Temple and then had a very special dinner at a cowshed. A cowshed is a traditional rural dwelling where families would keep their animals in the bottom of the home and the family would live at the top. This helped to keep the animals safe from predators, for heat and to easily clean the manure. Our meal was cooked over a traditional clay stove, with the only light in the room coming from candlelight. We ended with traditional Bhutanese song and dance. Such a wonderful way to remember Gangtey!

Bumthang

It was time to venture to the 4th lodge, which is the furthest in the Six Senses Bhutan group, to Bumthang, approximately a 5-hour drive with beautiful stops along the way, including a café with a waterfall of melting glaciers from high in the Himalayas. We reached Bumthang, and this lodge is dubbed the “Forest In A Forest” as it is surrounded by beautiful tall trees. With 8 suites and a 2-bedroom villa, this lodge is very zen standing at 8,575 feet.

We did it all in Bumthang. As Bumthang is known for its connection to the rivers and forests in the valley, the group completed the famous Bushman’s Hike after seeing the Burning Lake. One of the great highlights of this valley was our riverside lunch, prepared by the wonderful and versatile Six Senses chefs, as the white water set the backdrop for our lunch, along with our beer and wine being chilled in the river, and the team grilling on local stones. It was a beautiful setting of total immersion into the forest, with birds chirping, the river running and the fire crackling. Just the perfect way to spend an afternoon.

We made a stop at the Jakar Dzong, the district’s main fortress which is also from the 16th century. This Dzong is also called “The Fortress of the White Bird” in reference to a legend where a mythical bird signaled the auspicious spot to build the monastery. As a reference, a Dzong is a building that acts as an administrative building, a fortress and a monastery for the surrounding area and there are more than 20 in Bhutan.

Our last stop of the day was to Red Panda Brewery. Originally owned by a Swiss gentleman who married a Bhutanese woman, it has now been passed to his son who has created a nice gathering place for the local beer and cheese they produce. The beer is infused with banana and cardamom and is quite delectable!

It was a wonderful time in this more remote valley, but nevertheless, an extremely worthwhile stop before going to Paro to conquer Tiger’s Nest for our last two days!

Paro

It was time to bring our trip full circle and end in Paro, the place where the world-renowned hike to Tiger’s Nest sits. We luckily were able to take the Druk Air flight from Bumthang to Paro, as this flight runs a couple of times a week and saves the 8-hour drive back. We were quite lucky as well, as when we landed in Paro, the King was using our plane so they were setting up his red carpet on the runway which was quite a site to see!

After arriving, we took some time to shop in town and then made our way to an exceptional experience for a Farmhouse Lunch and Prayer Flag Making. We spent the afternoon with a local family, the matriarch of whom was a monk for over 20 years before leaving the monastery, marrying and becoming a father to help his family tend their farm and rice fields.

We were served a traditional lunch by his wife (delicious!) and then sat with him for the making of our own prayer flags which was an emotional experience.

Onto Six Senses Paro for our final check-in and we had the loveliest afternoon of exploring the chef's extensive gardens, archery and Bhutanese astrology before tucking in early to be ready to ascend Tiger's Nest for a 6 AM start time the next morning.

Tiger's Nest is what has put Bhutan on the map and is probably one of the most renowned hikes in the world. As one of the most significant cultural icons of the Kingdom, the monastery of Taktsang is built on the sheer cliff face above Paro and brought Buddhism to the Kingdom in the 8th century. The hike is beautiful and tedious as you climb nearly 2100 feet to reach the monastery. We were lucky enough to see a prayer service in session, and I believe that everyone in the group was a bit speechless that we were able to complete this hike and bask in the beauty of having the opportunity. We made our way down the mountain and back to the lodge for a beautiful outdoor lunch.

We ended our time in Bhutan under the stars in traditional Bhutanese dress, enjoying folk songs, dancing and music.

Conclusion

Bhutan is the trip of a lifetime and should be on every traveler's short list! It is a country where you push your own limits physically and mentally, and it is a warm embrace of a different culture that stands without judgement to the world outside. Our wonderful guides Chencho and Penden constantly ingrained the idea of karma...as what you put into the world is what you get out of it. This has always been my mantra, but after being to Bhutan, there is no doubt it has made me a believer not only in karma, but in the thought that the world is a good place...we just have to play a bigger role in making it that way. A huge THANK YOU to Six Senses Bhutan for making this journey a reality! They were exceptional from start to finish, and there is no one else in the country that I would have wanted to experience it with!