

HIMALAYAN SPLENDOUR

Ladakh, Bhutan & Nepal

15 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Delhi

Today we arrive into the pulsating metropolis of Delhi.

Despite its recent metamorphosis into a cosmopolitan hub for global business, media, technology, and fashion, Delhi is also a surprisingly green city, with whole swaths given over to gardens, parks, and protected woodlands. This city is the true hub of the country, and a symbol of India old and new!

Overnight in Delhi (airport area hotel).

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Delhi - Leh, Ladakh: Orientation Tour

Early this morning we fly up to Leh (3524 m / 11,562 ft). This surely is one of the most sensational scheduled flights in the world, taking you right over the top of the Greater Himalaya before dropping down to the small airport at Leh. The breathtaking beauty, combined with the warmth and friendliness of the locals is what draws many to Ladakh. This is a land of jagged mountains, picture-perfect gompas (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) and colourful fluttering prayer flags!

Leh is very Tibetan in many respects; the national dress, 'stove-pipe' hats and felt boots with turned-up toes are much in evidence. The Royal Palace which dominates the town is very reminiscent of the Potala in Lhasa and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, large chortens, prayer flags and mud brick houses with flat roofs are a dramatic culture change from the hot, teeming frenetic rush of Delhi.

The balance of the day is flexible due to the dramatic change of altitude and the importance of acclimatization. Your Tour Leader will likely suggest an easy orientation walking tour to Leh's colourful markets and central hub.

Note: The actual order of Leh area sightseeing may vary due to weather and other logistical considerations. Your day-by-day sightseeing may be modified at the discretion of your Tour Leader, with Leh area sightseeing spaced out to take into account the sudden change in elevation.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Leh: Palaces & Gompas

Today we visit Sankar Gompa (monastery). Nestled amid the shimmering poplar trees and terraced fields of barley that extend up the valley behind Leh, Sankar Gompa is among the most accessible monasteries in central Ladakh. This gompa belongs to the Gelukpa order and houses a beautiful impression of the Buddhist deity, Avolokiteshwara Padmahari with a thousand arms and heads. The hill here offers excellent views of Leh, parts of the Indus River Valley and the imposing 6100 m (20,100 ft) high peak of Stok Kangri that overlooks Leh. Nearby is the Peace Stupa on a hill commanding superb views of the town and the Indus Valley.

Later we will visit Leh Palace. This captivating building rises from the edge of a hill overlooking the town. Built in the 17th century, Leh Palace was occupied by the Ladakhi royal family until the 1830's. Today the building is deserted and is being restored by UNESCO.

Our next stop today is Shey Palace, the old 'summer palace' of the kings of Ladakh, built over 350 years ago by Lhachen Palgyigon, the first king of Ladakh. It stands next to the remains of a larger construction on the east side of a hill, which runs southeast towards the Indus. From the palace you can see over the fertile Indus plain northeast to Tikse Gompa and over the Indus to the Zaskar mountain range.

At some point during our time in the Leh area, we will have a jeep tour up the hairpins of the Nubra Valley road to the Khardung La Pass (5470 m/18,400 feet) -- the highest vehicular accessible pass in the world (inaccessible in spring due to snow). The views of the Zaskar Range and the Indus Valley on the way up are amazing as are frequent sightings of yaks on the high pastures below the pass. The road to the

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pass that crosses the Ladakh Range and provides access to the Nubra Valley and the Karakoram region was built at great human and financial cost by the Indian Army following frequent incursions into the area by the Chinese Army following the occupation of Tibet in the late 1950's.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Leh: Alchi & Likir

Today's sightseeing features an excursion across the arid and high plateau to Alchi, one of the largest ancient monastic complexes and an important Buddhist centre in all of Ladakh. Founded in the 11th century by Rinchen Zhangpo, one of the early Tibetan preachers who spread Lamaistic Buddhism to this part of the world, Alchi is undergoing major restoration work under UN sponsorship. The 1000-year-old paintings inside the main temple are some of the oldest of their kind and quite distinct from the murals present in the later built gompas.

On our return to Leh we will stop to see the location where the grey waters of the Indus meet the blue waters of the Zaskar River flowing from the remote Zaskar region of the Greater Himalaya. We will also visit Likir Gompa set on an isolated ridge. This magnificent gompa, overlooking the village of Likir, was founded in the 14th century and belongs to the Yellow Hat Sect. The head lama here is the younger brother of the Dalai Lama. The Likir Gompa is one of the oldest and well maintained monasteries in the Ladakh district.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Leh & Hemis Gompa

Early this morning we head east along the Indus Valley toward Hemis Gompa, dramatically hidden in a cleft the mountains. Hemis Gompa is located around 50 kms away from Leh on the west bank of Indus River, and it is regarded as the wealthiest and biggest monastery in Leh. Here we find a gigantic thangka, one of the largest in the world, and the largest and one of the most important in Ladakh. It was founded about 350 years ago by Stagtshang Rinchen, who was invited to Ladakh by King Singe Namgyal, founded it about 350 years ago.

Along our route back to Leh we will make a stop at Stok Gompa which dates back to the 14th century. Hidden behind a screen of trees around 2km south of the palace, Stok's small monastery has some crumbling old stupas, but the dominant feature, 200m above, is its brand-new gilded Buddha that is visible from most of the village. As we enter the veranda of the monastery, we come across bright friezes depicting the Guardians of the Four Directions. One of the major attractions of the Stok Monastery is its library, which boasts a complete set of the Kandshur, the 108 volumes of the Buddha's teachings.

Overnight in Leh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Leh - Delhi

Today we fly from Leh back to Delhi. If time permits, we will enjoy some sightseeing in Delhi this afternoon.

Overnight in Delhi (likely an airport area hotel).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Delhi, India - Paro, Bhutan - Thimphu

Today we fly to Bhutan. Our flight brings us into Paro, and this journey is considered to be one of the most thrilling descents as the plane

glides into the valley. One can see the red chillies drying on farm roofs nearby, and the crisp mountain air greets all visitors.

Upon arrival we will drive to Thimphu (2320 m/7,609 feet), the capital, which is roughly an hours' drive from the airport. En route we will see the Iron Bridge Builder Monastery located in the opposite hillside. You will also cross the Chunzom (confluence of rivers) bridge where stupas in three styles (Bhutanese, Nepalese and Tibetan) are located.

Thimphu is a bustling developing city/town with little cafes, bookshops and handicraft shops lined along its streets. The main town center itself is just a small area, and it lends itself well to individual exploration as it is easy to walk around and navigate. This town of about 100,000 people built along traditional lines is the administrative centre of Bhutan and was only established in the 1950s.

Overnight in Thimphu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Thimphu Area & Annual Festival

Today we drive to the impressive Tashicho Dzong (which we may be allowed to enter), the traditional summer capital of Bhutan and now the seat of the Bhutanese government. The present building is a rebuilt version of a dzong or monastery-fortress that was erected here by Nawang Namgyal in 1641 and it retains many of the features of the old dzong. It is now an impressive sight and it houses all the government departments and ministries, the throne room of the King, the National Assembly chambers and the nation's largest monastery with over 2,000 monks in residence.

OUR DEPARTURE coincides with the Thimphu Tsechu, an annual festival held at the Tashi Chhodzong. The Tsechu reflects the deeply rooted religious sentiments of the people. For three days various types of masked dances are performed. Many depict the story of good triumphing over evil, the day of 'judgmentmatrimonifidelity.' Please note that occasionally we include a festival in another location should the announced dates, which can vary a lot from year to year, not be optimal for our visit (ie in terms of weather). The overall experience does not vary from festival to festival as they all operate on a similar concept with similar ceremonies, costumes and customs.

Overnight in Thimphu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Thimphu - Punakha

This morning we depart Thimphu via the spectacular Dochula Pass 3031 m (10,004 feet). We pass steeply through a forest of pine and cedar with panoramic views of the Himalaya (Thimphu-Punkaha 77 km/48 miles, 3 hours).

Today's journey takes us deep into the heart of Bhutan. The drive will give you an insight into a medieval way of life that has changed little over the centuries. Modern development has brought better education, health care and electricity to these remote areas but the local small farm-based economy that has kept the local people self sufficient over the years is largely unchanged. Located at a relatively low altitude of 1300 m (4,265 feet) in a rainshadow, the Punakha Valley produces most of the oranges and fruits grown commercially in Bhutan. Despite the warmer climate and the possibility of growing an endless variety of produce, the population of the valley remains remarkably low. Until very recently, Punakha remained the winter capital of Bhutan (there is only one capital now, Thimphu), and it is still the winter headquarters of the Head Abbott (Je Khempo) and his monks who move here every winter.

Upon reaching Punakha we will visit the Punakha Dzong, arguably the most beautiful dzong in the country! The magnificent Punakha dzong straddles an island in the confluence of the Pho Chu and Mo Chhu (male and female tributaries of the river). This dzong was the second to be built in Bhutan and it served as the capital and seat of government until the mid-1950s. All of Bhutan's kings have been crowned here. The dzong is still the winter residence of the dratshang (official monk body). Today the dzong has been magnificently restored to befit its status in Bhutan's history.

Overnight in Punakha.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Punakha - Paro & Paro Dzong

Today we travel by road back to Paro, set in what is considered to be the most beautiful of the main valleys (2280 m / 7,500 feet). The dominant feature of Paro is undoubtedly the Paro Dzong set above the glacial Paro Chu River. It is a particularly important and historic dzong having played a part in Bhutan's history since it was first constructed.

Paro is a thriving agricultural valley and is also the location of some of the holiest Buddhist sites in Bhutan. Before the construction of roads most of Bhutan's trade came through Paro either from Tibet via Tremo la or from the south via Haa. Paro Valley extends from Jumolhari on the Tibetan border to Chuzom which is the confluence of the Thimphu and Punakha rivers.

The town is an interesting mix of traditional architecture interspersed with handicraft stores, cafes and galleries. This morning we can stroll and explore the growing town. The town is situated below the Dzong, which overlooks the valley and is accessible via a traditional cantilever bridge. Near the bridge are chortens (prayer shrines) situated alongside the Ugyen Pelri palace. We will also visit the local monastery situated at one end of the town. If we are lucky we may be able to view an archery match as the local archery field is at the end of the town en route to the Ugyen Pelri Palace.

Overnight in Paro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Paro: Area Sightseeing

Today we will continue with our sightseeing in Paro. Just a short drive from town is the revered Kyichu lhakhang, one of Bhutan's oldest and most beautiful temples situated among the paddy fields. This is venerated as being as holy as the monastery in Lhasa. The small Dumste lhakhang was built in Tibetan style, and legend has it that it had flown from Tibet.

We will enjoy a visit to the Paro National Museum, situated above the Dzong in the ancient watchtower (at time of writing the exhibits are being viewed in an adjoining building as the tower is under repairs). Housed in a 17th Century watchtower, the museum has a unique character and beautiful panoramic views over Paro Valley. Opened in 1968, its collection of fine arts, paintings and bronzes are famous. Here we will also find displays of textiles, jewellery, and handicrafts. The top floor of the museum is a chapel containing a "tree" depicting the main figures of the four religious schools of Tibetan Buddhism. After our visit here we will visit the Rinpung Dzong which serves as the headquarters for the local government and the local monk body.

At some point in our Paro visit, we'll head up the valley to view the famed Takstang, or 'Tiger's Nest', monastery, which burned down in 1998. The monastery has been rebuilt and we will drive to a viewpoint in the valley from where we can see Takstang high up on the cliff opposite.

NOTE: If you are interested in hiking all the way up to view/visit the Tiger's Nest, please consult with your Tour Leader upon arrival on tour. The overall hike/visit will require a bus ride for a short distance and the hike itself takes 6-7 hours over steep terrain at approximately 2700m/9,000 ft. Your Tour Leader can provide more details on arrival and assist with arrangements (including a required special permit).

Overnight in Paro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Paro, Bhutan - Kathmandu, Nepal - City Touring

Today we fly from Paro to Kathmandu, Nepal.

Wedge between the high Himalaya and the steamy Indian plains, Nepal is the very watershed of Asia. Nepal's cultural landscape is every bit as diverse as its physical one. Its peoples belong to a host of distinctive ethnic groups, and speak a host of languages. Massive mountains, golden temples, fluttering prayer flags, Buddhist stupas, wild yaks and wonderful people, Nepal really has it all.

Kathmandu, the capital, is a very liveable city, with pagodas dominating open squares and narrow alleys hemmed in by wooden buildings and fretwork screens. Here we can explore thousands of years of culture while making our way through historic temples and monasteries that

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belong to Hindus and Buddhists alike. At every turn you encounter rich culture, hidden temples, colourful bazaars, and the friendliest, warmest of welcomes.

After refreshment, we travel to Kathmandu's central meeting area, Durbar Square, a profusion of temples reflecting the different architectural styles dating from the eleventh century. Kathmandu's Durbar Square was where the city's kings were once crowned and legitimized, and from where they ruled. The Durbar Sq area is actually made up of three loosely linked squares, and the area also includes the Royal Palace with its gilded gates and elaborate statues. The square is alive with a multitude of nationalities, intermingled with stalls displaying a wide variety of Nepalese and Tibetan handicrafts.

We then proceed to Swayambhunath Temple, Nepal's most significant centre of Buddhist worship. A journey up to the Buddhist temple and UNESCO World Heritage Site of Swayambhunath is one of the definitive experiences of Kathmandu. There has been a temple on this site since at least the 5th century. Swayambhunath is also known as the "Monkey Temple" due to the large population of monkeys that make the grounds their home. The temple buildings are set atop a hill and offer an excellent view of Kathmandu and its valley.

This afternoon we will visit Patan, the second largest town in the Kathmandu valley. Patan is merely 5 km away from the capital city, but, despite such proximity, its 'preserved' ancestral uniqueness distinguishes Patan as a different environment. Patan's Durbar Square contains some of the finest examples of Newari Architecture in Nepal.

Please note: Early in our visit to Nepal, we will be putting the final bureaucratic touches on our Tibet permits through the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu. We'll have to complete some forms and such, and then over the next days, our documents will be finalized. This takes at least three days, so while we wait we'll make the most of our stay!

Overnight in Kathmandu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Kathmandu - Bhaktapur & Kathmandu Valley - Nagarkot

Today we will explore the historic suburb of Bhaktapur, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Founded in the 12th century, Bhaktapur is filled with Hindu and Buddhist religious sites and art. The tragic earthquake of 2015 caused terrible devastation, with whole streets of traditional houses lost to the disaster. Though only a few temples were destroyed, the scars of the disaster are still clearly visible and it will take years for the city to fully recover.

In addition to a walking tour of Bhaktapur, we will explore some other sites in the Kathmandu Valley. Pashupatinath is perhaps the most important Hindu temple in Nepal, and one of the most important Shiva temples on the subcontinent. This temple draws numerous devotees from all over India each year. Bouddhanath is among the largest stupas in South Asia, and it has become the focal point of Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal. The white mound looms thirty-six meters overhead. The stupa is located on the ancient trade route to Tibet, and Tibetan merchants rested and offered prayers here for many centuries. When refugees entered Nepal from Tibet in the 1950s, many of them decided to live around Bouddhanath. They established many gompas, and the "Little Tibet" of Nepal was born. This "Little Tibet" is still the best place in the Valley to observe Tibetan lifestyle. Monks walk about in maroon robes. Tibetans walk with prayer wheels in their hands, and the rituals of prostration are presented to the Buddha as worshippers circumambulate the stupa on their hands and knees, bowing down to their lord.

Our destination today is Nagarkot, which will place us well for our morning activities.

Overnight in Nagarkot.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Nagarkot Sunrise & Chandragiri Hill

Today we rise early to see the sunrise over the Himalaya! Nagarkot is popular hill station located east of Kathmandu city, and the viewpoint tower is located at altitude of 2195 meters. This setting provides one of the best panoramic views of 8 mountain ranges, stretching from Annapurna in the west to Makalu in the east. If weather is very clear, you may also see Mount Everest from this point. Weather-permitting, we hope to view the Central Himalayan ranges, which include the Langtang and Rolwaling ranges.

On our drive back to Kathmandu this afternoon, we'll take a trip up Nepal's newest cable car, taking us up Chandragiri Hill for the some more impressive views of the snow capped Himalaya anywhere. Opened in 2016, this exciting experience takes us on a 10-minutes journey to the

top where you can see a panoramic view of the Mighty Himalayas. We will spend some time here to enjoy the setting before the return trip down to the mountain.

This afternoon you will have some free time in Kathmandu.

Overnight in Kathmandu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Kathmandu.

BON VOYAGE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast