

LUXURY

ASIA

Bhutan now regarded as a winter destination for many to escape to during school holidays | Druk Air, Bhutan's national carrier, launches extra flights in December



(photo credit Druk Asia)

For travellers based in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, December seems to be a popular month to visit the landlocked country in the eastern Himalayas. Druk Air Singapore reports that 17% of the year's bookings for Singapore to Paro flights are for travel in December. In response to the demand, Druk Air, Royal Bhutan Airlines is adding one weekly flight from Singapore to Paro and Paro to Singapore in December 2019 and December 2020. These additions bring the total number of weekly return flights to three, and an increase of 464 seats in total each way for the 4 hours 45 min flight (with a 40-min refuelling stop at Guwahati).

“Instead of having to fly through Bangkok or another city that Druk Air flies to, travellers who prefer to fly out of Singapore now have more options with dates,” says Mr Wiris William, country manager of Druk Air Singapore. “The minimum daily spend of USD200 per day is lower between December to February, as compared to USD250 per day during September to November,” says Mr Cipto Handoyo, sales director of Druk Asia Singapore, a Bhutan travel specialist with an operations office in Bhutan, when asked why December is a popular month for travel to Bhutan with people in Southeast Asia.

Contrary to what many people think, the weather in Bhutan in December or even January is not as harsh as one expects to experience in winter. Vivid, blue skies provide the ideal backdrop for photography enthusiasts to capture their memories. Though the days are shorter, the temperature – usually within the low teens, is comfortable for hiking. This is before it takes a drastic dip at night. By then, you are likely to be well bundled up in warm clothing, with fingers wrapped around a cup of warm butter tea in front of a traditional heated stove, and experiencing Bhutanese hospitality and gooey chilli cheese in a homestay or a hotel. For avid hikers from Southeast Asia, the thought of leaving behind humid, bustling cities; traipsing through lush forests, and overlooking rugged cliffs and verdant vistas is very alluring.

From visiting monasteries to partaking in colourful festivals that showcase Bhutan’s Vajrayana Buddhism traditions and seeking mindfulness, here are some of Druk Asia’s itineraries that are popular in winter. Finding happiness is part of the package.

7-Day Dochula Pass Festival

Late September to late October is a popular time for travel in Bhutan largely due to tshechu celebrations in different provinces throughout Bhutan. Visitors love to witness the colour, pomp, gaiety and religious fervour during these religious festivities. Masked and elaborately costumed monks go into a trance when they perform. You can still have access into this otherworldly side of Bhutanese culture even if you were to travel in December. The Druk Wangyel Tshechu at Dochula Pass, a mountain pass between Thimphu and Punakha, takes place on Dec 13 this year. This festival is different from other tsechus because it is performed by the Royal Bhutan Army. Your itinerary will include a day at the festival.

[Neykor Tour: A 7-night 6-day Journey of Spiritual Immersion in Bhutan](#)

Guests will learn about mindfulness, and applying compassion in business management and life from His Eminence [Khedrupchen Rinpoche](#), a Rinpoche reincarnate and the head of a monastery in Trongsa. Khedrupchen Rinpoche has taught on a range of topics that can be applied to modern life. These include how Buddhism and its values can be used to overcome challenges in our daily lives. The ultimate goal is to achieve lasting peace and happiness. The last Neykor attracted attendees of different races and religious beliefs. “Not all who signed up were Buddhists. A good number of guests were seeking spiritual enlightenment and mindfulness. They view Buddhism as a way of life, rather than religion,” says Mr Cipto Handoyo, sales director of Druk Asia. This year’s Neykor will incorporate daily sessions on meditation and finding mindfulness with a tour of famous temples and monasteries in Punakha, Trongsa and Paro, including the iconic Tiger’s Nest. Dates: Dec 1 to 7, 2019

3-day Sinchula [Trek](#)

This trek can be incorporated into any itinerary that covers both Thimphu and Punakha. This route was widely used by the Bhutanese travelling between the two places until the 1980s when the opening of roads made it easier for people to travel. Your trek will take you from Thimphu across varied terrain including pristine alpine forests and bamboo groves until you reach the warmer Punakha valley. The highest elevation is 3,380m at the Shichu La pass, where you can see Gangkhar Puensum, Bhutan’s highest peak, on a clear day. Very fit, seasoned trekkers can complete the trek within two days, while someone of average fitness who does not trek often may take three days.

[Sketch Bhutan*](#)

Created by Singapore artist Erwin Lian and currently led by Bhutanese artist Rajesh Gurung, this itinerary takes art lovers and sketching enthusiasts on a journey of discovery and learning. They will visit popular Bhutanese landmarks while learning about tools and techniques to create beautiful sketches on-the-go. Visitors also get to mingle with other Bhutanese artists.

*Trip availability is subject to expert’s schedule

Photography Workshop with Edwin Tan

Cradled deep in the creases of the soaring Himalayas, and enveloped by the Indian plains to the south and the mountainous Tibetan regions of China to the north, Bhutan is home to breathtaking natural topography, centuries-old architecture and a proud people with colourful culture. Friendly locals in traditional Bhutanese dress fill bustling city markets while smiling monks in flowing maroon robes inhabit the ancient monasteries that dot the rugged countryside. Bhutan's natural light is soft and golden, and the prayer-flag-strewn, snowcapped-mountain vistas are beyond spectacular. Visitors on this trip will not only get to capture these scenes but also get to learn visual storytelling techniques and hands-on coaching on editing from award-winning photographer Edwin Tan. Set dates: Dec 11 to 16, 2019

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