

Cultural Highlights of Nepal, Bhutan & Tibet with Talo Tsechu

Three Himalayan capitals, important cultural sites and unforgettable high mountain landscapes, all in one trip



Group departures

See overleaf for departure dates

Holiday overview

Style	Tour
Accommodation	Hotels
Grade	Tour
Duration	20 days from London to London
Min/Max group size	4 / 12. Guaranteed to run for 4
Trip Leader	Local Leaders Nepal, Bhutan & Tibet
Land only	Joining in Kathmandu, Nepal
Max altitude	3,658m/12,000ft, in Lhasa, days 8-10

Private Departures & Tailor Made itineraries available



tel: +44 (0)1453 844400 fax: +44 (0)1453 844422 info@mountainkingdoms.com www.mountainkingdoms.com

Mountain Kingdoms Ltd, 20 Long Street, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire GL12 7BT UK
Managing Director: Steven Berry. Registered in England No. 2118433. VAT No. 496 6511 08

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Departures

Group departures

2022 Dates:

Sun 27 Mar - Fri 15 Apr	With Talo Tsechu
Sun 25 Sep - Fri 14 Oct	With Thimphu Drubchen

This is the detailed itinerary for our March departure only. Itineraries for all other departures can be downloaded from our website or requested from the Mountain Kingdoms office.

Group prices and optional supplements

Please contact us on +44 (0)1453 844400 or visit our website for our land only and flight inclusive prices and single supplement options.

No Surcharge Guarantee

The flight inclusive or land only price will be confirmed to you at the time you make your booking. There will be no surcharges after your booking has been confirmed.

Will the trip run?

This trip is guaranteed to run for 4 people and for a maximum of 12. In the rare event that we cancel a holiday, we will refund you in full and give you at least 6 weeks warning. Many trips do fill up quickly - we advise you to book early if you want to secure a place(s) on the dates of your choice.

Insurance

We offer a travel insurance scheme - please contact us for details.

Private Departures

We can also offer this trip as a private holiday. A Private Departure follows exactly the same itinerary as the group departure but at dates to suit you (subject to availability) - please contact us with your preferred dates.

Tailor Made service

We pride ourselves on the level of quality and choice we provide for our clients who want a fully tailor made holiday. A holiday will be created especially for you by one of our well-travelled experts. They will be able to advise on the accommodation best suited to your needs, the sights you should visit (and those to avoid!) and the best walks and activities matched to your ability. In short, we will work together with you to create your perfect holiday. If you would like to explore the idea of a Tailor Made holiday with Mountain Kingdoms then please call us on +44 (0)1453 844400 or see the Tailor Made pages of our website for further inspiration.

Your guide



On arrival in Kathmandu, Nepal, you will be met and looked after by our partners there who we have been working with for many years. They speak good English and have excellent knowledge of the history and culture of their homeland.

In Tibet you will have a knowledgeable English-speaking Tibetan guide and a Tibetan driver.

In Bhutan, Mountain Kingdoms have been working with the same partner since 1986. Their guides are some of the best in the Kingdom. They speak fluent English, as this is taught in all Bhutanese schools, and are fully qualified guides. The Tourism Authority of Bhutan insists that a Bhutanese trek or tour leader must pass his/her guiding exams in Thimphu before accompanying groups of foreign visitors.

Your trip highlights

- All the key cultural highlights including Tiger's Nest Monastery in Bhutan, the Potala Palace in Lhasa, and the World Heritage site of Durbar Square in the heart of Kathmandu
- Spend time at Dhulikhel resort in Kathmandu and enjoy wonderful views of the high Himalaya
- A well-paced itinerary with ample time for sightseeing, optional walks and good acclimatisation
- Join the festivities at the Talo Tsechu in Bhutan
- Good quality hotel accommodation throughout

At a glance itinerary

Days 1-2	Fly London to Kathmandu.
Days 3-5	Sightseeing in Kathmandu and drive to Dhulikhel. Sightseeing and walks in Dhulikhel and return to Kathmandu.
Days 6-7	Fly to Gonggar/Lhasa. Drive to Tsedang. Visit Samye and Yarlung Valley.
Day 8	Drive to Lhasa with Namseling and Mindroling visits on the way.
Days 9-10	Sightseeing around Lhasa.
Days 11-12	Drive to Gonggar and fly to Kathmandu. Day at leisure.
Day 13	Fly to Paro and drive to Punakha.
Day 14	Attend Talo Tsechu. Visit Punakha Dzong and Chimi Lhakhang.
Days 15-16	Drive to Thimphu. Sightseeing. Drive to Paro. Sightseeing.
Day 17	Walk to Taktsang Monastery. Sightseeing in the Paro Valley.
Days 18-20	Fly to Kathmandu. Time at leisure. Overnight flight home.

Trip summary

This exciting trip to Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet offers an amazing journey through three spectacular Himalayan countries. Although geographically close to each other and enjoying many historic and ethnic links, these countries are in fact each scenically and culturally very distinct and a trip to all three offers a fantastically varied trip. You will have plenty of time for sightseeing and for some optional walks as well as enjoying some of key cultural highlights of each country.

Firstly, arriving in Kathmandu you will have your first sight of the Himalaya, travelling out of Kathmandu to Dhulikhel for spectacular dawn views of the mountains including Everest itself, with an incredible panorama from Everest to Annapurna. You will also have time to explore Kathmandu city and to see some of the wonderful Newari architecture of the towns and villages of the Kathmandu valley.

After your time in Kathmandu you fly on to Lhasa in Tibet. On the flight to Lhasa you actually pass between two of the highest mountains in the world, Mount Everest and Mount Kanchenjunga, before landing in Tibet. Here on the high Tibetan plateau, the air is thin and the scenery is rather stark but very dramatic and is quite different to either Nepal or Bhutan. You will visit some of Tibet's most important historical, religious and cultural sites. Firstly you travel east to Tsedang and the 'Valley of the Kings', considered to be the cradle of Tibetan civilization and Tibetan Buddhism. You will also travel to one of the most important locations for Tibetan Buddhism at the monastery of Samye before you continue to Lhasa where your first sight of the spectacular Potala will be breathtaking. As well as sightseeing in Lhasa you will have time to join pilgrims on a 'kora' around the famous Potala Palace and for a visit to the historic Barkhor market.

You return to Kathmandu with a day at leisure and then travel on to Bhutan. On the flight to Paro you will fly alongside the Himalayas with possible views of Mount Everest away to the left and of Bhutan's mountains as you land. On arrival in Paro you will immediately be struck by the contrast to Nepal - national dress is still widely worn by both men and women in Bhutan with even officials at the airport wearing this distinctive apparel. Bhutan was never colonized and the Bhutanese are very proud of their own unique Buddhist culture and social traditions, and of their own distinctive building style, seen in the magnificent fortified dzongs, temples and monasteries as well as in its unique attractive farmhouses.

On your visit to Bhutan you will see some of the finest buildings in the country, including impressive Taktsang Monastery (the famous 'Tiger's Nest') in the Paro Valley and the magnificent riverside dzong at Punakha. Undoubtedly though, one of the highlights of your visit to Bhutan will be a visit to a festival - always a great social and spiritual occasion. On this departure you will attend the Talo Tsechu, a charming village festival well known for its masked dances and mischievous clowns.

Special notes

Tibet visas and itinerary changes

While you are staying in Kathmandu our local agent will obtain your Tibet permit/visa from the Chinese Embassy. However, the embassy can and do, at very short notice, change the rules and regulations regarding the obtaining of Tibet permits/visas. The embassy also changes its opening hours with little prior notice thereby affecting the timeframe in which our agent can obtain your Tibet permit/visa. This may result in last minute changes having to be made to the itinerary of the trip which may even effect the dates of travel.

If you are booking your own flights, we therefore strongly recommend that you only book flights which are able to be amended to allow for changes.

If we do have to make alterations to the itinerary or dates of travel at any point, we will do our utmost to ensure minimum disruption to your holiday.

Your trip itinerary

Day 1: Depart London.

Depart the UK to fly to Kathmandu.

Overnight: In flight

Day 2: Arrive Kathmandu. Transfer to hotel.

On arrival in Kathmandu you will be met and transferred to the Hotel Shangri La. This is a very comfortable hotel situated to the north of Thamel, the tourist district of Kathmandu. It has a lovely garden with a swimming pool and several excellent restaurants. The bustle of Thamel, with all its restaurants, shops and bars, is a 20 minute walk or 10 minute taxi ride away.

You could eat in the hotel or head off into Thamel to one of the famous restaurants there, such as Rum Doodle Restaurant, a place frequented by trekkers and climbers alike, with pride of place given to a board with the signatures of many Everest summiteers.

(Your Tibet permit will be finalised while you are in Kathmandu, so our local agents will ask you for your passport and payment).

Overnight: Shangri La Hotel, Kathmandu

Day 3: Sightseeing in Kathmandu. Drive to Dhulikhel, 1,550m/5,085ft.

In the morning you will have a guided sightseeing tour in Kathmandu city. Firstly you will go to Swayambunath, called the 'Monkey Temple' because of the large numbers of monkeys that live there. This temple is said to be the divine lotus flower floating above the lake that once covered the Kathmandu Valley. This is the most famous image of Nepal - the all-seeing eyes surveying every corner of the valley. You then continue to Kathmandu Durbar Square, the ancient medieval centre of the city, now a UNESCO world heritage site. Here you will see a host of wonderful temples and palaces, including the temple of the Kumari, the so called 'living goddess'.



In the afternoon you will drive to Dhulikhel, a small town located about an hour and a half's drive from Kathmandu along the main highway leading to Tibet, on the eastern rim of the Kathmandu Valley. Dhulikhel is famous for its panoramic views of the Himalaya. Dhulikhel has been an important trading centre on the commercial route linking Nepal to Tibet for many centuries, with people of Nepal travelling to Tibet to bring home salt and gold and Tibetans coming with huge flocks of sheep to sell in Nepal, especially during the great Hindu festival of Dassain. The town still has some old houses and a couple of ancient temples which are worth visiting. On arrival you should have time for a visit to town and then to enjoy fine sunset views in the evening.

Overnight: Dhulikhel Lodge Resort (Meals: BLD)

Day 4: In Dhulikhel.

The mountain views from Dhulikhel are some of the finest in the Himalaya, with dawn being especially spectacular - on a clear day from here you can see from Everest in the east to the Annapurna range in the west, as many as twenty major Himalayan peaks. It is worth arranging an early morning wake-up call to be sure of catching the views at their best. Later you have the day free to relax and enjoy the beautiful countryside around Dhulikhel. You could perhaps take a walk to a nearby village, such as Panauti, with its traditional farmhouses set on hillocks among the rice fields, or visit Namobuddha Monastery, a sacred spot which commemorates the legend of the Buddha's selfless action of offering his own flesh to feed a starving tiger. In these surroundings you can immerse yourself in the simple pleasures of traditional rural life in Nepal.

Overnight: Dhulikhel Lodge Resort (Meals: BLD)

Day 5: Return to Kathmandu with sightseeing in Bhaktapur on the way. Afternoon at leisure.

Today you will drive back to Kathmandu visiting the ancient city of Bhaktapur on the way. Bhaktapur is one of the three cities built in the Kathmandu valley by the former Malla kings. It is more laid back than Kathmandu city and still has quite a rural feel to it, being a town of farmers and craftsmen. The Durbar Square area has some beautiful examples of magnificent Newari craftsmanship in its temples and palaces, especially the famous Palace of Fifty Five Windows which, in its elaborately carved windows and doors, features some of the finest examples of Newari wood carving. The side streets of Bhaktapur have a wonderfully medieval feel to them, most of its buildings having their origins in the 15th Century and the back streets bring brick paved. The city is still very much lived-in, with much of it being closed to traffic - this makes walking around it a real pleasure and you can get a real taste of how things must have been in medieval times.

When you get back to Kathmandu you will have the afternoon free and you can either relax at the hotel or do some more sightseeing. The ancient Buddhist Stupa of Boudhanath is well worth a visit - it is a focus of Buddhist culture and is visited by pilgrims from all over the region. You might also visit the important Hindu Shiva temple and the cremation ghats on the banks of the Bagmati River at Pashupatinath.

Overnight: Shangri La Hotel, Kathmandu (Meals: B)

Day 6: Fly to Lhasa, Tibet. Drive to Tsedang, 3,550m /11,647ft - 2-3 hours.

Transfer to the airport for the flight to Gonggar in Tibet. This is an exciting flight which goes east along the Himalaya, passes Everest (on the left hand side of the plane) and then cuts through the chain to continue north east towards Lhasa. At Gonggar (the airport for Lhasa) you will meet your Tibetan guide and your driver. Remember to put your watch forward - there is a time difference of 2 hours and 15 minutes between Kathmandu and Lhasa.

You then drive east alongside the mighty Tsangpo River (called the Brahmaputra when it reaches India) to Tsedang at 3,550m/11,647ft. Tsedang, the capital of Shannan prefecture and the second largest city in Tibet after Lhasa, has some Tibetan buildings but as in so much of Tibet, Chinese influence is now predominant. But Tsedang does have an important place in the history of Tibet. It was here, on the nearby hill called Gongpo Ri that, according to legend, the Tibetan race originated, from the union of a monkey and an ogress. Tsedang was said to have been their playground.

There might be time this afternoon for a little exploration - Tsedang has a Tibetan quarter with traditional houses and several monasteries of interest - but it is probably best to rest and take it easy to help acclimatise to the altitude. In the main street outside the Tsedang hotel there are lots of restaurants serving good food - so in the evening you might try locally caught fish served with lots of chillies, or a Chinese hotpot.

Overnight: Tsedang Hotel or Similar (Meals: BLD)

Day 7: Explore Samye and the Yarlung Valley.

Today you will have a full day around Tsedang. Firstly you will visit Samye Monastery. The drive by the newly built road to Samye now takes one hour. Until recently this important monastery could only be reached by taking a ferry across the Tsangpo River. This was an exciting boat ride but with the building of the road the ferry now only runs sporadically if at all.

Samye was founded 1200 years ago and was the first monastery with monks in Tibet. It was the royal temple up to the end of the Yarlung Dynasty and is built in the shape of a Mandala. It is most closely associated with the Nyingmapa order of Buddhism, which is one of the oldest orders of Tibetan Buddhism and dates back to Padmasambhava, an Indian Buddhist master who is credited with bringing monasticism to Tibet in the eighth century. After your visit inside the monastery you might like to climb nearby Hepori Hill, considered one of the four sacred mountains of Tibet, for fantastic views over Samye. From the summit there are also wonderful views out across the Tsangpo Valley. After the visit to Samye you return to Tsedang.



The area around Tsedang is considered to be the cradle of Tibetan civilisation. In the nearby Yarlung valley, a short half-hour drive from Tsedang, is the fortress/chapel of Yumbulakhang, a distinctive tapering structure

perched on a crag, said to be the oldest building in Tibet and to have been built for the legendary King Nyentri Tsenpo. Its origins may date back more than 2,000 years. If you climb the ridge above Yumbulakhang you will get good views of the Yumbulakhang and the Yarlung Valley and the mountains to the south. The first cultivation in Tibet is thought to have started in this valley. It was also from Yarlung that early Tibetan kings unified Tibet in the 7th century. In nearby Chongye are found the burial mounds of these earliest kings. One of the larger mounds, topped by a monastery, is that of King Songsten Gampo who was the first royal patron of Buddhism in Tibet and in whose reign building of the Jokhang Temple was started. Tandruck Monastery, also situated near Tsedang, is one of the earliest Buddhist monasteries in Tibet, dating to about the same time as the Jokhang in Lhasa and you should have time to visit it on the way to Yarlung.

Overnight: Tsedang Hotel or Similar (Meals: BLD)

Day 8: Drive to Lhasa, 3,658m/12,001ft. Visit Jokhang Temple and Barkhor Market.

After breakfast you will drive to Lhasa with visits to a couple of places on the way. Firstly you drive a short way off the main road to see the old manor house at Namseling. Built in the 14th century this large and ancient building was an aristocratic manor house and is one of the very few remaining non-religious buildings to be found in Tibet. Sadly it was allowed to fall into a state of some disrepair but there has been some restoration work and hopefully this wonderful old building is now saved from dereliction. Until the mid 20th century the house was the centre of a grand estate and was surrounded by farm buildings and thriving orchards and gardens. Some people in the village still remember the old days when the estate was fully functioning. Later, also within living memory, in the 1960's, the building was used as a school. There are lovely views from Namseling over the Tsangpo valley and towards Hepori Hill, which marks the area where Samye monastery is situated. Continuing towards Lhasa it is also worth taking a detour to visit the famous monastery of Mindroling, one of the few monasteries in Tibet belonging to the Nyingmapa sect (this is the sect to which the Sherpas of Nepal belong). You then continue, past the airport, and drive through a tunnel through the mountains and continue to Lhasa alongside the Kyichu River. Lhasa looks a very modern Chinese city and as you drive in you will pass the new railway line coming in from China. But despite this apparent modernity your first view of the Potala Palace will still take your breath away. Your hotel is in the Tibetan section of Lhasa and within walking distance of the Jokhang Temple and Barkhor market.



After lunch you will visit the Jokhang Temple. This is the most sacred temple in Tibet and the centre of the Tibetan city. Pilgrims from all over Tibet flock to visit it. You will see them circling the Barkhor turning their prayer wheels or making full-length prostrations around the temple. To visit the Jokhang you will join these pilgrims as they shuffle round inside, making their offerings and feeding the thousands of flickering butter lamps. The temple was initially established in the 7th century by King Songtsen Gampo. It takes its name from the sacred image of the Buddha, the Jowo Shakyamuni, the most highly revered image in Tibet, a statue which was brought to Tibet by Songtsen Gampo's Chinese wife and which is now housed in one of the chapels of the Jokhang. The Jokhang itself was however originally designed by Nepalese craftsmen brought to Tibet by Songtsen Gampo's second wife who was from Nepal. Since that time the temple was further enlarged during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. It is worth visiting the roof of the Jokhang for wonderful views of the city and surrounding hills.

The Barkhor market is the area surrounding the Jokhang and is full of vendors selling all manner of wares; stirrups for dashing nomad horseman, tacky souvenirs for Chinese tourists and all sorts of other ephemera. Shops in the nearby streets display huge slabs of butter which pilgrims purchase to feed the butter lamps in the Jokhang temple. The characteristic rather cheesy smell of such temples is from these butter lamps. Part of the Barkhor market is now housed in a nearby building.

Overnight: Kyichu Hotel or Shambala Hotel or Similar, Lhasa (Meals: BLD)

Day 9: Sightseeing in Lhasa including the Potala Palace, Norbulingkha and Sera Monastery.

Today you have a full day sightseeing in Lhasa. This will include the Potala Palace and the Norbulingkha, the former summer palace of the Dalai Lama. In the afternoon you will visit the Monastery of Sera.

In the morning you will visit the Potala Palace. Luckily the Potala remained largely undamaged throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution. Songtsen Gampo was the first Tibetan ruler to establish a palace on this outcrop, the 'Red Hill', but construction of the grand palace that we see today began in 1645 during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The palace is named after Mount Potala, a sacred mountain in South India, and served as the home of successive Dalai Lamas and their monastic staff. You will start your tour at the top of the building where the view from the roof is stunning. You then work your way down through successive storeys and through a maze of rooms - through the living quarters of the Dalai Lama and down through numerous highly decorated chapels and colourful assembly halls. Walls are decorated with intricate murals and hung with painted thangkas. One of the most awesome rooms in the Potala is the Chapel of the Dalai Lamas' Tombs, which contains the massive golden stupa of the Fifth Dalai Lama and smaller stupas containing the relics of other Dalai Lamas. When you have completed your tour you may like to make a kora (circuit) right around the building, along with many Tibetan pilgrims who will be making the same circuit.



You will next visit the Norbulingkha. The name means 'Jewel Park' although nowadays it is known as 'People's Park'. The Norbulingkha was formerly the summer palace and recreation gardens of the Dalai Lama and it was from here that the present Dalai Lama escaped in 1959. The nearby Tibet Museum is also well worth a visit. Pass rapidly through the galleries justifying the Chinese occupation and you will find that the galleries on Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan arts and crafts along with objects of everyday life are well worth the visit. There are many outstanding pieces on display.

In the afternoon you will drive 40 minutes to Sera Monastery, one of the three great Gelukpa monasteries near Lhasa. This monastery dates back to the 15th century and was formerly a monastic township housing over 5,000 monks. Although many of the outlying buildings have been destroyed the principal buildings were left relatively intact and nowadays the monastic population is again over 300 monks. Sera is particularly famous for its great monastic debates and monks can still be seen debating in the debating courtyard. More prosaic but equally fascinating are the large monastic kitchens where monks prepare industrial quantities of food in huge copper cauldrons. It is quite a sight to see Tibetan tea being blended with a mixer the size of a road drill!

Overnight: Kyichu Hotel or Shambala Hotel or Similar, Lhasa (Meals: BLD)

Day 10: Visit Drepung Monastery. Afternoon at leisure.

This morning you will travel to Drepung Monastery, just a few miles out of Lhasa. Drepung, Sera and Ganden Monasteries make up the three great Gelukpa Monasteries of Tibet with Drepung arguably the most important of all. The name Drepung means piles of rice and comes from its appearance when seen from afar. Drepung was founded in the 15th century and was long a centre of Buddhist study with as many as 10,000 monks. Even today it is a centre of resistance to Chinese authority and was closed down by the authorities for several years at the beginning of the century. The 'debates' held by Drepung's monks are famous.

Finally, you return to Lhasa where you will have some free time to do some shopping or simply relax at your hotel.

Overnight: Kyichu Hotel or Shambala Hotel or Similar, Lhasa (Meals: BLD)

Day 11: Drive to Gonggar. Fly to Kathmandu. Transfer to hotel.

You will have a fairly early start for the hour's drive to Gonggar International Airport and the hour long flight to Kathmandu. The best views of Mount Everest are from the right hand side of the aircraft, although seating is allocated. However if you are on the left hand side you will get wonderful views of Mount Kangchenjunga. The flight to Kathmandu usually arrives by mid morning and you will hopefully be back in the Hotel Shangri La before lunch. This leaves the afternoon free for some or sightseeing.

Overnight: Shangri La Hotel, Kathmandu (Meals: B)

Day 12: Free day in Kathmandu.

Today you will have a full day at leisure in Kathmandu. You will have time for shopping or for some sightseeing. You might visit the town of Patan which has a very handsome Durbar Square and a fine museum, or the Hindu temple at Pashupatinath. For shopping, the central tourist district of Thamel has plenty of souvenir shops plus lots of bars and cafes.

Overnight: Shangri La Hotel, Kathmandu (Meals: B)

Day 13: Fly to Paro, 2,200m/7,218ft. Drive to Punakha, 1,242m/4,075ft - 125km, 3½ hours.

Transfer to the airport for the short flight up to Paro in Bhutan. On a clear day the panoramic views of the Himalaya are sensational, including Everest, but particularly exciting is the approach through the Bhutanese foothills and the landing at the tiny airstrip in the Paro Valley. Although you are at the mercy of the Druk air computer, if possible try to sit on the left hand side of the plane for the most spectacular views.

On arrival you will be met by your guide and driver and will set off on the drive to Punakha. You may have lunch on arrival in Paro or on the way, possibly at the Dochu La. Firstly after about an hour's drive you will bypass the turn off to the capital, Thimphu, and climb to cross the Dochu La Pass, a pass at 3,048m/10,000ft, a spot is marked by 108 chortens. Here, weather permitting, you will have a magnificent mountain vista. On clear days there are fabulous views of the eastern Himalaya from here - but this is a beautiful spot even on misty days. You then drive down through incredibly beautiful, varied forest to arrive in the lush Punakha Valley.

Overnight: Zhingkhom Resort or Similar, Punakha (Meals: BLD)

Day 14: In the Punakha Valley. Attend the Talo Tsechu, visit Punakha Dzong and Chimi Lakhang.

Today you will have the opportunity to visit a Bhutanese Festival. After breakfast you will drive the short distance into the hills above Punakha to the village of Talo at 2,800m/9,186ft. This is a very pretty and well-kept village and it is well known for its fine Gumpa, the Talo Sangnacholing, built on a plateau above the village and enjoying majestic views. Festivals in Bhutan are important cultural and religious events and are a chance for local people to attain merit as well as dressing up in their best clothes, socialising and generally having fun. The Talo Tsechu is famed for its masked dances - such masked dances and the other colourful ceremonies at festivals are thought to dispel the evil spirits that have accumulated over the last year. Beware the very naughty clowns (called atsaras) who tease the crowd and the dancers!



In the afternoon you will visit the Punakha Dzong. The fabulous Punakha Dzong is one of the most spectacular and important dzongs in the kingdom. It is situated in a stunning position at the confluence of two rivers. In 1994 there was a major flood in the town which caused a lot of damage to the dzong, but it has now been beautifully renovated and is a real showcase for Bhutanese craftsmanship and painting. Unless there are VIPs visiting you are normally allowed to visit the inside of the dzong.

Later you will also visit Chimi Lakhang, a temple built by Drukpa Kunley. Known as the 'The Divine Madman', Drukpa Kunley was a 15th Century Bhutanese Lama and is Bhutan's most popular saint and one of the most important figures in Bhutanese folklore. Despite the apparent conservatism of the Bhutanese people, Drukpa Kunley with his unconventional views on sex is a great favourite throughout the country - the phallus symbols painted on the outside walls of many houses date back to his teachings. Chimi Lakhang is especially popular with women who come here to make offerings and to pray for children. This charming lakhang is reached by a short walk across the paddy fields and the short excursion takes about 45 minutes each way.

Overnight: Zhingkhom Resort or Similar, Punakha (Meals: BLD)

Day 15: Drive to Thimphu, 2,320m/7,612ft. Sightseeing.

You will drive back over the Dochu La to Thimphu and you will have some sightseeing of the principal places in town. Firstly you could drive up to visit the huge Buddha statue for views over town.

Later you could visit the huge Tashichhodzong, part monastery, part administrative centre. Other highlights in Thimphu include the late king's memorial chorten, the textile museum, a visit to the indigenous hospital specialising in herbal medicine, and the school of painting. You can also visit a workshop to see handmade paper being made or the post office for some of Bhutan's fine editions of stamps. The handicrafts emporium is a good place to buy traditional crafts or traditional dress.

Overnight: Phuntso Pelri Hotel or Similar, Thimphu (Meals: BLD)

Day 16: Wangditse Monastery walk and drive to Paro. Sightseeing in Paro - Kyichu Lakhang and Paro Museum.

This morning you will drive up to Sangaygang next to the Bhutan First Broadcasting Service tower, located in the north west of Thimphu. It is only about a mile drive up to the tower so if you feel like you would like to burn a bit more energy you can always walk up instead. From the tower you will have great views over Thimphu Dzong and the Thimphu valley as you start your walk contouring the beautiful hills to visit Wangditse Gumpa. This walk should take around 1½ hours. You will have time to visit the gumpa before you walk down for another 30 minutes to reach Dechen Phodrang Monastery. This monastery houses around 450 student monks enrolled in a 8 year course and is also home to some fantastic UNESCO monitored 12th century paintings. You will then meet your vehicle and be driven back to Thimphu.

Later you will drive to Paro where you will visit a couple of its sights. Firstly will visit the temple of Kyichu Lakhang, one of the oldest and most beautiful temples in Bhutan. According to tradition the temple is said to have been built in the 7th century, one of 108 temples built by the famous Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, to pin down an enormous demon that was believed to be thwarting the establishment of Buddhism in the region. You may then visit the impressive Paro Dzong, one of Bhutan's most impressive and well-known dzongs, and perhaps the finest example of Bhutanese architecture you'll see. The massive buttressed walls that tower over the town are visible throughout the valley. You may also visit the Ta Dzong, the watch tower above the Dzong where you will see some of the treasures from Bhutan's National Museum. Displays include an impressive and fascinating collection of ancient thangkas depicting Bhutan's important saints and teachers and the wide range of Bhutan's history and culture. You will also find some fearsome festival masks, a collection of religious statues, some early stone carvings and the original iron links from the nearby Tamchhog Bridge.

Overnight: Hotel Olathang or Similar, Paro (Meals: BLD)

Day 17: Walk to Taktsang Monastery, 3,100m/10,203ft - 4-5 hours. Afternoon sightseeing in Paro or time at leisure.

A short drive beyond Paro town takes you to the trail head for the walk up to the famous Tiger's Nest, Taktsang Monastery. The monastery is perched some 600m/2,000ft up on a cliff overlooking the valley and was said to be where the legendary Indian saint, Guru Padma Sambhava, flew from Tibet on the back of a tiger to defeat five demons, who were opposing the spread of Buddhism in Bhutan. It's a steep uphill walk through woods, of about 1½-2hrs, to reach a tea house (an ascent of 340m/1,115ft.) Apart from offering welcome refreshment this tea house is one of the principle viewpoints of Taktsang, and those who prefer not to climb any further can relax here whilst others continue on. If there is a particular religious gathering or VIP visit in progress, you will not be able to enter the monastery but the further half an hour's ascent is well worth it in any case, as it brings you to another viewpoint directly across from Taktsang. If you are able to make a visit, the final section of the walk takes you from here steeply down 100m/330ft into the gorge that separates you from the monastery and then climbs back up again to reach the monastery gate.



After your Taktsang visit, you will descend back down to the valley floor and have the afternoon at leisure or for some more sightseeing including anything in the Paro Valley that you did not manage to see yesterday.

Your guide may suggest you drive up the valley to visit the ruined monastery fortress of Drukgyel Dzong, This dzong was built in 1649, during the time that Bhutan was resisting foreign invasion and consolidating its power, and it was an important base for the defence of the region right up until 1951 when it was destroyed by fire. Some imposing stone walls and rammed earth ramparts still remain to indicate what an impressive structure it must have been. From here there are good views to the north, and if the skies are clear, you can see Mount Chomolhari, the second highest peak in Bhutan.

Overnight: Hotel Olathang or Similar, Paro (Meals: BLD)

Day 18: Fly to Kathmandu. Afternoon at leisure.

You will be taken to the airport to check in for your flight. Again you have a sensational take-off and scenic Himalayan flight back to Nepal, where you will be transferred to Hotel Shangri La. Depending on the flight schedule you should then have the afternoon free to relax by the pool or do some shopping or sightseeing.

Overnight: Shangri La Hotel, Kathmandu (Meals: B)

Day 19: Time at leisure. Transfer to the airport and depart for London.

You will have much of today free in Kathmandu to do some sightseeing or shopping or simply relax by the pool at your hotel. Later there will be a group transfer to the airport for your overnight flight back to London.

Overnight: In flight (Meals: B)

Day 20: Arrive London.

Our grading system

Cultural Highlights of Bhutan and Tibet is graded as a Tour, as described below.

Tours

Tours may include any of the following activities: sightseeing, visiting local villages, exploring temples, game viewing, birdwatching, husky sledding, mountain flights, city tours and dramatic journeys by road, rail, or river. Occasionally there will be short, gentle walks so that you can properly explore the cultural sites you are visiting.

Trip altitude

Important - please be aware that this trip involves travel at altitude. Whilst all our itineraries are carefully designed to optimise acclimatisation to high altitudes, participants on this trip are likely to experience some symptoms of being at altitude. The Dossier pack we provide when you book your holiday includes comprehensive advice on safe travel at altitude. If you require further information or advice on travel at altitude prior to booking please contact the office to speak to an experienced member of our team. Alternatively we recommend www.medex.org.uk as a good source of information.

What the price includes

Mountain Kingdoms aims to offer the best value for money. We do not charge extra for meal packages or apply local charges and try to ensure that all the key elements of your holiday are included.

What's included:

- ✓ Local English-speaking guides in Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet
- ✓ All internal flights and domestic airport transfers
- ✓ Bhutan visa fee and Bhutan departure tax
- ✓ 4-star standard hotel accommodation in Kathmandu, twin share, bed and breakfast basis
- ✓ Best available hotels in Bhutan and Tibet, on a twin share, full board basis
- ✓ All road transport by private vehicles
- ✓ Sightseeing where specified
- ✓ Economy class return air fares from the UK & UK Departure Tax (flight inclusive only)
- ✓ Single, timed group airport transfers for international flights on arrival and departure
- ✓ Carbon offsetting with the Ecoan Tree Planting Project (for clients taking our flight inclusive option)
- ✓ A free Mountain Kingdoms Water-to-Go bottle
- ✓ The opportunity to attend one of our pre trip meets in the Cotswolds

Airport transfers

The cost of a transfer to/from the airport is included in the price of your holiday. This is a single group transfer which is arranged to coincide with the timings of the group flights. If you book your own flights which arrive/depart at different times to this, or we book flights at your request that have different timings, we will be happy to provide a quote for a separate transfer. Please contact us should you require any further information.

What's not included:

- ✗ Travel insurance
- ✗ Nepal visa fees and Tibet permit (Bhutanese Visa is included)
- ✗ Lunch and evening meals in Kathmandu
- ✗ Optional trips
- ✗ Tips

Water-to-Go Reusable Bottle Campaign

We have joined the campaign to help cut down on the use of plastics and, in particular, single-use water bottles. To do this we have teamed up with the revolutionary company, Water-to-Go who have developed a multi-use drinking bottle with a reusable filter that eliminates over 99.9% of all microbiological contaminants. This makes water from virtually any source safe to drink and significantly reduces the need for travellers to buy bottles of water wherever they are in the world.

Our clients who are not given a free Mountain Kingdoms kit bag for their holiday (these are required for certain treks), will instead receive a free Mountain Kingdoms Water-to-Go bottle. These unique Water-to-Go bottles can also be purchased from us at a discounted rate.

For further information about our campaign visit <https://www.mountainkingdoms.com/water-to-go-reusable-bottle-campaign>.

Your accommodation

We will endeavour to secure the hotels named in the itinerary but if our first choice of hotel is not available we will book a suitable alternative of a similar standard.

Hotels in Bhutan

Please note that there is generally a shortage of hotel/lodge accommodation in Bhutan, especially outside Paro and Thimphu. Although we pre-book rooms as far in advance as possible, anything can happen and probably will, e.g. if the royal family suddenly has a visiting delegation, accommodation may be changed at short notice. Additionally, during peak seasons, it can sometimes be very difficult to secure not only the hotels/lodges we want, but also the single rooms we might need. In these circumstances singles may occasionally be asked to share but in such cases we refund any single room supplements that might apply. Given these conditions we will make every effort to secure any of the following hotels:



Shangri La Hotel, Kathmandu

The Shangri La Hotel is a 4* hotel of character, just a stone's throw from the British Embassy and only a 20 minute walk or short taxi ride into the popular tourist area of Thamel. The hotel has a swimming pool, a lovely, landscaped garden, and a choice of restaurants and bars. Recent entertainment additions include a casino and fitness centre.



Dhulikhel Lodge Resort

This very pleasant resort is located overlooking lush countryside and enjoying fabulous views of the Himalaya. Rooms are large and comfortable and have all facilities and attached bathrooms. From the lodge there are views of Everest and opportunities for walks to nearby villages and temples.



Tsedang Hotel or Similar

This large, busy hotel is situated in the centre of town and has clean, comfortable rooms and serves a large buffet breakfast to send you on your way.



Kyichu Hotel or Shambala Hotel or Similar, Lhasa

The Kyichu Hotel is a busy and popular Tibetan hotel located just a 5 minute walk from the Jokhang Temple. It has a central courtyard and comfortable rooms. The Shambala is a good hotel, although still only about 3 star by European standards. Both of these hotels are located in the old part of town which allows more freedom for your own sightseeing.



Zhingkhram Resort or Similar, Punakha

Overlooking Punakha Dzong, and only opened in 2016, the Zhingkhram Resort is one of the best hotels in Punakha. The well-proportioned, stylish rooms come complete with free Wi-Fi, minibars and coffee/tea making facilities as well as balconies giving picture-perfect views of the dzong and the surrounding hills and countryside.



Phuntso Pelri Hotel or Similar, Thimphu

Despite its somewhat dark entrance hall, this relatively new hotel is very well appointed, with custom made Bhutanese wooden furniture and good sized rooms. During busy periods, especially during festivals, we may use the Jomolhari Hotel, the Kisa Hotel, Hotel Gakyil, Hotel Osel or the Amodhara Hotel. These are amongst the best tourist class hotels in Thimphu.



Hotel Olathang or Similar, Paro

Originally built for the coronation of the Bhutan's 4th King in 1974, this attractive hotel stands on a hill overlooking Paro town. Rooms in the main building are set around a peaceful courtyard and there are also a number of cottages dotted around the spacious grounds. Decoration is typically Bhutanese with stripped wooden floors and colourfully painted walls. Rooms are well-equipped and the hotel has its own spa, international restaurant and bar.

Meal arrangements

Bed and breakfast in Kathmandu, all meals elsewhere. 18 x breakfasts, 12 x lunches, 12 x dinners.

Flight arrangements

Flight inclusive from price

Our 'Flight inclusive from' price is based on the best fare available at the time of printing. As airfares change on a constant basis, this should be used only as a guide price. Rest assured that, at the time of booking, we will endeavour to get the best possible price for the flights you need. Remember, the earlier you book the greater your chances of securing the best fare.

Flight inclusive packages booked through Mountain Kingdoms are protected through our ATOL bonding scheme.

Flight upgrades and regional Airports

Please call us on +44 (0)1453 844400 for flight options from regional UK airports, Business Class upgrades, alternative airlines and stopovers. Please also check our website for the most up to date flight inclusive 'from' prices.

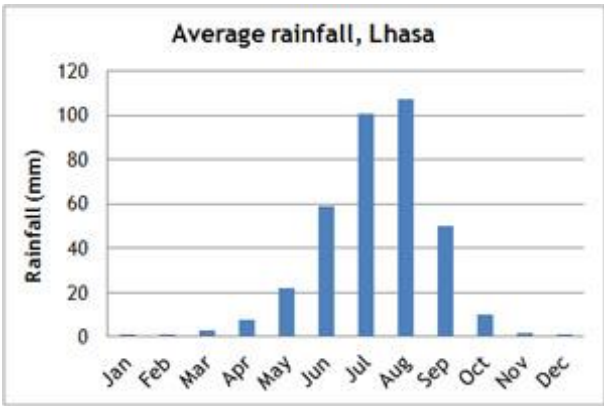
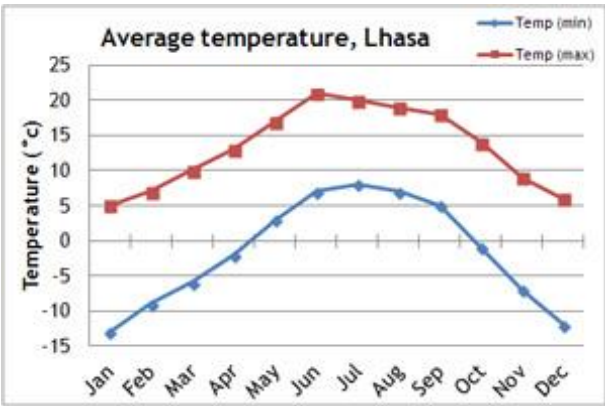
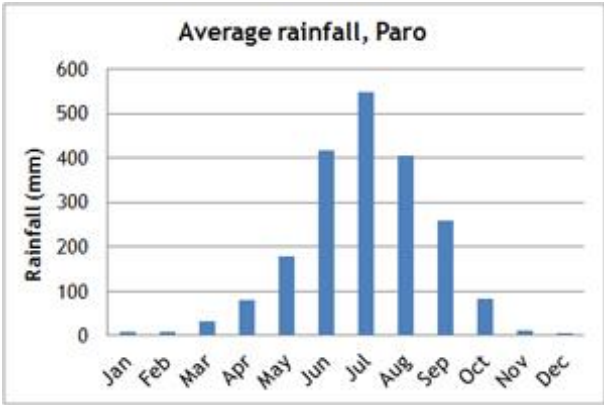
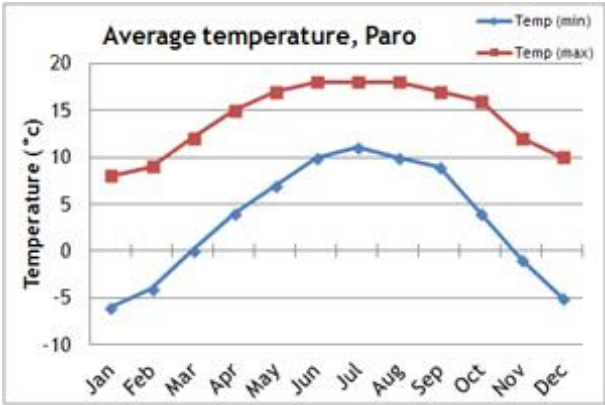
Further information

When we receive your booking, we send you a full Trip Dossier which contains details of any visas and vaccinations required, a suggested gear and clothing list and lots of useful information. If you do have queries at this initial stage do call us on 01453 844400 and we will be pleased to offer advice.

The nature of adventure travel

Every effort will be made to keep to this itinerary but we cannot guarantee that things may not change, either before you travel or while you are away. By its very nature, adventure travel involves an element of the unexpected, particularly in more remote areas. A variety of factors such as adverse weather conditions, changes to local schedules and difficulties with transportation can all contribute to the need to make changes to the itinerary, often at the very last minute. Our Operations Manager and your Trip Leader will make every effort to maintain the integrity of the original itinerary and minimise the impact of any changes, but an easy-going and flexible nature is a real asset! Please note that all timings and distances given are approximate.

Climate information



Extensions

Extending your holiday

If you would like additional inspiration on how or where to extend your holiday please call us on 01453 844400. Alternatively, you can download a range of extension information sheets on our website, at www.mountainkingdoms.com.



Extra nights in Nepal

If you would like to extend your stay in Nepal, you can add extra nights at your group tour accommodation or choose from our range of distinctive properties in Pokhara and the Kathmandu area. We can offer luxury resorts, heritage hotels, tranquil lodges and characterful cottages. Our selection includes Dwarika's hotel in Kathmandu and its sister property - Dwarika's Resort at Dhulikhel, Pavilions Himalaya at Pokhara, Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge and Shivapuri Heights Cottage. Individual extension leaflets for all these options can be downloaded from our website or requested from our office.



Kathmandu sightseeing excursions

We can arrange half day or full day sightseeing tours taking you to the key cultural attractions of central Kathmandu or the World Heritage Sites of Bhaktapur and Patan. Your tour will be led by an English speaking guide and you will have a private vehicle and driver.



Lumbini

Enjoy a three day extension to the birthplace of Buddha, one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the world. Take the short flight from Kathmandu, and spend two nights in a comfortable 3* hotel, just steps from the Lumbini temple complex, with a full day to explore the fascinating UNESCO World Heritage Site in the company of an expert local guide.



Wildlife extensions in Nepal - Chitwan, Bardia & Koshi Tappu

Visit Chitwan or Bardia National Parks home to a rich variety of birds and animals including elephant, rhinos, leopard and Bengal tiger. Stay in a comfortable lodge and enjoy a range of wildlife viewing activities. Alternatively visit the renowned Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve - one of the finest birdwatching and wildlife areas in all Asia.

Why book this holiday with Mountain Kingdoms?

- This is a specially designed tour to take you to the heart of Bhutan and Tibet with time also spent in Nepal.
- We have created an itinerary with an excellent balance of sightseeing, travel and time to relax.
- We have included time at a festival in Bhutan - a highlight of any visit to the Thunder Dragon Kingdom.
- With over 30 years experience of the Himalaya we are the UK's leading operator taking people to Bhutan and Tibet.
- Your tour will be led by professional, English-speaking guides who will be delighted to share their expert knowledge of the history, culture and nature of their home country.
- We have been pioneering holidays in Bhutan for over 30 years. Our M.D. Steve Berry, is one of the leading authorities on Bhutan in the travel industry and has written two books about his experiences in the Thunder Dragon Kingdom.
- Many members of the Mountain Kingdoms team have first-hand experience of the Himalaya and would be very happy to answer any questions you may have about this holiday.
- Our maximum group size is 12 for this trip. This provides for a genuine small group travel experience and helps reduce the negative aspects associated with larger tour groups.
- As part of our commitment to 'Tourism Declares a Climate Emergency', we will be carbon-offsetting all international flights booked through us by donating funds to the Ecoan Tree Planting Project in Peru.
- We are an IATA accredited agent and work directly with some of the world's major airlines. If you wish to fly with a specific airline, from a regional UK airport or on alternative dates to the main group we would be happy to arrange this for you. Please contact our Flights Manager, April, for flight options, quotes and further information.
- We offer a flexible service and can extend your holiday with extra hotel nights, upgrades and exciting activities in both Bhutan and Nepal.

If we've tempted you to take your next holiday with us, we advise you to check availability and you can do this via our website: www.mountainkingdoms.com or by calling the team on +44 (0)1453 844400. Bookings can be made online, by phone or by completing a booking form and returning it to us. We can also provisionally hold places if you need time to consider your options.

What our clients say



The Cultural trip was well planned ,all the tour guides and drivers were excellent.

-Mr F W, Littlehampton

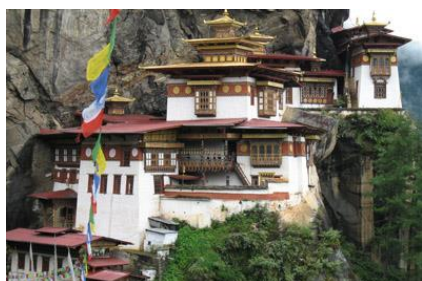
We had a very memorable adventure with experiences we will remember for along time!

-Mr B, Barnsley



An enjoyable trip to see the cultural highlights of Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. A little bit of trekking involved in Bhutan but well worth it to see the Tigers Nest Monastery. All the guides and drivers were helpful, knowledgeable and spoke good English. The hotels were comfortable and we enjoyed a lot of traditional food as most meals were included. Each country is predominantly Buddhist but this is interpreted differently depending on the country, so it was a fascinating insight into the slightly confusing world of Buddha (or Buddhas as I learnt there are more than one!).

-Ms W, West Sussex



Gross National Happiness. The concept of GNH will be one of our lasting memories of Bhutan, quite apart from the spectacular scenery, clean air, beautifully crafted architecture, wonderful people and chilli cheese! The effort, as part of the GNH concept, to retain the cultural heritage of Bhutan, whilst taking modern approaches to equality, education, health care and the environment makes visiting Bhutan such a joy. Seeing the old and young celebrating local festivals in their very finest national costumes, with only a very small minority wearing western clothing, was colourful beyond measure. GNH gives hope that Bhutan will not rush headlong into becoming just another westernised (if remote) beauty spot.

-Mrs T, Nottingham



We found Bhutan and Tibet interesting and worthwhile with lots of good walking and sightseeing. Our extension to Chitwan was extremely memorable due to the staff, guides and accommodation, the whole of the planned programmes ran to time. We met interesting people in the villages. The guides in Bhutan and Tibet were first class.

- Mr & Mrs H, Gloucestershire

An outstandingly well planned tour, clearly based on your detailed experience and excellent local agents in each country.

-Mr H, Lanarkshire

Mountain Kingdoms - distinctly different

Truly independent

In an age where many so-called 'independent' travel companies have in fact been bought out by multi-national giants, we remain fiercely independent with all the benefits this offers our clients.

Value for money prices with an emphasis on quality

We are not in the business of cutting our itineraries and services to the bone to offer eye-catching cheap prices. We use some of the best airlines, and typically 3 or 4 star hotels in cities. We include the majority of meals and private transport for road travel. We use excellent equipment and appoint well-trained staff and leaders. Last year, over 98% of our clients rated their Mountain Kingdoms holiday as 'excellent' or 'good'. We are members of AITO and bound by their quality charter.

Complete financial security

You can book with us confident that your holiday has full financial protection. Flight inclusive holidays are financially protected by the Civil Aviation Authority under ATOL licence number 2973 and 'Land Only' holidays are covered by a bond secured with ABTOT.

No Surcharge Guarantee

Your peace of mind is important to us so we have a No Surcharge Guarantee on all Land Only and Flight Inclusive bookings. This means that there will be no change to the price of your holiday once we have confirmed your booking, regardless of fluctuations in exchange rates or fuel prices.

Award winning Responsible Tourism

We feel strongly that all our holidays should benefit local communities, protect the environment and respect local traditions, religion and heritage. You can read more about the charities we support and our Responsible Tourism commitments and initiatives on the following page or at www.mountainkingdoms.com.

Genuine small group travel

Almost all of our holidays have a maximum group size of just 12, plus leader. This provides more contact with your leader, readier access to off-the-beaten-path areas, greater interaction with local communities and a reduced environmental impact.

Loyalty Discount

If you have previously travelled with us we recognise your loyalty with a discount on future trips.

Booking your holiday - it couldn't be easier

Once you've chosen your Mountain Kingdoms holiday you can book online, call the office or complete and post a booking form which can be found in our brochure or downloaded from our website. If you would like to hold a place on one of our trips, whilst you make up your mind, please give us a call to make a provisional booking. This is a no-obligation, no-cost booking and we will hold your place until space comes under pressure or we need your decision.

Comprehensive information

When we receive your booking we send you a full trip dossier which contains details of visas and vaccinations required, a suggested gear and clothing list and lots of useful information. In fact, everything you need to know to give you peace of mind and allow you to prepare for your trip of a lifetime.



RESPONSIBLE TOURISM STATEMENT CLIMATE EMERGENCY PLAN



For over 33 years, Mountain Kingdoms has been offering people the chance to visit amazing places on this extraordinary planet. We now offer trips to all corners of the world, but we are conscious that inevitably our holidays have a detrimental impact on the world around us, and we want to do all we can to reduce our carbon emissions. We are a signatory to Tourism Declares a Climate Emergency, along with a growing number of like-minded, reputable tour operators. For more information, please visit www.tourismdeclares.com

From 2020 onwards, we will be focusing on how we can reduce the carbon emissions that our holidays produce, and how to counterbalance this carbon by supporting carbon offset measures. Here are some of our current and future plans to minimise the impact of our business as a whole:

Carbon Offsetting

Already doing:

- ✓ We have been offsetting carbon since 2007, but will be increasing our donations to the [Ecoan tree planting project](#) in Peru this year. This is with a trusted partner where the funds go directly to a project where the community plants trees on its own land.

Will do:

- ✓ We are working on making our carbon offsetting more accurate and targeted.
- ✓ In future, we will add to that a further estimate for carbon produced by hotels, local road travel, trains and internal flights to arrive at a carbon offset sum for each trip we operate.
- ✓ Carbon offsetting will be included in our holiday prices. For our Flight Inclusive holidays it will include the international flight and any emissions produced by inland travel and accommodation. Our Land Only prices will include the cost of offsetting emissions caused by inland travel and accommodation.

Reducing Carbon Emissions

Already doing:

- ✓ We already offer the majority of our customers a free filtered water bottle which means they can instantly cut down on their single-use plastic consumption. This will be an ongoing project.
- ✓ We already predominantly use locally owned hotels, but will continue to ensure that, where possible, we use these rather than multinational chains.
- ✓ We have joined the Tourism Declares a Climate Emergency initiative to stand alongside like-minded travel companies, to work together to initiate best practices to make tourism as sustainable as possible.

Will do:

- ✓ We will re-evaluate our flights to make sure we are using the most fuel efficient airlines with the youngest fleets and, where possible, direct flights for each trip.
- ✓ We will stop offering unnecessary optional flights – for example our Everest sightseeing trip.
- ✓ We will eliminate unnecessary staff flights wherever possible.
- ✓ We will look at minimising internal flights.
- ✓ We will be asking all our worldwide agents and suppliers to look at their own carbon footprint and encourage them to reduce it.
- ✓ We will promote our more low impact trips to give customers an informed choice.

As part of our wider commitment to Responsible Tourism, we will continue to support a number of charities with whom we have had a long standing relationship over many years. These include: Shiva Charity in Nepal (Ginette Harrison School), Simien Mountains Mobile Medical Service and Porter Welfare, as well as setting aside a sum for emergency disaster relief should the need arise.

