

**HIMALAYAN KINGDOMS (SIKKIM & BHUTAN),  
22 DAYS**

This document was designed to be read in conjunction with our other pre-departure information provided after you have made a booking with Wendy Wu Tours. It aims to provide a straight forward description of the physical activities involved in sightseeing or travelling during the tour. All passengers should read this dossier to confirm their ability to complete the tour. This is not your **Final Itinerary** and therefore does not mention all the sites visited.

**Tour Grade – Active Pace Tour**

This is defined in our brochure as the following: “Refers to programmes where personal involvement is necessary, which can travel to remote areas and that may contain areas of high altitude, reaching up to 3700m. These tours may involve some hiking. Accommodation on these tours may be in basic hotels or camps in remote areas. These programmes also require a good level of fitness and a doctors’ certificate will be required for those tour participants 70 years of age and over.”

Anyone with a good level of fitness should be able to complete this itinerary. Travelling may involve driving for prolonged periods, estimated to be up to 9 hrs, on unsealed and winding roads. Sightseeing may involve walking on the ground rather than pathways and spending time at altitude. These tours are not recommended for those unable to walk for lengthy periods without assistance, which have poor balance, knee or hip injuries. Of course, our local guides always endeavour to provide the highest level of service and assistance, but they cannot be expected to cater for passengers who are unfit to complete the itinerary.

**Climbing Steps and Treks**

Sightseeing at nearly all of the palaces, fortresses/dzongs and some temples involves climbing some steps. These palaces were built to provide defence against potential invaders so nearly all of them stand on top of a hill, while the interiors have layers of narrow hallways and steps to slow down the advance of enemies once they were inside. The

steps tend to be quite large, not level and sometimes without handrails. Hindu and Buddhist temples or pagodas also tend to be built at an elevation, as this is the most auspicious position according to ancient beliefs. This means you sometimes need to walk uphill from the bus park to the entrance, and/or need to climb some steps once inside. Finally, the old hill station towns, such as Darjeeling, are located at a higher and cooler elevation and were developed as resorts to escape the heat of the lowland. They are usually made up of interconnecting roads, steps and sloped pathways so walking around the town, or even within the grounds of your hotel, may require some physical effort.

**Taktshang Monastery (Tiger's Nest)**

As the most famous of Bhutan's monasteries is perched on the side of a cliff 900m above the Paro Valley floor, this trek deserves its own mention. The climb is steep in some places and can be unstable under foot, particularly on the downward legs as steps are only found between the view point and the monastery with the remainder of the path being dirt. Despite this, the journey is certainly worthwhile on account of the superb views en route. However, this is quite a physically challenging hike and any passengers that have poor knees, are prone to vertigo, dislike heights or are physically unfit will certainly struggle to keep up and at best may only make it to the halfway point; the cafeteria where lunch is served! The view from this point is quite spectacular should you not wish to continue to the top.

The hike to the monastery can be broken down into various stages. The first stage is the trek to the cafeteria (lunch stop) which is situated on a rocky outcrop across a ravine from the monastery. This leg of the trek takes approximately 45 to 60 mins, depending on your level of fitness. Horses (really only small ponies) can be arranged for this leg at your own cost.

The second stage of the walk is from the cafeteria to the lookout opposite the monastery. This leg takes close to another hour. At this point some may be content to snap photos and return to the cafeteria.

The next stage is the trek/climb down the steps in the cliff face to the bottom of the ravine which crosses over a stream and waterfall before the path again ascends to the entrance of the monastery. Once here we should be able to enter into the monastery and view the cave where Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal meditated. (Please note that cameras are not allowed inside the monastery). The visit and climb to the entrance and back to the lookout will take about another hour.

**Altitude**

This itinerary spends the majority of the time traversing high altitudes. During the tour you will experience the following altitudes (approximations):

Darjeeling	2,130m
Pelling	2,083m
Gangtok	1,677m
Kalimpong	1,250m
Thimpu	2,350m
Dochu Pass	3,140m

Punakha	1,300m
Gangtey	3,000m
Pele Pass	3,420m
Yotong Pass	3,425m
Bumthang	2,580m
Trongsa	2,180m
Paro	2,280m
Tigers Nest	3,180m

These are considered to be moderate, rather than high altitudes and people rarely have any trouble with these. Your group will be driving and therefore ascending gradually in altitude, which is one of the best ways to minimise the effects of AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness). It is recommended to drink more (water, non-alcoholic and non-caffeinated drinks) and avoid exertion after arriving at altitude.

Mild symptoms of AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) occur in some people and include dizziness, fatigue, nausea or loss of appetite, breathlessness or headache. These usually develop over the first 36 hrs at altitude and not immediately on arrival. AMS symptoms are experienced by people of varying ages and levels of fitness, and usually the symptoms will subside after a day or so. If symptoms worsen, you should seek medical advice and descend in altitude immediately. If you have an existing respiratory, vascular or coronary condition, we recommend checking with your Doctor before undertaking this itinerary.

### Group size

In most cases, the group will operate with a minimum of 10 passengers.

### Tipping

As with most countries, tipping is a way of life in China and Nepal. For our passengers' convenience we ask for a compulsory amount to be paid at the beginning of our group tours to cover tipping for guides, drivers, restaurant staff etc. Approximate tipping amounts can be found in our brochure and/or website. Exact tipping amounts will be stated in your final documentation, approximately 3 weeks before departure

### Appropriate dress

When visiting temples or mosques, both men and women should dress in non-revealing clothes. Full-length trousers with a shirt or t-shirt for men; and pants or skirts below the knee with a top that covers the shoulders and upper arms for women. Women might also consider carrying a 'modesty shawl' in their daypack – this could be a sarong or light scarf – which is worn over their shoulders and heads to feel more comfortable while sightseeing at mosques. When visiting Jain temples, you must not wear or take in any leather items such as belts, watches, camera straps, purses, shoes.

Religious sites and homes throughout India/Bhutan – for Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims or Buddhists to name a few - ***require all visitors to remove their shoes to enter.*** Even if you then need to walk outdoors, over hot or uneven ground, you will not be allowed to wear shoes. You will often find shoe storage rooms near the entrance of a site where it is customary to leave your shoes. Occasionally there are 'shoe minders' who will offer to keep your shoes safe for a 'tip' – this is not compulsory so each passenger can choose to tip for this service or not. If you do not want to remove them, you will have to remain outside.

***Bring some shoes that can easily slip on and off, and carry a pair of thick, old socks in your daypack, which you can wear to protect your feet from any rough or hot ground.***

Make sure you allow for climate changes throughout the day as you will experience different weather patterns whilst you transverse multiple and significant changes in altitude daily. You will generally find it is better to have several thin layers rather than one thick layer as it gives you more flexibility and warmth. A fleece can be invaluable and double as a pillow on the long road trips.

The section below will indicate when you need to consider these.

### Itinerary changes

1. Order of events and sightseeing may vary according to local conditions.

### Rail journeys

This trip involves one "Toy Train" ride from Darjeeling to Ghoom - refer to Refer to Your Travel Guide's TRANSPORT section for more information. Getting on and off the trains in India can be quite disordered and amusing as passengers will start boarding well before people have finished getting off!

### Electricity

The supply of electricity can be unreliable in the hill stations and smaller towns of Sikkim, West Bengal and particularly East Bhutan (despite Hydroelectricity being Bhutan's largest GNP earner) – e.g. Darjeeling commonly has blackouts. Refer to Refer to Your Travel Guide's ELECTRICITY section.

### Alternative transport and road conditions

In Darjeeling, you will travel to Tiger Hill on board a **sumo** truck and you may experience an elephant ride in Jaldhpara Wildlife Sanctuary.

Road Condition: Time taken in getting from A to B in this region is usually dependent on the size of your group. In a group you will be in a small coach with your luggage in a second vehicle. Roads in Sikkim and particularly in Bhutan are mostly like remote Australian country roads, tarred but a single lane. Though marked as dual lanes, they are invariably the width of one and a half lanes; however there are continual road works to make the main highway a full dual carriage road. Most of the roads are also very winding and are cut into a cliff face, giving you a magnificent view of the scenery and mountains as you drive past. This means space to pass is at a premium and although distances are not large the time to travel these distances is a lot longer than it would take in Australia. This means some days are full of driving with comfort stops throughout the day. Though there are toilet stops at cafes and

restaurants, some will be at 'bush toilets' en-route, hence carry some toilet paper with you at all times. Refer to Your Travel Guide's TRANSPORT section for more information.

### **Alternative or basic accommodation**

At Jaldhapara you will be staying overnight in basic Government run accommodation. In Bhutan hotels on our tours are generally "medium range" and can vary from a business class hotel in one city to a family run guesthouse in a smaller town. Hotels in Bhutan, other than those which are classed as deluxe properties and are extremely overpriced and expensive, are allocated one month prior to travel by the tourist authority. Unless you are staying in one of these deluxe hotels or visiting outside of the peak times, no particular hotel or room category can be guaranteed prior to that. All hotels we do use have private bathrooms and have air conditioning and/or a ceiling fan and bar/restaurant facilities. Travellers should however be cautioned against expecting princely comfort! Tea and coffee facilities are generally not available in your room. Some hotels do not have fridges, though in the colder months they are unnecessary if you have a balcony.

Please bear in mind that all levels of hotels can sometimes suffer from minor problems and technical difficulties (see Electricity). At each hotel your Tour Leader will try to organise the rooming arrangements to suit everyone's requirements. If you are travelling as a couple please note that we cannot guarantee the availability of double beds. Refer to Your Travel Guide's ACCOMMODATION section for more information.

**NB: Times and distances listed in this section are approximations only.**

### **Day 1: Arrive Kolkata**

You will be met in the airport arrivals hall tonight by your Local Guide/National Escort together with any other passengers from your group

who may be arriving at a similar time. Transfer (approx 1hr) to your hotel and check in.

### **Day 2: Kolkata**

Today is a very full day of sightseeing around Kolkata, involving approx 3 hrs on foot. Sightseeing includes a visit to a Jain temple – refer to **Appropriate Dress** above. Please note that many foreigners find Kali Temple confronting as they still make live animal sacrifices here (usually at midday) and can be crowded and pushy. To create the image of blood running on the ground, for example, they grind hibiscus flowers with water to run deep red on the ground. Goats are ritually sacrificed each day to honour the goddess Kali, known for her destructiveness. There is an obligatory donation of at least Rs50 each person; locals pay this so foreigners should too!

### **Day 3: Kolkata/Bagdogra/Darjeeling**

Darjeeling altitude – 2,130m

Please note that this flight is subject to change; it could depart in the morning or evening. Check out from the hotel and transfer to the airport for our flight to Bagdogra (flight duration 1 - 1 ½ hrs). From Bagdogra, drive 3 ½ hrs (93km) to Darjeeling and check in at the hotel. \*Please Note: Electricity shortages are common in Darjeeling.

### **Day 4: Darjeeling – Ghoom**

Rise before dawn to catch a jeep or *sumo bus* to Tiger Hill, 11km outside of town. Sightseeing here involves walking from wherever the vehicle parks to the top of the lookout. After viewing the sunrise from the lookout, there is easy sightseeing at a monastery near Ghoom before returning to the hotel. After breakfast, the group bus will take you to Darjeeling station to catch the '*Toy Train*' back down to Ghoom station (journey takes approx 1hr). Drive back to the hotel in the group bus for lunch, or you may have the option to catch the train back to Darjeeling as well. Free time in the afternoon.

### **Day 5: Darjeeling to Pelling**

Pelling altitude – 2,083m

Drive 5 to 6 hrs (130km) to Pelling, visiting Tashiding and Pemayangtse Monasteries en route. Sightseeing is easy here, with few steps – refer to **Appropriate Dress** above. Check in at the hotel.

### **Day 6: Pelling**

Drive 1 hr (18km) to Kanchenjunga Falls then Khecheopalri Lake; the road is uneven and unsealed. Sightseeing here is leisurely. Return to Pelling for lunch. Afternoon free time.

### **Day 7: Pelling to Gangtok**

Gangtok altitude – 1,677m

Drive 5 to 6 hrs (127km) to Gangtok and check in at the hotel.

### **Day 8: Gangtok**

This morning is easy sightseeing within Gangtok, which includes visiting Enchey Monastery – refer to **Appropriate Dress** above.

### **Day 9: Gangtok to Kalimpong**

Kalimpong – 1,250m

Check out from the hotel and drive 90mins (25km) to Rumtek Monastery for easy sightseeing. Continue driving 3 hrs (80km) to Kalimpong.

### **Day 10: Kalimpong**

Day at leisure.

### **Day 11: Kalimpong to Gorumara**

Drive 70 kms (approximately 2.5 hrs) to the Gorumara Wildlife Sanctuary and check in at the hotel. The afternoon sanctuary programme includes a jeep safari for approx 2hrs.

### **Day 12: Gorumara to Phuentsholing**

Phuentsholing altitude – 300m

Drive 110 kms (approximately 3 hrs) to Phuentsholing, the gateway to Bhutan for overland travellers. Here meet our Bhutanese National Escort. Visit Zangtho Pelri, a small temple built in the centre of town – refer to **Appropriate Dress** above.

### **Day 13: Phuentsholing to Thimphu**

Thimphu altitude – 2,350m

Drive 110 kms (approximately 6.5 hrs) to Thimphu, the capital of

Bhutan, via the Kharbandi Gompa (a Tibetan Buddhist monastery). The main highway is undergoing widening; therefore ongoing construction may be present.

#### **Day 14: Thimphu**

Today is easy sightseeing in and around Thimphu. Lunch served at the hotel. See Trashichho Dzong the medieval fortress/monastery; visit the National Library, the nearby Institute for Zorig Chusum (Painting School) and view the National Institute of Traditional Medicine. After lunch visit the National Memorial Chorten, the state-run Handicrafts Emporium, the Folk Heritage Museum and the National Textile Museum. Also drive out of town to an enclosure which is part of Thimphu Zoo to see the unique Bhutanese Takin.

#### **Day 15: Thimphu to Punakha**

Punakha altitude – 1300m

Drive (75km) to Punaka via Dochu-la (Pass) (3,140m), stopping en route to view Simtokha Dzong. Arrive in Punakha and check-in to the hotel. Depending on your group booking, overnight accommodation may be booked in Wanduephodrang - 30mins from Punakha. Later visit Punaka's 17<sup>th</sup> Century dzong located 30mins from Punakha – easy sightseeing. – refer to **Appropriate Dress** above.

#### **Day 16: Punakha to Bumthang (Jakar)**

Bumthang altitude – 2,580m

Drive 7hrs (210km) to Bumthang via Wangdue and Trongsa. Full day of driving; stopping only at Wangdue Markets and for lunch at a restaurant near the Nepalese style Chendbji Chorten. The drive from Wangdue to Pele-la (Pass) (3,420m) takes 105 mins. The lunch stop is a 60min drive after the pass. From the Chorten to Trongsa is another 80min drive. The drive (67km) Trongsa to Bumthang via Yotong-la (Pass) (3,425m) takes 150 mins. Refer to **Alternative transport and road conditions** above.

*[N.B: Please note: Most toilet stops will be bush toilets – make sure you have toilet paper in your possession.]*

#### **Day 17: Bumthang (Jakar) to Trongsa**

Trongsa altitude – 2,180m

Touring this morning is mostly by foot over the local trails in the foothills surrounding Bumthang – easy bushwalking standard. After visiting Jambey Lhakhang, drive to Kurje Lhakhang then walk across the river to Tamshing Lhakhang which has some of the oldest wall paintings in Bhutan. This afternoon drive back to Trongsa. Upon arrival, visit Trongsa's Dzong– refer to **Appropriate Dress** above for all monasteries and the dzong. Later check-in to your hotel.

#### **Day 18: Trongsa to Punakha via Gangtey Valley**

Gangtey altitude – 3,000m

Drive (142km) Trongsa to Punakha. 10mins after passing through Pele-la (Pass) leave the National Highway and drive (30mins) into Gangtey Valley. A few kilometres beyond the Gangtey Gompa on the valley floor, is the village of Phobjikha the winter home of the black necked cranes. After a picnic lunch in the valley, drive to Punakha or Wangdue for an overnight stay. Refer to **Alternative transport and road conditions** above.

#### **Day 19: Punakha to Paro**

Paro altitude – 2,280m

Drive 5 hrs (124km) to Paro. Upon arrival, check into the hotel. Later visit Ta Dzong, and Rinpung Dzong (home of the Paro Tshechu Festival) – steady up hill walk to reach both may be required. Refer to **Appropriate Dress** for visiting the dzong.

#### **Day 20: Paro**

Drive (20mins) to the start point for a hike to Taktshang Gompa – see **Climbing Steps and Treks** section above. The moderate hike takes all morning meaning a vegetarian lunch is served at the cafeteria, run by monks. Whilst returning to Paro visit Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest and most sacred temples of the Kingdom.

#### **Day 21: Paro to Kolkata**

An early drive (20mins) to the airport for a flight to Kolkata (1hr). Immediate check-in to the hotel upon arrival. Enjoy the day at leisure to do some last minute shopping.

*[N.B: Be conscious of local guides at the markets who are employed to 'entice' you to visit surrounding shops and once there may block the door till you buy something! Be firm and polite in your dealings. Be aware of your surroundings and your pockets.]*

Late check out has been requested for your group (until 6pm). Transfer to the airport according to the time of your international flight.

#### **Day 22: Australia.**

Arrive home.

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