

Western Bhutan



Whether you arrive by air at Paro or by road at Phuentsholing, your first impression of Bhutan is one of stepping into a world that you thought existed only in storybooks or your imagination. Vertical prayer flags flutter in the breeze and men dressed in a traditional *gho* (tunic) and Argyle socks stroll past yellow-roofed shrines and wooden slate-roofed houses. It soon becomes clear that you are well off the beaten path of mass tourism.

As with the rest of country, western Bhutan is a collection of valleys. The remote Haa valley in the far west is separated from the Paro valley by the 3810m Cheli La. The relatively built-up Thimphu valley to the east is divided from the historical centres of Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang by the 3140m Dochu La. East of here the rugged Black Mountain range forms an even greater barrier that separates western Bhutan from the rest of the country. North of here, the upper valleys are trekking territory, leading to the sacred peak of Jhomolhari, the Tibetan border and the fascinating and remote regions of Laya and Gasa. To the south are the lush foothills and the all-important road to the Indian border at Phuentsholing.

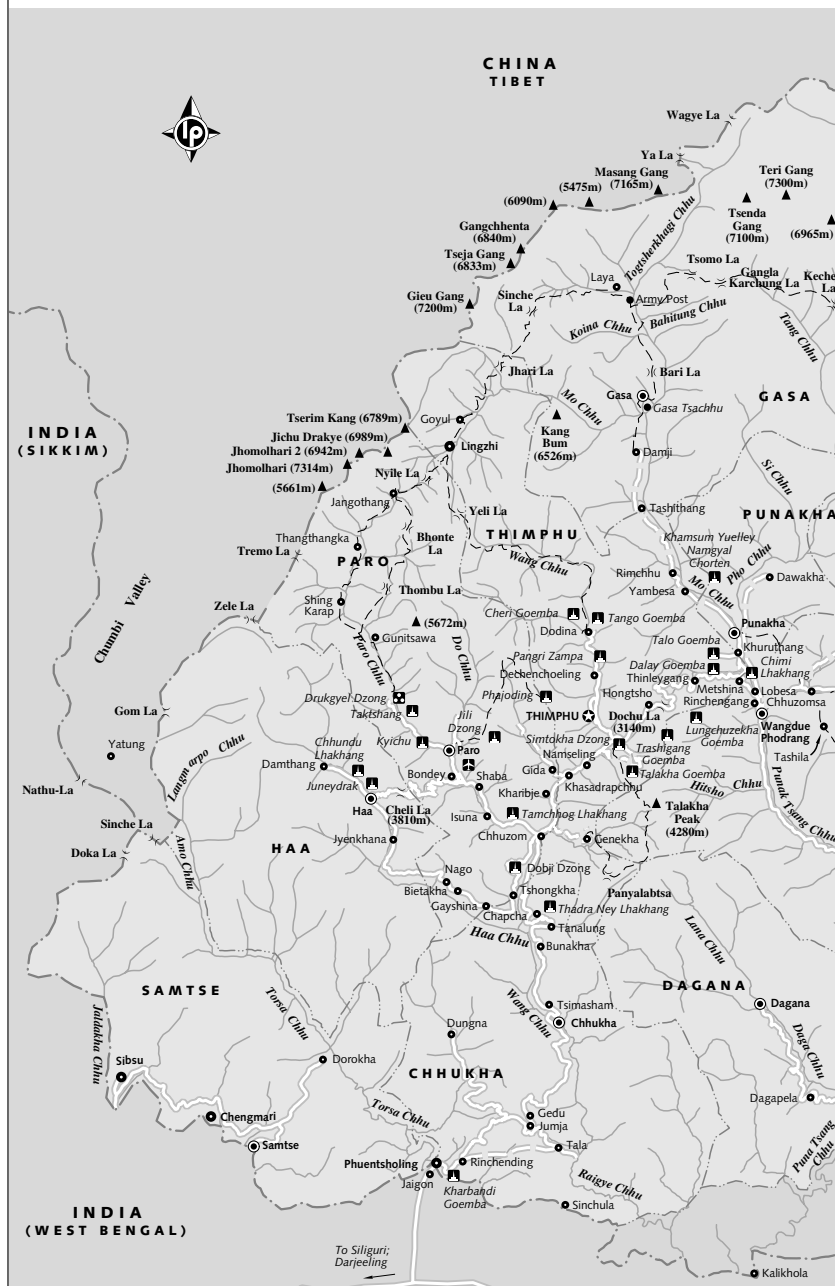
This is the region of Bhutan that most tourists see and for good reason. It's the heartland of the Drukpa people, home to the only airport, the capital and the largest, oldest and most spectacular dzongs in the kingdom. Whether it's the beginning of your trip or the all of your trip, it's a spectacular introduction to a magical land.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the spectacular dzongs of **Paro** (p122), **Wangdue Phodrang** (p149) and **Punakha** (p145).
- Admire the rhododendrons and mountain views on an early-morning drive to the **Dochu La** (p134)
- Immerse yourself in Bhutanese culture and history at Paro's **National Museum** (p124)
- Spot black-necked cranes or just do some great hiking in the remote **Phobjikha valley** (p152)
- Hike uphill to the dramatic cliff-hanging **Tiger's Nest** (p128), Bhutan's most famous sight
- Make a pilgrimage to the **Kyichu Lhakhang** (p127), one of Bhutan's oldest and most beautiful temples
- Explore little-visited monasteries and hermitages in the **Haa valley** (p133)
- Be blessed with a 10-inch penis, if only for a day, at **Chimi Lhakhang** (p145), the monastery of the Divine Madman!



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History

The history of western Bhutan is reflected in the history of Bhutan as a whole. Punakha was the capital of a unified Bhutan from the 17th to the 19th century. The seat of government was later moved to Paro, which then became the commercial, cultural and political centre of the country. Before the construction of roads, most of Bhutan's trade came through Paro, either from Tibet via the Trema La or from the south via Haa and the Cheli La.

PARO DZONGKHAG

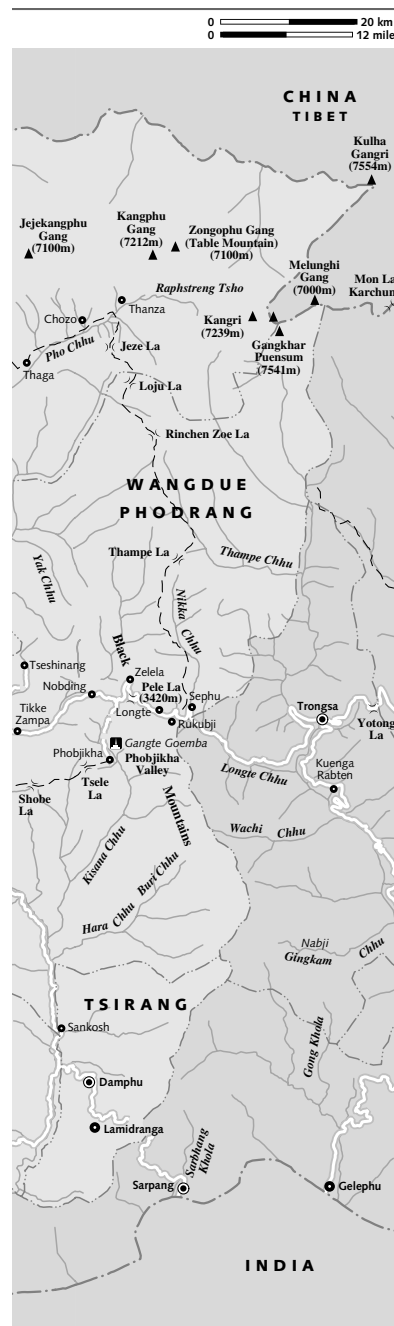
With our passage through the bridge, behold a curious transformation. For just as Alice, when she walked through the looking-glass, found herself in a new and whimsical world, so we, when we crossed the Pa-chhu, found ourselves, as though caught up on some magic time machine fitted fantastically with a reverse, flung back across the centuries into the feudalism of a mediaeval age.

Earl of Ronaldshay, *Lands of the Thunderbolt* (1923)

The Paro valley is without doubt one of the loveliest in Bhutan. Willow trees and apple orchards line many of the roads, whitewashed farmhouses and temples complement the green terraced fields and forested hills rise on either side to create a beautiful, organic and peaceful whole.

The broad valley is also excellent agricultural land and the people of Paro are better off than many elsewhere in Bhutan. One indication of their affluence is the preponderance of metal roofs throughout the valley, which have largely replaced the traditional wooden shingles. Red and white rice, apples, strawberries and asparagus (wonderful in April) all thrive in the fertile soil.

Several treks begin in or near Paro. The Druk Path trek climbs over the eastern valley wall, crossing a 4200m pass before descending to Thimphu. The Jhomolhari, Laya-Gasa and Snowman treks all lead west from Drukgyel Dzong on to Jhomolhari base camp and the spectacular alpine regions of Gasa and Laya beyond (for more on these regions, see p199).



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