

Santa Fe Workshops

Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon with Jennifer Spelman

April 24 – May 3, 2026



Daily Itinerary

Please note: While we do our best to follow the above itinerary, changes may be made to any aspect of the tour due to a variety of potential situations or unforeseen circumstances.

Day 1 (April 23): Kathmandu, Nepal

Upon arrival, you are picked up at the airport and taken to our hotel. For those who arrive early or who are interested in activities on this day, our support team is on hand to assist. After getting settled and having a rest, we start off with an evening orientation and group dinner at an excellent restaurant for a taste of Himalayan cuisine.

Day 2 (April 24): Kathmandu / Paro, Bhutan

This morning, we leave Nepal and take a 1.5-hour flight to Paro, a Bhutanese valley town known for its terraced fields, traditional homes, and a long history tied to early trade routes. After landing, we enjoy lunch for our first taste of Bhutanese cuisine and then check into our hotel. This afternoon, we head out on a photography tour of Paro Dzong, a 17th-century fortress-monastery with high stone walls, carved wooden balconies, and courtyards that host both religious ceremonies and local administration. We also visit Drukgyel Dzong, originally built to honor Bhutan's victory over Tibetan invasions, where we capture its partially restored ruins and learn about its centuries-old story. Later, we have dinner and settle in for the night.

Day 3 (April 25): Paro / Jakar

After a leisurely breakfast, we head to the airport for a quick 30-minute flight to Bumthang, a region often called the spiritual heart of Bhutan for its abundance of temples and monasteries. We spend the day in Jakar, the region's main town, known for its stunning mountain views and heritage Bhutanese houses. As we stroll through the village, we photograph and learn about daily life here, observing the farmers tending buckwheat fields and shopkeepers selling local cheese. During the

walk, we also sample some regional dishes by visiting small markets that offer everything from butter tea to hearty buckwheat noodles. For the golden hour, we head to Jakar Dzong, a 17th-century fortress located above the valley, known for its large courtyard, prayer halls, and the centuries of local governance that once took place within its walls. We then check into our scenic mountain lodge, where we settle in and enjoy dinner surrounded by the peaceful highland.

Day 4 (April 26): Jakar / Burning Lake / Pema Choling / Jakar

We begin the day with a 45-minute drive toward Pema Choling, a small monastic community settled in the hills. Along the way we stop at Burning Lake, a narrow gorge on the Tang River where locals come to leave butter lamps and pray. Upon arrival, we visit a nunnery set into the hillside, where Buddhist nuns live, study, and practice their faith. We learn about their day-to-day activities and share lunch with them, giving us an inside perspective on their routine. We also have the unique opportunity to see the nuns chanting prayers, turning prayer wheels, and going about their daily chores. In the afternoon, we return to Jakar, where you can relax or continue exploring the village on your own.

Day 5 (April 27): Jakar / Chumey / Trongsa

Today is a particularly exciting one as we depart Jakar and set off on a 1.5-hour drive to Chumey, a valley known for its farmland and weaving heritage. Historically, this area played a key role in the region's cultural development, and we witness this legacy at the Domkhar Tshechu festival. This festival is dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, the saint who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, and is believed to bring blessings to the community. We watch and photograph vibrant masked dances and hear monks chanting in honor of Bhutan's spiritual ancestry, all while sampling regional snacks and observing the locals wear their finest clothing, a tradition passed down for generations. After enjoying the festival, we visit a nearby textile community where artisans spin and dye sheep's wool by hand before weaving it on back-strap looms. Later, we drive another hour to Trongsa, a historic town that once served as the

home of Bhutan's royal family. We settle into our resort and enjoy a bit of quiet time to admire the mountain scenery from the infinity pool or treat yourself to a massage at the spa. We close this long day with a private barbecue dinner in a peaceful spot overlooking a waterfall.

Day 6 (April 28): Trongsa / Phobjikha Valley

Enjoy a leisurely morning at the resort, relaxing and taking in the mountain views or perhaps editing your photographs before we depart for an exciting day. In the late morning, we head to Trongsa Dzong, a 17th-century fortress dramatically perched above the Mangde River. As we walk through its expansive courtyards and long corridors, we photograph the detailed murals and traditional architecture that reflect its important place in Bhutan's royal history. After an early lunch we set out on a 3.5-hour drive to Phobjikha Valley, a wide glacial valley known for its peaceful landscapes, patchwork farmland, and scattered villages. Along the way we make stops to photograph small settlements and terraced fields, offering a glimpse into everyday life in this rural part of Bhutan. Once we arrive, we check into our hotel and enjoy a quiet evening with dinner.

Day 7 (April 29): Phobjikha Valley / Lawala Pass / Punakha

This morning, we explore the Phobjikha Valley, beginning with a visit to Gangtey Monastery, a 17th-century Buddhist center noted for its spacious courtyard, intricate wood carvings, and a main prayer hall where monks gather for daily rituals. We learn how the monastery has shaped spiritual life in the valley for centuries before heading out on a light hike through the surrounding fields, passing potato farms and watching daily life unfold in this peaceful part of Bhutan. After lunch we continue with a walk to a nearby village, where we have the chance to observe and photograph scenes of rural life, time-honored homes, and villagers going about their routines. As the sun begins to set, we return to the monastery to attend an evening prayer session, a quiet glimpse into Bhutanese monastic life.

Day 8 (April 30): Punakha

This morning, we leave the quiet valley of Phobjikha and begin our 2.5-hour drive to Punakha, a town that once served as Bhutan's capital and still plays an important role in the country's history. The drive takes us over the Lawala Pass, a mountain route lined with prayer flags where we stop briefly to photograph and stretch our legs. We arrive in Punakha around midday and have a relaxed picnic by the river before visiting Punakha Dzong. Sitting at the meeting point of two rivers, this impressive fortress was built in the 17th century and is known for its beautiful courtyards, painted woodwork, and role in royal and religious ceremonies.

Afterwards we cross a nearby suspension bridge, the longest in Bhutan, where we get wide views over the surrounding fields and hills. Before returning to our hotel, , we test our skills with a portrait session with locals from Laya, a remote highland region where residents wear conical bamboo hats and thick woven clothing suited to the cooler mountain climate.

Day 9 (May 1): Punakha / Dochula Pass / Thimphu / Paro

After breakfast, set off on a 2.5-hour drive to Thimphu, passing through the Dochula Pass—a scenic spot, that on clear days, offers some of the best views of the Himalayan peaks. Once we arrive in Thimphu, Bhutan's capital and largest city, we explore the downtown area, where modern government offices and traditional buildings line the streets, and locals often wear ghos (a knee-length robe for men) and kiras (an ankle-length dress for women) . Afterwards, we enjoy lunch at a friend's home, experiencing local hospitality firsthand and sampling homemade Bhutanese dishes. We then visit the farmer's market before driving the 1.5 hours back to Paro, arriving by late afternoon with time to relax before dinner. We end the day early to make sure everyone is well-rested for tomorrow's hike to the Tiger's Nest Monastery.

Day 10 (May 2): Paro / Tiger's Nest Monastery / Paro

After breakfast, we set out on a hike to the legendary Tiger's Nest Monastery, also known as Paro Taktsang, a sacred Buddhist site on top of a cliff nearly 3,000 feet above the Paro Valley. Legend has it that Guru Rinpoche meditated here after arriving on the back of a tiger, giving the monastery deep spiritual meaning. The trail is about four miles round-trip and moderately challenging, although anyone looking for a lighter option can take a pony ride to the Taktsang Viewpoint, where a small café offers comfortable seating and stunning views for photos. Later you can relax with an optional hot stone bath, a Bhutanese practice known for its therapeutic benefits. This evening, we gather for a special farewell dinner paired with cultural performances.

Day 11 (May 3): Paro / Kathmandu, Nepal

We begin the day with an early morning 1.5-hour flight back to Kathmandu, where the tour officially comes to an end. From here you can connect with your departure flight, taking with you the unforgettable memories of our journey through Bhutan and Nepal.

IMPORTANT: Departing flight from Kathmandu should be booked for any time after 1:00 pm in order to have enough time to transfer to the International Departures area of the airport.