

Santa Fe Workshops

Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon with Jennifer Spelman

April 23 – 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

For those interested, we begin the day with an optional sunrise tour through the mountains, focusing on bird photography. This area is home to more than 200 bird species, such as Himalayan griffons, colorful pheasants, and various songbirds, offering a chance to capture some unique images in the early morning light. Alternatively, you can stay and enjoy a leisurely morning at the resort, taking in the mountain views. In the late morning, we head to Trongsa Dzong, a 17th-century fortress above the Mangde River, where we photograph its detailed murals that reflect its role in Bhutan's royal lineage. After lunch, we drive for 3.5 hours to Phobjikha Valley, a glacial valley known for its farmland and quiet villages. Along the way we stop to photograph a few small settlements with wooden houses and terraced fields, giving us a glimpse into everyday rural life. Upon arrival, we check into our hotel and have an optional 30-minute light hike at Pelela Pass, a route marked by prayer flags and panoramic views of the surrounding peaks. We end the day with dinner back at the hotel.

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, wood carvings, and a main prayer hall where monks gather for daily rituals. We learn how it has shaped the community's spiritual practices over the centuries before heading out on a light hike through the valley, passing potato fields and watching villagers go about their day. After lunch at a local restaurant, we drive for 3 hours to Punakha, crossing Lawala Pass en route, with stops to see the rows of prayer flags and take in the mountain scenery. We reach Punakha by late afternoon, a historic town that

once served as Bhutan's capital. We settle into our hotel with time to relax before dinner.

Day 8 (April 30): Punakha

We start our day exploring Punakha Dzong, built where the Pho Chhu and Mo Chhu rivers meet. This fortress-monastery is known for its elaborately painted courtyards and a long tradition of hosting royal ceremonies. After our visit, we walk across the nearby suspension bridge, one of Bhutan's longest, high above the river, which offers clear views of the surrounding fields and hills. After lunch, 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. This evening, take a breather and relax at our countryside hotel.

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.