

# BHUTAN ON A BUDGET



PHOTO: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

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Bhutan, simply put, is an aesthetic land from all corners – from the mountain passes and temples to their architecture and persona. But with that beauty comes a price too high for us students. If you're planning to explore the “dragon's den” on a budget then I have just the plan for you.

The budget range we're targeting for this itinerary is between BDT 15,000 and 20,000, which excludes extra expenses like souvenirs and items on your personal shopping list. To execute this perfectly, I'll need you to solemnly swear to not indulge in lavish food and accommodation, to have genes superior enough to let you withstand mountain rides for hours on end, and to change your sleeping schedule from the nocturnal millennial to the ideal *shokal belar pakhi*. Now that we've set you up for the trip, let's jump to the preparations.

The first thing you need are bus tickets to the Burimari border in Lalmonirhat to enter India. Two-way tickets cost around BDT 2,000. There are bus services that help you in border crossing. If you want to avoid the hassle you can opt for one of them. Next, get an Indian transit visa. Bhutan's visa is on-arrival, so you needn't worry about that now. Check Bhutan's weather beforehand because it can get pretty chilly up there. Buy appropriate winter clothing. Lastly, take your student ID card with you to cut down ticket expenses to half.

Now let's get to the itinerary step by step. I'll sketch out one of 7 days, with 2 nights extra on either side for on-road journeys to and from the border.

## DAY 1

You'll start for the border on night 0,

reaching on the morning of day 1. The border opens at 9 AM, the crossing taking about 2 hours to complete. You can convert currency right on the opposite side, named Changrabandha. Both Indian and Bhutanese currency can be used in Bhutan.

Now you'll need to get to Jaigaon, the Bhutanese border. Taxi for four people costs Indian Rupees (INR) 2000. There's also bus available, but you can't depend on it for timeliness. This is a trade-off you'll face for the whole trip.

You'll reach Jaigaon in 2 hours. Complete the India departure from the border office, have lunch, cross the open border, stare in awe at the disparity in beauty and cleanliness of the two sides of the Bhutan gate and get your Bhutan visa from the border checkpoint. Buy a Bhutanese sim after you're done.

Leave Phuentsholing, the Bhutanese side of the border, as early as possible. It'll take about 4 hours to reach Thimphu, where everything closes down by 9 PM. There's nothing else to do in night 1 other than checking in your hotel and dinner. You can leave night time city exploration for night 2 and use night 1 for a good night's rest after that 24-hour journey on road.

## DAY 2

Use the first half of the day for sightseeing around Thimphu. Locations of interest include: Buddha Point, Thimphu Dzong, Thimphu Chorten, Clock Tower Square, National Folk Heritage Museum, Tango Buddhist Institute, Motithang Takin Preserve, and Simtokha Dzong. Hiring a taxi for the day will cost INR 1,500.

Before sightseeing, you can apply for a travel permit for Punakha. Afterwards you can explore the capital. You can buy

souvenirs here or from Paro, their airport city, where the collection and pricing is better. Thimphu is very vibrant and beautiful at night, experience it to its fullest now because this is your last night at Thimphu in this trip.

## DAY 3

Leave for Punakha as early as possible. The plan for the day is to partake in rafting in Punakha and go straight to Phobjikha valley, leaving the rest of Punakha to be explored on day 4.

The ride to Punakha from Thimphu takes about 2-3 hours. The rafting takes 2 hours including preparations. Rafting is quite easy and safe. It's a bit expensive (INR 6,000 to 9,000) but I personally found the experience worth it. After finishing lunch in Punakha, head for Phobjikha. It'll take approximately 3 hours to reach there. You stay at the many farmhouses there or in a high-end hotel that isn't all that expensive. Your taxi driver can help you in booking a farmhouse. You stay the night there and wait for the light of day to reveal the beauty of the valley.

## DAY 4

After successfully breaking off from the enchantment of the valley, head back to Punakha. Places for sightseeing include: Dochula Pass, Punakha Dzong, Chimi L'hakhang Temple, Khamsum Yulley Namgyal Chorten, and Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Nunnery. Your travel for the day ends in Paro. The taxi hired from Thimphu on day 3 ending in Paro covering everything we discussed will cost INR 6,000 to 8,000.

## DAY 5

Dedicate this day for sightseeing around Paro. Places include: Tachogang Lhakhang Bridge, Airport area, and Chele La Pass. If

you're on season, you can wander around apple gardens in full bloom. You can spend the rest of the day exploring the town, which is admittedly not as grand as the capital, but houses plenty of souvenir shops.

## DAY 6

Last but not least, visit Taktsang, the Tiger's Nest Monastery. It's the signature location to visit in Bhutan, but don't let that fool you in thinking it's an ordinary tourist spot. You require a 3.5 hours hike up to the 3000 feet high cliff on the side of which the monastery is built. Some say it's a spiritual hike, and I get why they think that way. But if you're someone like me who gets tired after two flights of stairs, it'll be a monumental struggle, to say the least.

You can ride a donkey a quarter of the way for INR 500. There's a café where the donkey ride ends. The prices there are too high for our budget to accommodate. So it's wise to bring dry snacks with you on the hike.

You can interchange the plans of days 5 and 6, but then you'll have to experience Paro with sore feet. Better to rest for the remainder of day 6, preparing for the 24-hour journey back home.

## DAY 7

Start early for Phuentsholing. Remember to take both Bhutan departure and India arrival seals on your visa at the border. The rest of the way is the exact reverse of Day 1.

*Fatiul Huq Sujoy is a tired soul (mostly because of his frail body) who's patiently waiting for Hagrid to appear and tell him, "Ye're a saiyen, lord commander." Suggest him places to travel and food-ventures to take at fb.com/SyedSujoy*