

AMANKORA

# AMANKORA

Combining *aman*, the Sanskrit-derived word for 'peace', and *kora* or 'circular pilgrimage' in Dzongkha, the Bhutanese language, **Amankora** is a unique circuit of lodges set throughout the Kingdom of Bhutan's central and western valleys. Descending from 7,000-metre peaks in the north to the low-lying plains of the south, Bhutan's rivers have forged deep valleys separated by high mountain passes. Historically isolated, each valley's scenic beauty and topography affords visitors an opportunity for unique journeys of discovery between them.

## AMANKORA PARO

Situated in Balakha Village, 30 minutes from Paro International Airport, the 24-suite **Amankora Paro** contrasts rustic elements with contemporary design. Its architecture features natural rammed-



earth walls, gently sloping roofs and woodpanelled interiors. Centred by a large flagstone courtyard, a lime-washed stone pavilion houses the living and dining room facilities, library and outdoor terrace, all warmed by fireplaces.

**Suites** feature a combined lounge and bedroom that is furnished with a king-size bed, banquette window-seat and reading chair. In one corner is the traditional *bukhari*, a wood-burning stove. Opening from the bedroom is the spacious bathroom. This is dominated by a large terrazzo-clad bath, flanked on one side by twin vanities and hanging space, and on the other by a separate shower and toilet.

Appointed with comfortable sofas and lounge chairs, **The Living Room** features floor-to-ceiling glass windows. These reveal a forest of blue pines, the 17th-century Drukyl Dzong and Mount Jhomolhari, which soars to over 7,300 metres. The warm and cosy ambience makes this an ideal spot for sipping drinks and swapping tales. The adjacent **library** provides a range of books on Buddhism and local lore, textiles and the Himalayas. Complimentary Internet access is also available through an in-house laptop. A selection of traditional Bhutanese handicrafts, textiles and clothing is available in the small **boutique**.

Located below the Living Room, **The Dining Room** opens onto an external terrace which overlooks a small stream. Views extend to snow-clad Jhomolhari and the ruins of the ancient *dzong*. Classic simplicity of form meets a warm ambience with communal tables and dark wood walls reflecting historic Bhutanese motifs. Amankora Paro's Dining Room serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, specialising in Indian, Western and Bhutanese dishes.

Behind the main cluster of buildings is the **spa**, which is set on two levels. The upper level includes an arrival area, changing rooms, a sauna, steam room and glass-walled yoga studio. Steps descend to the lower level which houses one double treatment room and four single treatment rooms, each offering a shower and unique outdoor bath.

## AMANKORA THIMPHU

**Amankora Thimphu** is situated in a blue pine forest in the upper reaches of the Motithang area of the Thimphu Valley. The 16-suite lodge is close to the capital's sights and shopping, while remaining a quiet retreat away from the hustle and bustle of the Kingdom's main commercial centre. The resort's *dzong*-inspired architecture incorporates whitewashed stone buildings accessed through an enclosed arrival courtyard. Stairs lead from this entryway to a combined **Living and Dining Room** with soaring ceilings and wood-panelled walls. An outdoor dining deck provides views of the nearby stream



and surrounding forest. The **spa** features three treatment rooms (two single and one double), a steam room and changing areas.

**Suites** combine a bedroom and lounge, and feature a king-size bed, a reading chair and a window banquette. This provides views across a landscaped courtyard, or of the stream and pine forest. A traditional *bukhari* is positioned between the bedroom and the bathroom. The suite's interior features wood panelling and chocolate brown walls. The spacious bathroom opens from the bedroom and provides twin vanities, separate shower and toilet, hanging space and a terrazzo-clad bath.

# AMANKORA

## AMANKORA PUNAKHA

Situated a short drive north of the impressive 17th-century Punakha Dzong and Puntsho Pelri Palace, **Amankora Punakha** is accessed by crossing a suspension bridge over the Mo Chhu (Mother River).

A short walk or drive takes guests to the large compound designed around a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse. This was built by a former *Je Khenpo* (Chief Abbot of Bhutan) as a residence to oversee the surrounding rice paddies and fruit orchards. The quaint, three-storey structure with its preserved vegetable-dye wall paintings is now the combined common guest area.

**The Dining Room** is situated on the ground floor, and the upper floors offer intimate relaxation areas and a traditional altar room for prayer and meditation. The **courtyard** of the farmhouse is suitable for outdoor dining and relaxation during Punakha's temperate months. Adjacent to the Courtyard is a **tea pavilion** that was once the kitchen. Beyond this is the two-storey **spa**. This provides a yoga/meditation room on its upper level with open views of the surrounding rice paddies, and two private treatment rooms, a steam room and changing areas on the lower level. Identical in Bhutanese-inspired design to those of Amankora Paro, eight **Suites** are located in three, rammed-earth buildings set in an orange orchard with views across the rice paddies and up Punakha Valley.



## AMANKORA GANGTEY

In the picturesque but little-visited Phobjikha Valley near the village of Gangtey, the eight-suite **Amankora Gangtey** is set on a forested knoll with sweeping views of the broad valley and the 16th-century Gangtey Goemba (monastery).



Lodge accommodations and guest facilities are housed together. The combined **Living and Dining Room** features cosy chairs, sofas and family-style dining tables, all looking out through floor-to-ceiling windows over the valley and surrounding mountains. **Spa** facilities consist of two massage treatment rooms and changing areas on the lodge's ground floor.

The eight **Suites** are identical to those of Amankora Thimphu, providing an open-plan living and bedroom area with views across the valley.

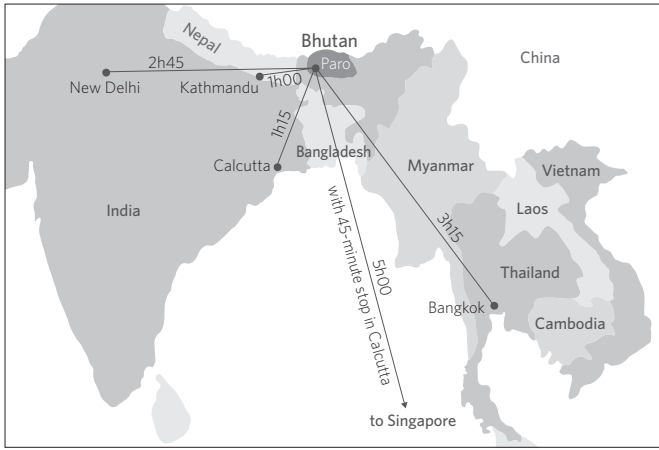
## AMANKORA BUMTHANG

Adjacent to the first and second King of Bhutan's palace, Wangdichholing, **Amankora Bumthang** lies within the town of Jakar in the Choekhor Valley in an area commonly known as Bumthang. Circling a stately peach tree, the pathway leading to Amankora Bumthang passes alongside the former royal sports ground of Bhutan's first two kings, and a traditional and much-used archery area. The lodge is set within an apple orchard with pear trees along its boundary with the Palace. A *dzong*-inspired hallway at the lodge's entrance opens onto a **library** and the comfortable **Living Room** with its lounge chairs, daybeds and traditional *bukhari*. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer views of a landscaped courtyard adjoining the shared Palace grounds.



Adjacent is the regally-appointed **Dining Room** with its soaring ceiling. Shaded by fruit trees, the courtyard is ideal for alfresco dining. The **spa** provides three intimate treatment rooms, a steam room and changing areas. Accessed through an impressive stone-clad hallway, 16 **Suites** are situated in four separate structures, each containing two on the ground floor and two on the upper floor. Each features wood-panelled interiors, a traditional *bukhari*, king-size bed, terrazzo-clad bath, shower, twin vanities and a daybed overlooking the courtyard and nearby Wangdichholing Palace and monastery.

# BHUTAN



## GEOGRAPHY

Bhutan's historic isolation is due to the inaccessibility of its location, lying in the Eastern Himalayas between India and Tibet. From a narrow southern plain at an altitude of 300 metres, Bhutan quickly rises through the Himalayan foothills (1,600 metres) to the valleys of Central and Western Bhutan (2,600 metres) and the mountain chains of the High Himalayas (4,000-5,000 metres). These run both east-west and north-south, and serve to separate one region and valley from the next. As a result, valleys such as Paro (2,250 metres), Haa (2,700 metres), Thimphu (2,350 metres), Punakha (1,300 metres), Phobjikha (3,000 metres) and Bumthang (2,580 metres) each have their own unique customs and traditions.

With the exception of Haa, which has a climate suited to raising livestock, western Bhutan is a land of rice paddies and orchards. These valleys are the domain of the Ngalong, 'the first to rise', meaning the first to convert to Buddhism. They speak Dzongkha, the 'language of the *dzong*', now the national language of Bhutan. The Black Mountains (5,000 metres) have traditionally marked the boundary between western and central Bhutan. The main road from Paro to Trashigang in eastern Bhutan crosses these mountains via the Pele La Pass (3,300 metres).

## HISTORY

Secular and religious history in Bhutan are so intertwined that the religious school - the Drukpa - which prevailed from the 17th century, gave its name to the country it unified and its inhabitants. Thus in the Dzongkha language, Bhutan is called 'Druk Yul' and the Bhutanese

people 'Drukpas'. The poetic translation of Druk Yul is 'Land of the Dragons', which can be explained by the following anecdote. When Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (1161-1211) was consecrating a new monastery in central Tibet at the end of the 12th century, he heard thunder, which popular belief holds to be the voice of a dragon (*druk*). He therefore decided to name the monastery 'Druk', and the religious school which he founded was likewise called 'Drukpa'. In the 17th century, when the Drukpas unified Bhutan, they gave it their name.

According to Bhutanese tradition, the history of Bhutan began in the seventh century AD when the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo, constructed the first two Buddhist temples: Kyichu in the Paro Valley and Jampa in the Choekhor Valley at Bumthang. In the 8th century, a Tantrist from Swat (in present-day Pakistan) arrived in Bhutan. His name was Padmasambhava, but he is generally known in Tibet and Bhutan as Guru Rinpoche, the 'Precious Master'. Here, as in Tibet, he introduced Tantric Buddhism. He is considered by the Nyingmapa religious school to be their founder and the Second Buddha.

After the introduction of Buddhism, the 9th and 10th centuries constitute an obscure historical period. Tibet plunged into great political turmoil following the assassination in 842 AD of the Tibetan king, Landarma, whom tradition depicts as anti-Buddhist. However, the beginning of the 11th century saw a revival of Buddhism in Tibet which was reflected in Bhutan by the activity of *tertöns*, the 'discoverers of hidden religious treasures' in Paro and Bumthang.

These treasures were texts or objects hidden by Guru Rinpoche and other saints, to be discovered by predestined persons at a favourable time. The Nyingmapa School produced most of the *tertöns*.

Under the charismatic Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651), Bhutan became a unified state in the 17th century. Persecuted in Tibet, he fled to Bhutan in 1616 and over the next 30 years succeeded in crushing all opposition, unifying the 'southern valleys' into Druk Yul, 'the Land of the Drukpas'. Using the title of Shabdrung, he constructed his first *dzong* at Simtokha in the valley of the Wang River. Subsequent *dzongs* not only symbolised the power of the Drukpa school, since each *dzong* contained a monastery, but also constituted a matchless instrument of government, as each also served as a centre of administration for the provinces.

In the second half of the 18th century, British missions seeking preferential trade agreements with Tibet and Bhutan succeeded in establishing good relations with the Bhutanese, but without the concrete results they had hoped for. Conflicting interests over the

Duars (the narrow southern plain) quickly soured relations and expeditions in the 19th century were marked by hostility. Skirmishes on the southern border from the 1830s onward escalated in 1864 into a conflict known as the Duar War. In 1865, the Treaty of Sinchula restored friendly relations: Bhutan ceded the fertile Duars in return for an annuity from the British.

A weakening of the central government in the second half of the 19th century led to internal power struggles that culminated in the decisive victory of Ugyen Wangchuck, who favoured closer ties with the British. He was elected the first King of Bhutan on December 17, 1907. He was succeeded by his son, Jigme Wangchuck, who reigned until his death in 1952.

Bhutan's third king, Jigme Dorje Wangchuck, is considered the father of modern Bhutan. In 1961, with the help of India, the King launched the first five-year plan of development with emphasis on road-building. In 1962, Bhutan joined its first international organisation, the Colombo Plan, and in 1971 it was proudly admitted to the United Nations. After the sovereign's death in 1972, his son, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, came to the throne at the age of 17 and reigned until 2006 as the driving force behind the strict preservation of the Kingdom's rich heritage. His son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, is the current king of Bhutan.

## TRAVEL TIPS

**Getting There:** Aman will book all flights and take care of visas on behalf of guests. Amankora recommends that guests fly from Bangkok, Delhi or Singapore into Paro. In Bangkok, Aman has an airport representative. There are also flights from Kolkatta (Calcutta) and Kathmandu. Druk Air adheres to schedules as closely as possible barring vagaries of weather and occasional impromptu requests for seats by special delegations. Complimentary arrival and departure transfers are offered between Paro International Airport and Amankora Paro/Amankora Thimphu, as well as between Bumthang Domestic Airport and Amankora Bumthang.

**Climate:** Bhutan is an all-season destination with a climate that varies widely from region to region. The dry autumn and winter months (from September to mid-March) offer warm days with temperatures ranging from 12-20°C (54-68°F). Cobalt blue skies can be enjoyed throughout the days in winter. Evenings and early mornings are cool with overnight temperatures often falling to freezing. The spring season (mid-March to June) offers warmer temperatures of 16-30°C (61-86°F). During the summer (June to September), days are clear and warm with temperatures of 22-26°C (72-79°F). Afternoon showers dispel some of the heat and temperatures fall to around 15°C (59°F) at night.

**Language:** The national language of Bhutan is Dzongkha, however English is widely spoken due to its use as the primary language of school instruction.

**Currency:** The national currency in Bhutan is the ngultrum (Nu) and cash is the preferred medium of exchange. Prices are usually quoted in ngultrum although US dollars are widely accepted and changed. Guests are recommended to carry cash in either currency, as there is limited ATM access. Existing ATMs are credit card only. However, most of the antique/textile shops around Thimphu and Paro accept VISA credit cards and a few accept American Express. Ngultrum can be reconverted if changed through an authorised money exchanger.

At Amankora, VISA, Mastercard and American Express are accepted and currency exchange to Bhutanese ngultrum is available using the following currencies – US Dollar, Pound Sterling and Euro. Amankora does not offer cash advances on credit cards, and guests are advised to carry sufficient cash for purchases outside of the Amankora lodges.

**Immigration:** Tourist visas are required and must be obtained prior to arriving in the country. The processing of visa applications will be arranged by Amankora and requires approximately 14 days for handling. A visa fee of US\$40 will be charged at time of booking. The departure tax is included in the airfare. Indian nationals do not require a visa to visit Bhutan.

**Health:** The best medical facilities are at the general hospital in Thimphu. Travellers are advised to avoid untreated/unboiled water. Water at Amankora is fully treated and bottled water is also available. Altitude sickness can affect some travellers although accommodation is at a similar altitude to most ski resorts. General medicines are readily available but guests are advised to bring any prescription medicines. Guests should consult their doctors and arrange travel insurance prior to departure.

**Electricity:** 230 volts

**Time Zone:** Bhutan is plus six hours GMT, 30 minutes ahead of India, one hour behind Thailand and two hours behind Singapore.

**Dress:** In spring and summer, light clothing is appropriate with a sweater or jacket in the evenings. From autumn through winter, down jackets, fleeces, hats and gloves are necessary. Sports shoes are suitable for light touring, while hiking boots are recommended for treks. Legs, shoulders and upper arms need to be covered when visiting *dzongs*, monasteries and *lhakhangs* (temples). Sunscreen, lip balm, and sunglasses are recommended for higher elevations.

# ACTIVITIES & EXPERIENCE

## THE AMANKORA JOURNEY

The sole surviving Himalayan Buddhist Kingdom, Bhutan is located between the Tibetan Plateau and India, making it one of the most remote and unaltered environments on earth. To facilitate one's *kora* or circular journey of discovery in Bhutan, Amankora offers a number of guided treks and excursions by car or on foot through the valleys of **Paro**, **Thimphu**, **Punakha**, **Phobjikha** and **Bumthang**. The only international hotel group to offer its own accommodation and services throughout these valleys, Amanresorts arranges all permits, visas and flights into and out of Paro and/or Bumthang on behalf of guests.

For guests staying for seven nights or more on a continuous journey in any lodge or combinations of lodges, a tailor-made itinerary based on preferred length of stay will include complimentary long road permits, private transport with driver and guide and one 60-minute spa treatment that may be enjoyed at any one of the lodges.

Estimated travel time along Bhutan's winding roads:

	Paro	Thimphu	Punakha	Gangtey	Bumthang
Paro	—	1.5 hours	4 hours	6 hours	10 hours
Thimphu	1.5 hours	—	2.5 hours	5 hours	8 hours
Punakha	4 hours	2.5 hours	—	2.5 hours	6.5 hours
Gangtey	6 hours	5 hours	2.5 hours	—	5 hours
Bumthang	10 hours	8 hours	6.5 hours	5 hours	—

*The above indicated driving times are straight transfer times and do not include breaks in the journey for sightseeing, excursions, hikes or picnics. At times there may be delays in the transfer time due to road conditions, upgrading/widening of the national highway and/or inclement weather.*

## PARO

At an elevation of 2,250 metres, Paro Valley is the closest to the international airport.

Paro Valley boasts a number of beautiful monasteries and monuments, but the most dramatic is the 8th-century Taktsang, or 'Tiger's Nest'. A revered monastery built on a sheer cliff face at a height of 2,950 metres, it is visible from the valley floor. From Amankora Paro, a return hike to Tiger's Nest takes four hours. While the hike up is challenging, horses, mules and donkeys are usually on hand to ease the journey.

In an excursion to the town of Paro itself, the National Museum, previously the watchtower of the valley, displays an intriguing

collection of artefacts that illustrate the rich culture and heritage of the Kingdom. A short stroll away is the magnificent Paro Dzong, a prime example of Bhutanese architecture. From the *dzong*, a leisurely walk back into town crosses over one of Bhutan's traditional cantilevered bridges, and continues on to the 15th-century Dumtse Lhakhang town temple with its altar and beautiful wall paintings. Just on the outskirts of Paro town lies the 7th-century Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the first Buddhist temples built in the country.

Paro Valley is also the starting point for many of Bhutan's treks. These range from the four-day Druk Path which crosses the mountains between Paro and Thimphu, to the challenging 21- to 42-day Snowman's Trek - considered one of the world's most difficult.

## THIMPHU

A two-hour drive from Paro, Thimphu lies in a steep valley at an altitude of 2,350 metres, surrounded by forested mountains dotted with ancient monasteries and temples. The town is situated on the banks of Thimphu Chhu (river) with the quaint Clock Tower at its heart. This is surrounded by atmospheric lanes of shops, markets and local restaurants. As Bhutan's capital city, Thimphu is home to many attractions and activities, including the National Textile Museum, Folk Heritage Museum and bustling Changlingmethang Market. It also houses the seat of government and the office of His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, in the majestic Tashichho Dzong. Nearby, one can visit Pangri Zampa, two 16th-century buildings that now house a monastic astrologer training school. At the head of the valley, a walk across one of the country's oldest cantilever bridges leads to Cheri Goemba, where the Kingdom's first monastic community was based. Thimphu's main street provides an opportunity to shop for Himalayan jewellery and Bhutanese handicrafts and textiles.

## PUNAKHA

At an elevation of 1,300 metres, Punakha is one of the lowest-lying valleys in the Kingdom. With its temperate climate, this valley is the market garden of the country. Produce grows year round and many Bhutanese reside here during the colder winter months.

Punakha was Bhutan's winter capital for 300 years until Thimphu became the official capital in the 1950s. A highlight is visiting the Punakha Dzong, which straddles the confluence of the Mother (Mo) and Father (Pho) rivers like an ancient ship stranded by the tide.

Twenty-one temples are contained within the area of the *dzong's* third courtyard, the largest of which is the monks' hundred-pillared Great Assembly Hall. Built late in the 15th century, the renowned Chimi Lhakhang is also worth visiting. This auspicious worship house boasts an impressive collection of ritual phalluses. Closer to the lodge, a beautiful morning hike takes one to the regal Khamsum Yuelley Namgyal Chorten (a reliquary monument). This dominates the upper Punakha Valley with views across the Mo Chhu and up towards the mountainous peaks of Gasa and beyond.



Amankora Bumthang's neighbouring Wangdichholing Palace was built in 1857 as the Kingdom's first palace. It is now the residence of a small monk body that also shares residence in an adjacent monastery. Both overlook five square *chortens* (reliquary monuments) housing water-driven prayer wheels.

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

**Trekking:** Amankora arranges treks that cater to all levels of ability, from short valley floor walks to more strenuous full-day hikes over mountain trails where trekkers can spot wild mountain goats, langur monkeys and the occasional leopard. Overnight treks can also be organised.

## GANGTEY

A stay in the Phobjikha Valley usually begins with a casual stroll through the quaint village of Gangtey, situated at 3,000 metres. This is usually followed by a visit to the ancient altars and ramparts of the massive Gangtey Goemba. Should the Gangtey Tulku (a high-ranking *lama* who can choose the manner of his or her rebirth) be in residence, then an audience for a sought-after blessing can possibly be arranged.

The Phobjikha Valley is part of the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park (formerly the Black Mountains National Park), one of Bhutan's most important wildlife sanctuaries. Each winter it becomes home to a flock of 300 endangered black-necked cranes arriving from Tibet. Numerous nature walks and treks are offered throughout the valley's varied terrain and, in winter, the reclusive black-necked cranes can be seen at the nearby Crane Centre or from a viewing hide set near their main nesting and feeding grounds.

## BUMTHANG

Bumthang comprises four valleys – Chhume, Choekhor, Tang and Ura – at an elevation of 2,580 metres. The entire region is commonly known as Bumthang Valley and is covered with fields of buckwheat, millet and potato, with apple orchards climbing the slopes to mix with pine forest. Across the valley lie some of the Kingdom's most auspicious and revered houses of worship and monasteries, many featuring ancient wall paintings and all with colourful, mystical histories. The valley is known for its cottage industries which produce the renowned Bumthang butter, Gouda and Emmental cheese, honey and a variety of intriguing fruit spirits and brandies.

**Archery:** From traditional bamboo to advanced Olympic compound bows, archery is Bhutan's national sport. Tutors in the art of archery are available as is practice with a traditional bow.

**Fishing:** Trout were introduced to Bhutan by an officer of the British military. Today the Kingdom's rivers are teeming because fish is not a traditional part of the Bhutanese diet. A day spent in the river valleys wetting the lines offers the opportunity to enjoy Bhutan's pristine surroundings. Equipment, guides and licenses can be arranged with advance notice.

**Golf:** Bhutan's nine-hole golf course is located in the heart of Thimphu, 2,800 metres above sea level. The course enjoys a majestic backdrop of the capital's administrative Tashichho Dzong and the surrounding mountainscape. Tee times can be arranged by Amankora.

**Meditation:** Meditation sessions or blessings under the guidance of a Bhutanese *lama* can be arranged. These can focus on deliverance from bad spirits, the promotion of long life, the cleansing of the spirit or even a desire for prosperity. Meditation takes place in the lodge or a temple close by.

**White-Water Rafting:** White-water rafting is possible in the Punakha Valley from September until May. During the earlier part of the season, trips provide an exhilarating ride through the deep river valleys. Later on in the season, the pace is more leisurely with an opportunity to admire passing wildlife, farms, villages and the occasional *dzong*.



LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON  
**BHUTAN**

