



BHUTAN:

GENERAL INFORMATION



Satyr Tragopan is one of the most sought-after birds in the world – and a big target in Bhutan.

INTRODUCTION

The small mountainous country of Bhutan (known as “The Land of the Thunder Dragon”) is located in the eastern Himalayan Mountains, and is engulfed by its massive neighbors, India and China. Bhutan is famous for its ties to Buddhism and, indeed, much of the tourism in the country is centered around this.

Perhaps due to its unique location in the mountains, this is a sparsely populated country, and one that is still very wild and raw – with vast, untouched tracts of habitat left in place. Furthermore, the government strictly protects more than half of the country’s nature and wilderness – it is refreshing to see so much habitat remaining.

Bhutan only recently started being influenced by the outside world, and its ‘modernization’ has been rapid and dramatic. The 2010s saw the start of modern infrastructure being introduced, and most tours were characterized by camping. The 2020s are seeing more-than-adequate lodges and hotels throughout, with road travel continually improving ensuring that much more of the country has been opened up to tourism. This will no doubt continue to develop as time goes by.

Our Bhutan birding tours generally start and end in Paro. Most of the habitats we encounter are of a wooded nature, and include high-altitude pine, aspen and hemlock woods, along with moist and mixed deciduous and broad-leafed forests. We encounter the odd river, wetland and open farmland habitat here and there.

Our Bhutan tours DO NOT include any camping – we make use of hotels and lodges throughout. It is important to note that Bhutan is a high-altitude country, and we spend most of our time at elevations from 6,000 – 8,000 feet (1,830 – 2,440 m); with some passes going up to 12,000 – 13,000 feet (3,660 – 3,960 m). Altitude sickness is a possibility on the tour (although this usually affects some people more than others). Furthermore, due to Bhutan’s mountainous nature, the roads are usually narrow and winding and there are hardly any straight roads anywhere.

PASSPORT AND VISA

Your passport must be valid for a period of at least six months after the date of your arrival in Bhutan. Please make sure that there is at least one full empty page available in your passport. Please also bring a photocopy of your passport, to be kept in a different location to your passport, in case of loss.

Entry to Bhutan is strictly controlled and a visa needs to be arranged in advance. Birding Ecotours facilitates this and arranges visas on behalf of our clients. We will request certain documents from you so that we can start this process.

ENTRY INTO BHUTAN & FLIGHTS

This tour starts and ends in Paro, where the country’s only international airport is to be found.

As mentioned above, entry to Bhutan is controlled, and there are only a handful of flights in and out of the country. Currently (2025), there are no major foreign airlines that operate in the country,

and people make use of Bhutanese airlines (like Druk Air) to enter and leave the country. This means that you will NOT be able to fly direct to Bhutan – you need to first travel to a point where the Bhutanese airlines depart from, and only then will you be able to fly into Bhutan. The most popular sectors traveling into the country are:

- Delhi, India
- Bangkok, Thailand
- Singapore

Generally, travelers fly to one of these countries, spend a day/night there and then fly into Bhutan. *A new, larger airport is in the early stages of being constructed at Gelephu, which should allow many major airlines to fly direct to Bhutan – but this will likely still take many years until completion.

Birding Ecotours usually arranges the Bhutan-specific flights on behalf of our clients. Again, a staff member will get in touch with you to initiate and facilitate this process.

Please do not book any of these flights yourself before you have spoken to our office staff.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

We require (see Birding Tours Terms and Conditions - Birding Ecotours) that you purchase trip cancellation insurance. This must cover cancellation due to illness prior to tour departure date, accidents, medical issues, illness, loss of valuables or luggage while on tour, and travel interruptions or delays of all kinds. Allianz Travel and Generali Global Assistance are two good options to consider.

SAFETY (INCLUDING ALTITUDE SICKNESS)

We do not spend much time in large cities and generally stay in tourist areas which are considered safe. We suggest not leaving valuable personal items in the vehicle while it is unattended (while parked at the hotel overnight, for example). If ever in doubt, please check with the tour leader.

Most of Bhutan is at elevation, and some passes go up to 13,000 feet (3,960 meters), and altitude sickness can be a very real problem. If you are prone to this, kindly bring necessary precautions and, as always, ensure you make the tour leader aware of your risk(s).

HEALTH, PESTS AND DANGEROUS ANIMALS

There could be ticks in certain areas while birding on foot, so wearing long trousers and checking yourself for ticks after the day out in the field is recommended. Additionally, it is a good idea to spray your legs/trousers and particularly boots/socks with anti-tick spray.

Rabies (although rare) does still exist in some areas and although the likelihood of encountering rabid animals is very low on this trip, we strongly advise against touching/petting domestic animals in rural areas. Please consult with your tour leader if you are unsure.

We will be visiting areas inhabited by venomous (and non-venomous) snakes, nevertheless, as usual, we would be very lucky to see any. To minimize the risk of snakebite or other stings and bites (very low), we recommend hiking boots, jeans/long trousers and simply to be careful.

Large mammals are present in Bhutan, but extremely scarce and sparsely distributed. There is a chance we could encounter animals like Tiger and Asian Elephant while out birding, but this is highly unlikely. Apart from monkeys and squirrels, mammals are very scarce in Bhutan. As always, our tour leaders and local guides are there to help, should any such situation arise.

Please carefully read the [UK Foreign Travel Advice for Bhutan](#) and the [Center for Disease Control \(CDC\) information for travelers to Bhutan](#) (or your government's equivalent health travel advice for Bhutan). Below, we mention a couple of specific items but, first and foremost, follow the up-to-date information provided at the links above.

Yellow Fever vaccination is not required but it is good practice to have a vaccination certificate with you, especially if you have traveled to countries where Yellow Fever is present.

It is recommended that you are up to date with all routine vaccinations, such as polio and measles-mumps-rubella (MMR). Additionally, it is also recommended to get vaccinations for Hepatitis A and B, rabies and typhoid. Please keep in mind that if you have not been ill with any one of these previously, you should be inoculated at least six weeks prior to your trip for the vaccine to take full effect.

Malaria

We recommend anti-malaria drugs for travel to Bhutan since malaria is present in the lowlands (bordering India). Please consult your doctor accordingly.

Mosquito repellent, long trousers/jeans and long-sleeved shirts, particularly at night when malaria (*Anopheles*) mosquitoes bite, are advisable, in addition to the prophylactic drugs.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Please make sure that you are covered by medical insurance in case of an emergency on this trip. Without insurance the cost of medical care can be extremely high.

Please notify us when registering for the tour of any medical conditions you think we should know about (including allergies, heart conditions, epilepsy, etc.). This will help us greatly to cater to your needs. The bulk of our time in Bhutan is at high elevation (6,000 – 13,000 feet / 1,830 – 3,960 meters). Much of our tour is in more rural areas, far away from advanced medical help.

WATER / FOOD

We provide unlimited bottled water in the tour vehicles, and you are welcome to take water from the vehicles for evenings, when not provided in the hotel rooms. More expensive bottled water available at restaurants is excluded from the tour cost and is for your account.

Dinners will virtually always be at our hotels, lodges and restaurants, as will most breakfasts and lunches. We do make use of the occasional packed “picnic” style breakfasts and lunches where necessary, but this is not usually the case. Conveniently, most of our hotels and lodges cater for early breakfasts, which we usually eat before dawn. There are many good restaurants along the road which are perfectly adequate for lunch.

Please do inform us if you have any food allergies or other dietary requirements. Unfortunately, we cannot guarantee that these can be accommodated during the tour, and we will then ask you to please bring appropriate/replacement foods with you.

Meals in Bhutan are largely based on Oriental cuisine – typically including noodles, rice and stir-fried vegetables. Chicken is common, but fish, beef and pork are less common. Locals tend to enjoy their food “spicy”, thus our meals will occasionally be spicy. There is a growing Western influence on the food in Bhutan.

CURRENCY AND MONEY

The Bhutanese Ngultrum (BTN) is the official currency, and we recommend that you have sufficient cash in local currency to cover expenses such as drinks, tips, and other items of a personal nature (such as gifts). Credit cards are not yet widely accepted for payment, but this is changing and will certainly become more popular in future years.

You will be able to exchange or draw money at the airport upon arrival. Note that exchanging money is only possible at the airport (on arrival) and this is usually the best way to obtain local currency.

There are ATMs in the country, where local currency can be withdrawn, but they are sparsely located, often allow only small amounts to be withdrawn, and regularly reject foreign cards. Note: Indian Rupees are widely accepted, usually at a rate of 1:1 (with the local Bhutanese Ngultrum), while US and Canadian dollars, pound sterling and euros cannot be used for purchases.

WEATHER

Bhutan is a cold country due to its location and elevation. It is necessary to bring adequate warm clothes (including thermal underwear, beanies, gloves, socks etc.). The weather can be very unpredictable at times – everything, including rain, snow and wind is possible. Despite the elevation, it can become lovely and warm when the sun is out. We expect most of the days on our spring tours to be sunny, while our winter tours often include much more overcast weather.

Our hotels and lodges usually have heaters in the rooms.

We usually spend a few days at much lower elevations in Bhutan (Tingtibi, Panbang etc.), where it is usually warmer and more humid and can get rather hot and sweaty.

Layers of clothing is extremely useful, making it easy to add or remove layers as necessary.

ELECTRICITY

The standard voltage is 220 V. If you intend to recharge camera and other batteries in your hotel room, you will need an international adapter. Note that in Bhutan, the best power plug socket to have is Type F (see link). It is always good practice to bring an international adapter along, since hotels and lodgings occasionally differ.

All our hotels and lodges will have electricity throughout the day and night, and will have at least one outlet available for chargers, laptops and other electronic devices.

A good torch is advisable, for night walks, and if the lighting in the room is insufficient.

INTERNET/WIFI

Wi-Fi internet is available at most of the lodges and hotels on these trips, but often only in the main reception and dining area and not from individual rooms. This is improving though, and Wi-Fi throughout should soon become more commonplace.

Should you wish to stay connected more continuously, we advise you to either:

- purchase an eSim compatible with your phone (like those available on AloSIM.com, for example), or
- purchase a local sim card at the airport on your arrival.

TRANSPORTATION

Depending on group size, we typically use Toyota Coaster minibuses. These have ample seating and space inside, with large windows to ensure good views of the surrounding landscape.

As with all our birding tours, we make use of a seat rotation policy in the vehicle. This will be explained to you by your tour leader at the start of the tour.

Airconditioning (and heating) is available in the tour vehicles.

LENGTH OF DRIVES

These tours take place in a mountainous country and virtually all the roads are narrow, windy and steep – these roads have generally been cut out of the sides of mountain slopes. As such, we cannot drive fast since there is often a steep drop on one side of the road.

We spend lots of time driving in Bhutan, both because of the winding roads and the several far drives we have to negotiate. These drives usually take the entire day, although we do a lot of birding along the route.

WALKING

These tours are considered “easy” from a physical exertion point of view (but the tour pace can be considered quite intense). Even though we spend a lot of time in vehicles, all our birding is done while walking, but there are no difficult or long, arduous walks on any of our Bhutan set departure tours. (On custom tours/excursions to visit the Tiger’s Nest Monastery, there is a very difficult and long hike, but this does not form part of any of our set departure tours).

Virtually all our birding is done from roadside, where we park the vehicle, disembark and walk slowly along the road, birding. The vehicle is generally very close at hand, should anyone need anything (like water or a rest). Comfortable shoes are imperative, as we spend considerable time on our feet (especially when trying to see a shy or skulking species). We do venture off the road on occasions, but this is usually not more than a few steps, and mostly not challenging.

The most difficult aspect of the birding/walking is that it is done at high altitude at times. We never bird at a fast-walking pace, and most folks don’t battle much, but it is certainly noticeable when walking at 13,000 feet (~4,000 meters) how much extra effort walking takes.

Participants should be able to manage these conditions, and be comfortable on their feet, with comfortable shoes, for several hours at a time.

PACE OF TOUR

Our spring tour is fairly intense, with long days out in the field virtually every day and covering the bulk of the country. Our winter tours are less intense, covering less distance and fewer sites, but still have mostly full days out in the field.

We generally start the day off early pre-dawn, with hot breakfast at our hotel. There is the odd occasion when we take a packed breakfast, but the norm is for an early hotel breakfast. Many of the birding sites are a distance from our accommodation, up to an hour’s drive before we arrive at the site. We then spend the day birding, which usually involves driving to a point, then walking, then driving and walking etc. We will break for lunch on the route, either at a local restaurant on the way or sometimes with a packed lunch. Following lunch, we carry on birding, only returning to our accommodation later in the afternoon/evening. There is little downtime expected.

Our travel days are usually similar to what is described above, except that we usually check out from the hotel after an early breakfast and have our luggage with us for the day.

Evening forays to look for nocturnal birds and mammals are regular (done at most places), but this is usually an optional activity. Occasionally, the afternoon birding leads into evening/night birding, but the guide will always communicate in advance should this be the case.

It is possible to opt out of some activities, should you not feel up to it, but this isn’t generally possible on the days where we transit between overnight accommodations. In some instances, it may be possible to stay with the vehicle should you prefer.

The guide discusses the next day’s plan in detail with the group each evening. We do remain flexible (within reason) to maximize your birding experience.

ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation options used on this tour are of a “good/standard” quality, although some places are more “simplistic” and “rustic”. En-suite bathroom facilities are available throughout the tour, but in some basic places (like Tingtibi) there is no hot water (although it can be requested in a bucket). Lack of maintenance can be an issue at some places, with electrical points and lights etc. not working.

* Note that there are ongoing advancements in Western-style amenities in Bhutan, and this improves year after year. It is anticipated that the basic facilities in Tingtibi will no longer be an issue from 2026 onwards, as more suitable alternatives become available.

Because the tourism industry, and especially Western-style amenities, are still new in Bhutan, there are, understandably, some occasional teething issues.

WHAT TO BRING

Clothing – Casual and informal clothing is fine in the hotels and lodges. Bhutan is a cold country and you **must** ensure that you bring adequate warm clothes. Rain gear, a poncho or umbrella is advisable. It is best to have layered clothing, allowing you to take items on or off as needed by the conditions, which are highly variable.

Laundry can be done at most establishments throughout the tour (at your expense). A lead time of at least one day is typically needed (meaning that we can only do laundry at places we are staying for two nights or longer).

Sunglasses, sunhat and sunscreen (rated SPF 30 or higher) are essential.

It is a good idea to bring two pairs of comfortable walking/hiking shoes/boots, since a lot of time is spent walking and on your feet.

Do not forget – BINOCULARS, prescription medication (also bring the generic names), toiletries, prescription spectacles (and a spare pair), insect repellent, camera, flashlight, batteries for electronic equipment, chargers for batteries, plug adaptor, alarm clock, mosquito repellent, money pouch, field guide(s), a **soft-sided duffle-style luggage bag** (this is recommended since hard-sided luggage is not always easy to pack), daypack/backpack, and your favorite road snacks!

Key documents and cash – Passports, travel or health insurance cards (you may send us copies to file in case of emergency), credit cards (Mastercard and to a lesser extent, VISA, are best (see above). US dollars, euros or pounds can be exchanged for local currency at the airport as you arrive in the country (or you can simply draw from an ATM). Cash for drinks, gifts, **tips**, items of a personal nature etc.

Luggage – Due to limited luggage space in the vehicles, please pack as lightly as possible. A medium-sized, soft-sided duffle bag (not the hard-sided cases) works best for packing in the vehicles. This allows us to fit the bags better. Please bring a daypack for items you need on a daily basis.

Books – We suggest purchasing a copy of the Helm Field Guide “Birds of Bhutan and the Eastern Himalayas, 3rd edition, by Grimmett, Inskipp, Inskipp, and Sherub, 2019”. It is also worth reading our blog about recommended field guides.

