



American Horticultural Society  
Travel Study Program

# DISCOVERING THE BEAUTY OF BHUTAN: LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

April 9–20, 2022

WITH AHS HOST TIM CONLON AND  
TOUR LEADER SUSIE ORSO OF SPECIALTOURS



Dear Friends of the American Horticultural Society,

It's with great pleasure that I invite you to join us for **Discovering the Beauty of Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon**. This rare opportunity for exotic adventure will bring us to a land and culture that couldn't be further from our own.

Read on for a sneak peek of just a few tour highlights. In Bhutan's capital city, Thimphu, we'll see Buddha Point (Kuensel Phodrang) a gilded bronze statue of Buddha that stands 177 feet and is one of the world's largest. We'll also follow in the footsteps of royalty at the Tashichho Dzong, which houses the throne room and offices of Bhutan's king.

As we'll see, the Royal Botanical Garden in Serbithang serves as a rescue center for rare and threatened native plants. The high mountain pass of Dochula will put us at 10,000 feet; with luck, we'll get a view of the Himalayas. Our visit to Lampelri's Royal Botanical Park and its Rhododendron Festival will also be memorable. Some 46 rhododendron species—including regional natives—will be blooming during our visit, and we'll enjoy the traditional songs and dances that are part of the festival.

We'll soak in the land around us on a beautiful walk through the forest and flowering meadows in the Phobjikha Valley, home to rare, migrant black-necked cranes. In Paro, we'll see one of the oldest temples in Bhutan, Kyichu Lhakhang, an intimate site of great importance to Buddhists. We'll take the steep climb up to the Paro Taktsang monastery, also known as the Tiger's Nest, one of Bhutan's most celebrated examples of monastic architecture.

Accompanying you on this program as AHS Host is Tim Conlon, a member of the AHS Board of Directors. Tim heads a successful construction firm in the Midwest and, together with his wife, Christine, have traveled on many AHS programs in the last 25 years, enjoying memorable gardens all over the world.

Our tour organizer is Specialtours' Susie Orso, who has arranged and led many AHS Travel Study Programs. She brings her years of experience and her insights to bear on this thoughtfully designed itinerary. We are extremely fortunate that she has chosen to lead this journey for the AHS, as she winds down her brilliant career as a tour leader.

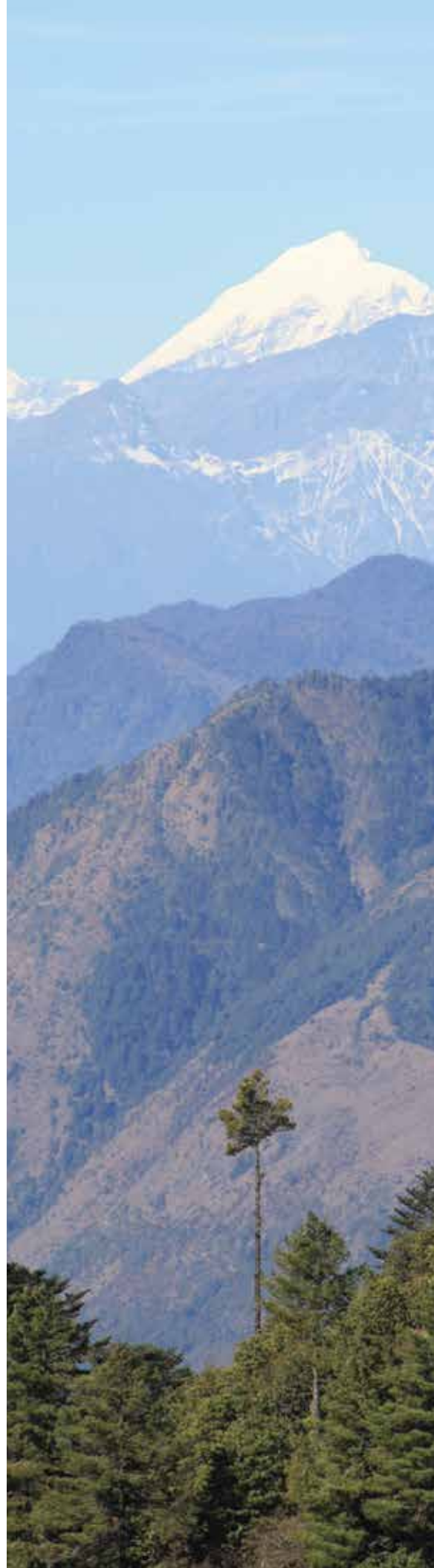
The accommodations for our tour are brilliant as well. We'll spend short stays at the Novotel Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport hotel at the beginning and end of the tour. The Norkhil Boutique Hotel & Spa, located in the heart of Thimphu city, offers holistic spa treatments and organic cuisine in an exceptionally beautiful natural setting. The Dhensa Boutique Resort, set in the Punakha Valley, will immerse us in the peace and beauty of nature. At the five-star Gangtey Lodge we'll enjoy style, comfort and the beautiful setting. From its waterside perch, Le Méridien Paro, Riverfront hotel is blessed with panoramic views of the Eastern Himalayas.

I hope these highlights will convince you to accompany us to Bhutan. While this tour is more physically demanding than some of our other offerings, the isolated vistas, rich culture and history of this country make it a once-in-a-lifetime experience for those able to comfortably manage walking and climbing. Only 18 spaces are available, so make your reservations as soon as possible. For your convenience, a reservations form is enclosed in this brochure.

Most sincerely,



Marcia Zech  
Chair, AHS Development Committee



# DISCOVERING THE BEAUTY OF BHUTAN: LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

WITH AHS HOST TIM CONLON AND TOUR  
LEADER SUSIE ORSO OF SPECIALTOURS



Join AHS Host Tim Conlon and tour leader Susie Orso for this once-in-a-lifetime garden travel experience.

## Itinerary Highlights

This tour takes us to a land so enchanting that many have compared it to the fictional lost paradise of Shangri-La. That land is Bhutan, a small kingdom hidden behind the peaks of the Himalayas that for centuries was closed to Western visitors. The country, with a population of 750,000, has made every effort to remain independent and to maintain its traditions and culture. Our journey encompasses splendid monasteries and *dzongs* (large, fortress-like structures distinctive to Bhutan and Tibet), its delightful people, and unique culture, along with the country's spectacular landscape of fertile valleys, lush forests, pristine flora, and snow-capped peaks.

There will be a lot of walking at high altitudes, on inclines and uneven footing so members interested in this tour must be able to participate in a somewhat physically demanding sojourn. Another factor that makes this tour so special is that it will be one of the last AHS tours for Specialtours' Susie Orso, who has guided many of our Travel Study programs but recently announced her retirement. She was so intrigued by the idea of visiting this magical place, which she knows well and loves, that she could not resist taking this trip with us.

### FRIDAY, APRIL 8

We'll depart the United States for Bangkok, Thailand.

### SATURDAY, APRIL 9 — BANGKOK (D)

We'll arrive at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport and transfer to the Novotel Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport hotel. There we'll have the rest of the day to unwind before we embark on this fantastic journey. In the evening, we'll get acquainted while enjoying drinks and a buffet dinner in the hotel.

### SUNDAY, APRIL 10 — THIMPHU (B, D)

We'll depart Bangkok for Paro, Bhutan. We'll be met by our local guide, Sonam Tshering, who will accompany us via bus to Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan. Thimphu lies in a steep valley at an altitude of 7,700 feet, surrounded by richly forested mountains dotted with ancient monasteries and lhakhangs (temples). Along the way, we'll make a brief stop to see the iron

bridge built by Thangtong Gyalpo in the 15th century. Then, we'll check-in to Norkhil Boutique Hotel & Spa, which is known for its holistic spa, organic cuisine, and exceptionally beautiful natural setting. But to really get to know Thimphu, we'll need to hit the streets. Our orientation walk in the city will include Kuensel Phodrang (also called Buddha Point). Made of gilded bronze, it's one of the largest Buddha statues in the world, at 177 feet tall. We'll dine at the hotel this evening.

### MONDAY, APRIL 11 — THIMPHU (B, L, D)

Our exploration of Thimphu continues with a visit to Memorial Chorten, a stupa, or hemispherical structure, built in memory of the third king of Bhutan. With its golden spires and bells, this is a prominent landmark. Our next stops today will help us understand this unique country and its culture. Perched on a ridge, the Changangkha Lhakhang is a temple where parents bring their newborns to receive auspicious names and blessings. Nearby, the National Textile Museum displays marvelous examples of the country's artisan weaving practices, traditional clothing, and antique textile artifacts. And at the Traditional Medicine Institute we'll learn how the Bhutanese make herbal medicines using local plants. After a well-deserved break for lunch, we'll visit the Jungshi Handmade Paper Factory, which produces paper made from the bark of two trees, one of which is a Daphne. Next, a royal treat: the Tashichho Dzong of Thimphu, which has been the seat of government since 1952. It currently houses the throne room and offices of the king, the secretariat, and the ministries of home affairs. We'll return to the hotel briefly and then enjoy a private dinner at the home of Tashi and Dawa Pemo. Tashi is Chair of the National Council of Bhutan.

### TUESDAY, APRIL 12 — THIMPHU (B, L, D)

All of our senses will be in for a treat today as we'll tour the Royal Botanical Garden, Serbithang. Established in 1999 by the National Biodiversity Center, it serves as a repository of plant germplasm for conservation and research, as well as a rescue center for rare and threatened regionally native plants. The Simply Bhutan Museum is a living museum/cultural center which demonstrates



the varied culture and traditions of the country. It's also meant to inspire and train young people for meaningful careers. After a break for lunch at a local restaurant, we'll visit the Crafts Bazaar for a chance to see—and purchase—locally made Bhutanese arts and crafts. We'll have dinner at a restaurant or in the hotel tonight.

### **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13 — PUNAKHA (B, L, D)**

We'll leave with baggage for the high mountain pass of Dochula. How high? At 10,000 feet, we can see — with the blessings of a clear day — the regal Himalayas. A true “bucket list” experience! A dual delight awaits at our visit to Lampelri's Royal Botanical Park, which hosts a renowned Rhododendron Festival. The park features 46 rhododendron species, many of which will be in bloom during our visit. In addition, there are hundreds of other plants, including trees like oaks, magnolias, and birches. During the festival we'll enjoy lunch, along with Boedra and Zhungdra traditional songs and dances, and cultural programs, as well as educational activities relating to conservation performed by schoolchildren. As we continue on to Punakha, we'll walk through the rice fields to Chimi Lhakhang, often called the fertility temple, built in 1499 in memory of Lama Drukpa Kunley. Known as the “Divine Madman” for his somewhat unorthodox beliefs and practices, Kunley implored his followers to question all authority. We'll spend the night at the Dhensa Boutique Resort, set in a pine forest overlooking the Punakha Valley, dining together at the hotel.

### **THURSDAY, APRIL 14 — GANGTEY (B, L, D)**

This morning we'll leave (with baggage) for a visit to Punakha Dzong. It's considered one of the most beautiful in the country, especially in the spring when the jacaranda trees around the dzong show off their lilac flowers against the white-washed walls. We'll have lunch at Hotel Lobesa before heading to Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup Nunnery, which is located on a mountain ridge. We'll see a golden-tipped, large white stupa, a 14-foot-tall bronze statue of Avalokiteshvara (a bodhisattva, or enlightened being, who embodies compassion), and depictions of notable lamas. We'll continue along the Kingdom's east-west highway through the village of Wangdi and on through forests of bamboo and oak as far as the Pele Pass. We should see yaks grazing in the fields as we reach the Phobjikha Valley. We'll check into the Gangtey



Lodge, a place to see the sophistication of Bhutanese design while witnessing nearby rural life, and enjoy dinner there.

### **FRIDAY, APRIL 15 — GANGTEY (B, L, D)**

Our morning will be active and relaxing at the same time as we visit the Gangtey Goempa monastery and take a 1½- to 2-hour walk through the beautiful forest and flowering meadows in the protected Phobjikha Valley. We'll drop in at the Black-necked Crane Visitor Centre, run by the Royal Society for Protection of Nature, and learn about their work with the majestic but rare black-necked cranes, which migrate from Tibet to Bhutan in late autumn each year. A busy morning deserves lunch at the Dewachen Hotel and Spa. Following lunch, we'll immerse ourselves in the local culture with a visit to a local farm house and meet the family that runs it. We can take the rest of the afternoon at leisure at the hotel, with the option of a traditional stone bath before dinner there.

### **SATURDAY, APRIL 16 — PUNAKHA (B, L, D)**

On our return journey to Punakha, we'll leave with baggage and take part in yet another bit of sensory magic. At Lhawang Driden Incense, we'll witness the authentic Buddhist production of handmade incense sticks in this small family cottage. We'll have lunch in a restaurant to re-charge for our afternoon activities. Punakha is one of the lowest-lying valleys in the Kingdom, so produce grows year-round here and farming is a way of life. We'll start with a walk up through the white-washed homesteads and farmland to Khamsum to see Yulley Namgyal Chorten, a shrine recently built by the royal family. We'll see the Bhutanese culture up close and personal again while visiting a local village and assisting with the rice harvesting. Then we'll return to stay again at the Dhensa Boutique Resort. A pleasurable night is in store: we'll be treated to a musical performance followed by dinner in the hotel.

### **SUNDAY, APRIL 17 — PARO (B, L, D)**

Our journey continues as we'll leave with baggage for Paro. First stop: the Dzong, the center of civil and religious authority in the valley. Then it's on to Kyichu Lhakhang, built





in the 7th century and one of the oldest and most venerated temples in Bhutan. Enjoy the fruit trees in the outer courtyard and the murals and statues inside. We'll break for lunch in a restaurant before our drive up the valley to Drukgyal Dzong. Built in 1647 by the great Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, father and unifier of medieval Bhutan, the Dzong was destroyed by fire and left in ruins. We'll explore the ramparts and hope for a clear day so we can experience the awe-inspiring view of Mount Jomolhari, ranked as the 79th tallest mountain in the world at over 24,000 feet. Our day will wind down as we check into Le Méridien Paro, Riverfront hotel. Dinner tonight will be in the hotel or in a nearby restaurant.

### **MONDAY, APRIL 18 — PARO (B, L, D)**

This day will be memorable as we make the steep climb up to Bhutan's most celebrated examples of monastic architecture: Paro Taktsang monastery, also known as the Tiger's Nest. It hugs the side of a steep cliff 3,000 feet above the Paro valley. Legend has it that this cliffside was where Guru Rinpoche landed on the back of a flying tigress. Our journey will be more grounded, as the ascent on foot normally takes three hours. Our morning break at the cafeteria will allow us to soak in the wonderful view. We'll feel like we're in another world as we pass a waterfall and fluttering prayer flags while enjoying the clean mountain air, en route to the top. Lunch will be back in the cafeteria before we return to the valley. (Note: Alternative arrangements will be made for any travelers who do not wish to make this ascent.) Tonight we'll unwind with dinner in the hotel.

### **TUESDAY, APRIL 19 — BANGKOK (B, D)**

Today we're in transit, departing after breakfast to take a Drukair flight for Bangkok, where we'll check into the Novotel Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel. In the evening, we'll share memories, selfies, and contact information as we raise our glasses for farewell drinks and dinner in the hotel.

### **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20**

We'll board our return flights to the United States.

*While revisions of this itinerary are not anticipated, the AHS and its travel partners reserve the right to make changes, with or without notice, which may become necessary.*





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### JOIN US FOR MANY MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES, INCLUDING:

- Buddha Point, one of the largest Buddha statues in the world at 177 feet tall.
- The Tashichho Dzong, the seat of the government since 1952.
- The Royal Botanical Garden, Serbithang, a rescue center for rare and threatened native floral species.
- The high mountain pass of Dochula, at 10,000 foot; on a clear day we will see the Himalayas.
- The Lampelri Royal Botanical Park & Rhododendron Festival. The park features 46 species of rhodies, many of which will be in bloom during our visit. During the festival we'll enjoy traditional songs, dances, and cultural programs.
- Kyichu Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples in the country.
- Bhutan's most celebrated examples of monastic architecture: Paro Takstang monastery, also known as the Tiger's Nest.

### THE SUPERB ACCOMMODATIONS FOR THIS PROGRAM ARE:

- Novotel Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport hotel, for short stays both at the beginning and end of the tour.
- Norkhil Boutique Hotel & Spa in Thimphu is known for holistic spa treatments and organic cuisine in an exceptionally beautiful natural setting.
- The Dhensa Boutique Resort, set in the Punakha Valley. We'll be immersed in the peace and beauty of nature at its most brilliant.
- The Gangtey Lodge, a window into Bhutanese rural life. It respectfully blends into its environment and will enable us to connect with the spirituality of Bhutan.
- Le Méridien Paro, Riverfront hotel. Located on the edge of the Paro River, it offers panoramic views of the Eastern Himalayas.

Please refer to the enclosed reservation form for pricing and instructions for reserving your place on this AHS Travel Study Program tour. For more information about Travel Study Program tours, please contact [development@ahsgardening.org](mailto:development@ahsgardening.org) or (703) 768-5700, ext. 127. Information is also available at [www.ahsgardening.org/travel](http://www.ahsgardening.org/travel).

Designed with the garden-travel connoisseur in mind, the American Horticultural Society Travel Study Program offers exceptional itineraries that include many exclusive experiences and unique insights. Your participation benefits the work of the American Horticultural Society and furthers our vision of *"A land of sustainable gardens, cultivated by a diverse population with a common passion for plants."*

