



ELLISON ROBERTS' FACT FILE BHUTAN

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE: Bhutan is a high place located between Nepal in the West and Burma to the east with China to the north and India to the south. It has three principal geographic and climatic zones; the southern plains, the central foothills and valleys and the northern Himalayan mountains. There is considerable climatic change, affected by both altitude and the SW monsoon, with the south being sub-tropical, the centre having hot summers and cold winters and the mountainous north having cool summers and severe winters. In general the months of March, April, May, September, October and November are the best times for tourists to visit.



THE PEOPLE: Bhutan has three main ethnic groups: the Sharchops in the east, who originated from the tribes of northern Burma and northeast India; the Ngalops in the west, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan after migrating from Tibet; and the Lhotsampas in the south, originally belonging to Nepal. The overall population of Bhutan is around 700,000. Approximately 100,000 live in Thimpu.

LANGUAGE: Dzongkha is the official language of Bhutan, but many regions in Bhutan still retain their native dialects due to their isolation. Apart from Dzongkha, English is also spoken quite widely.

RELIGION: The Tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism is the official religion of Bhutan. It is an important factor in the development of Bhutanese society. Villages in Bhutan are strewn with temples and religious structures, which are present along the roads and trails. One can also see many prayer flags on the hills and high passes, fluttering in the breeze. Almost every home in Bhutan has a special area called a Chusum, which is a small shrine, or a special room used for prayers.



NATIONAL DRESS: The men in Bhutan wear a 'gho', a long knee-length robe that is tied around the waist by a belt and the women wear a 'kira', which is an ankle-length dress worn with a short jacket. Since 1989 to preserve the ancient customs from being influenced by the West, the Bhutanese government has made it compulsory for all Bhutanese to wear only the national dress in public and this rule is observed by most, although somewhat less rigorously by the youth of Thimpu.



FOOD: The Bhutanese diet is rich in meat and poultry, dairy, grain (particularly buckwheat) and vegetables. Rice and chillies are the major features of Bhutanese diet. Emadatse (chilly pepper and cheese stew) is considered the national dish with many interpretations of this recipe throughout the country. Poultry and meat dishes, pork, beef and yak, are lavishly spiced with chillies, and it is common to see the bright red peppers drying on rooftops in the sun. The chillies are considered a vegetable and not just a spice. Bhutanese dishes are mostly fiery but uniquely Bhutanese in every sense. Salted butter tea, or suja, is served on all social occasions. Unfortunately most hotels serve their food buffet style i.e. kept warm rather than freshly cooked. Hopefully pressure from discerning tourists will help effect a change.

CURRENCY: The Ngultrum, denoted BTN, is the official currency used in Bhutan. Equal in value to, and interchangeable with, the Indian Rupee (through a 1:1 peg), the currency is subdivided into 100 chertrums. A word of caution. If you take Indian Rupees into Bhutan you should avoid the Rp1,000 denomination notes as these may be difficult to use. There are presently [in 2010] no ATMs in Bhutan. However, major cards can be used in the bigger hotels.

SPORT: Bhutan's national sport is archery and every town and village will have its archery ground, where early morning practice is commonplace. The distance to the target is usually 105m and amazing precision is demonstrated. Each team will try to put off the other team by singing and dancing as the archer takes a shot.

