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THE SPIRIT OF BHUTAN
Photographic and Cultural Tour

Led by Joel and Karen Schulman
April 23-May 6, 2025

Trip Highlights ~

- **Land cost includes** Bhutanese Travel Visa and estimated Business Class round trip airfare Bangkok/Paro, all meals in Bhutan are included, meal and hotel tips included.
- Glimpse the traditions and customs disappearing from the rest of the Himalayan world.
- Full day hike to **Taktsang Dzong**, more commonly known as the **Tiger's Nest.**
- Photographing amidst the ancient **Buddhist Monasteries and Temples**.
- **Phobjikha**: Valley of Gangtey is one of the most beautiful spots in Bhutan.
- **Bumthang** Region: unique candlelit prayers at a private monastery.
- Twelve days with acclaimed tour guides and professional photographers **Joel and Karen Schulman.**

For more information or to register contact the Strabo Photo Tour Collection: 607-756-8676
www.phototc.com

STRABO TOURS
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Trip Overview:



Spring is possibly the most beautiful time of the year, ablaze with a fabulous array of bright colors from spring blooms. The valleys are green and lush and fruit trees and Rhododendrons are blossoming. Join Karen & Joel Schulman, who will share Bhutan with you and fellow photographers alike. This will be Karen's fourth trip to Bhutan. She and Joel invite you to continue on a wonderful sharing opportunity. On Karen's first trip to Bhutan, she found it was very difficult and expensive for the Bhutanese to obtain corrective eyeglasses. When she mentioned this to her ophthalmologist in Steamboat Springs, he offered to help. So he donated 100 new pair of eyeglass readers for Karen to take, and even showed her how to help her Bhutanese friends choose a pair that were the right strength. With the help of the tour guide, driver and the rest of her group, there were a lot of very happy people. Joel and Karen are looking forward to continuing this wonderful project in 2025!



Karen and Joel are wonderful photography instructors, and there will be opportunities in the evenings to have photo discussions, and photo review, so everyone can learn and share from one another. If you prefer a private photo review, they will be pleased to set aside some time for you.

Bhutan's ancient history relies heavily on Buddhism, local mythology, and legend. This country, nestled in the heart of the Himalayan Mountains, has, for centuries, remained a mystery to the rest of the world. Ghosts, angels, yetis, demons, and saints shaped the past. Fortunate are the few travelers to visit the Buddhist kingdom of Druk Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon), or Bhutan as it is known to the outside world. Bhutan is holding on to its cultural traditions despite the homogenization process that has engulfed so many other small countries.



Photo courtesy of Erik Pronske

The tour includes opportunities to photograph some of Bhutan's most visually exciting places, including the famed Tiger's Nest monastery, dramatic landscapes, villagescapes, and the beautiful Bhutanese people. Our adventure includes the Shangri-La setting of the Paro Valley, the remote Wangdi Valley, the capital city of Thimphu, and the cultural heartland of the country. Its thriving spiritual center abounds with numerous centuries old temples, shrines, and monasteries. There will be unique photo opportunities that other travelers are not able to experience such as a private monastery in the Bumthang Region and a possible visit to a nunnery. These provide intimate moments where you witness and photograph members during their candlelit prayers.

We invite you, the inquisitive traveler, to join photographer **Karen and Joel** on this special tour of Bhutan. We will have a cordial welcome in this country with its brilliant colors, compelling architecture, irresistible allure, and warm hospitality.

Photo Leaders:

Karen and Joel have been working in the photographic field for over 40 years and are both accomplished professional photographers. Karen is a skilled and sensitive photographic artist and educator and during our tour will share ideas and knowledge to help you create great travel photographs, whether you are using a DSLR or an iPhone! Joel is an expert in the digital imaging world and has done photographic printing for some of the most notable names in fine art photography. He will share his knowledge of both the technical and creative aspects of the photographic medium.



In addition, Karen and Joel will offer visual presentations and discussions highlighting the development of personal vision and awareness, and show how light, color, composition, gesture and 'the moment' contribute to the success of a photograph. There will also be opportunities to have photo reviews of your images, so everyone can share and learn from each other, or private photo reviews can be arranged. Both Karen and Joel are passionate iPhoneographers and during your tour will offer optional creative iPhoneography instruction. Our goal is to make this tour enjoyable and fun for both serious and casual photographers!

From Karen: "I encourage each person to give themselves permission to make mistakes, permission to create. The more we learn to 'see' with our mind, heart and spirit, the more of an adventure life becomes." If you wish to review Joel's work or contact him: www.photographicsart.com, joel@photographicsart.com, Karen www.focusadventures.com, karen@focusadventures.com

Testimonials



I went on the trip to Bhutan expecting to watch my wife, the avid photographer, take pictures while I enjoyed touring and learning about an exotic land and people. In truth, it was successful at that level, a rich cultural experience. I was caught by surprise, however, at how much Karen taught me about photography, largely using my iPhone. The root of it was Karen's ability to encourage and inspire, while also providing feedback and constructive advice. I left for Bhutan uninterested in photography. I returned passionately dedicated to becoming a photographer. It certainly has changed how I see. In fact, I believe it has changed my life. I look forward to taking future trips with Karen. ~ JOE TURNER

Karen is terrific – always engaged, always available, great energy, great sense of humor. She has an amazing ability to get people through photo/camera gear crises when they occur. Makes things glow smoothly even over the rough spots. She's diplomatic but not condescending, encouraging and enthusiastic. Altogether a terrific leader and instructor. — J. TILLINGER

I had the most wonderful trip of my lifetime. It was fabulous. Karen is an inspiring and gifted teacher and your local guide is amazing. His knowledge and wisdom and heart cannot be overstated. Thank you for planning this fabulous experience. I'm definitely a Strabo fan. — J. WETZEL

What to Expect



This tour is designed to be a photo tour, and, as such, we must be flexible in our scheduling. Much of what we do, and when we do it, will depend upon weather, light, and the permission of the government-operated Bhutan Tourism Corporation. In the event that changes may occur, we will need to be flexible, which will also allow us to take advantage of new photographic opportunities.

Bhutan has made great strides in tourist accommodations and services in recent years, but please remember this is still a developing country, so we may experience occasional inconveniences. All our accommodations will be clean and comfortable, with private toilet and shower/bath. The hotels have been chosen for their proximity to prime photographic locations. Majority of accommodations do not have elevators, and rooms may be on an upper floor, although there will be porters for your luggage.



Health and Fitness

Tour participants should be in good health and good physical condition to get the most out of the trip. You will find that every day includes many steps to gain access to each Dzong. There are always options for those who wish to not take part in a particular activity, such as entering a Dzong, or skip a certain walk or hike. Although you will not be running marathons, you will be taking long walks if you wish to reach the prime photographic locations. You will be at various altitudes ranging from 4,000' above sea level to 10,000' (Tiger's Nest). While you will not be required to climb these peaks, you will find it worth it photographically if you are able. You can expect long drives on very winding, narrow roads.

Itinerary

April 23/24 or prior for Travel Days

Your departure from home will need to be **April 23 or prior** in order to arrive in Bangkok, Thailand April 24, and then connect with the group on the 25th to Bhutan.

In order to experience such a remote country, it is necessary to fly into Paro, Bhutan on Druk Airlines. The group airfare from Bangkok-Paro-Bangkok has been included in your land cost. Pending changes by Druk Air, your group will need to be at the Bangkok Airport at 4AM on **April 25**. Therefore we recommend you book at least one night stay in Bangkok, Thailand. Although there are many hotel choices in the city center, we recommend spending the evening of **April 24 at the Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel** (reservations and payment made through hotel website which will be sent upon enrollment).

Note – The flight from Bangkok to Paro departs very early. If your flight into Bangkok is delayed by even just a few hours, it would be easy to miss the group departure flight to Paro. You may want to take advantage of visiting a few of the Bangkok sights, recovering from jet lag, and assuring yourself that you will be on time for the Bhutan flight, by spending additional evenings in Bangkok.

April 25-26 Bangkok – Paro - Thimphu



This morning return with Karen and Joel to the BKK airport via the hotel shuttle service or the air-conditioned walkway from the Novotel Hotel. You will present your e-tickets sent to you prior to departure ***(business class has been included for additional baggage limit and faster group check-in).*** The flight departure time is currently 6AM on Druk Airline.

Upon arrival in Bhutan you will be met by your guide and driven an hour and a half to the capital, Thimphu. After checking into the hotel and lunch, spend some time in town. Thimphu has a population of approximately 45,000, composed mainly of monks, the Kingdom's royal family, government civil service, and a growing middle class. Its emergence as a capital city began in 1952.

Begin the next day after breakfast, photograph the National Memorial Chorten, with its sun-catching golden finial, making it one of the most visible religious structures in Thimphu. For many people it is the focus of their daily worship. *Chortens* are Buddhist reliquaries and memorials to the teachings of the Buddha. Sometimes stupas carry relics of the Buddha or

revered monks. Whether or not there are relics inside, the stupas mark the landscape with reminders of the Buddha's teachings. It may be possible to enter Tashichho Dzong (dzong is a fortress-monastery), the most important monastery in the kingdom. In addition to housing the offices of the king's government, Tashichho is also the summer residence of the central monk body.



After lunch visit a traditional weaving studio and the Choki Traditional Art School (if school is in session), which focuses on education of Bhutanese traditional painting, woodcarving, and embroidery for socially and economically disadvantaged youth of Bhutan. These visits will be wonderful photographic opportunities in the long-established art and craft techniques of the Bhutanese people. *Overnight Thimpu (L, D; B, L, D)*



April 27 Trongsa
Today continue your journey across the Dochu La Pass, from where you will get your first look at the chain of Himalayan peaks strung along the northern horizon. The pass has 108 chortens, honoring those who laid down their lives while flushing out insurgents from southern Bhutan in December 2003. Next reach the Pelela Pass, which was, during ancient times, the boundary between western and central Bhutan. From Pelela, drive down through dwarf bamboo vegetation, grazed by the migrating yaks during winter. En route visit Chendebji *Chorten* erected in the eighteenth century by a Tibetan over the remains of an evil spirit that was subdued at this spot. The *chorten* has painted eyes at the four cardinal points.

Drive another hour after lunch, reaching the spectacular landscape of Trongsa and its impressive *dzong*. There is a viewpoint to see the dzong stretched along a ridge above a ravine. This town is right in the middle of the country, separated from both east and west by high mountain ranges. A large influx of Tibetans immigrated here in the late 1950's and 1960's. Overnight Trongsa *(B, L, D)*

April 28-30 Trongsa - Bumthang
The Trongsa Dzong is considered one of the most magnificent pieces of architecture in Bhutan, and the strategic location gave it great power over this part of the country. The only trail between eastern and western Bhutan still leads straight through Trongsa and used to run directly through the dzong itself. Given time visit the Ta Dzong on the hillside above the town. During ancient times, Ta Dzong used to be a watchtower to guard Trongsa.

Drive further east, taking time to photograph the beautiful landscape of this region. Arriving to your Bumthang hotel in the late afternoon, have a bit of time for rest, dinner, and perhaps some evening photography. Experience rare opportunities not afforded other travelers, such as being invited to a private monastery in the Bumthang region. Here join monks during their evening candlelit prayers. Visit a traditional farmhouse, providing opportunity to interact with the local families and learn more about their lifestyle. *Overnight Bumthang (B, L, D all days).*

May 1 Gangtey
After breakfast in Bumthang you will move on to Gangtey, with photographic stops along the way; you may even see the red Panda at Pelela. Driving through the mountains and over a high pass, you will enter Phobjikha Valley, popularly known to be the home of the black-necked cranes. The Bhutanese have great respect for these heavenly birds. Visit



Gangtey Goenpa, the only Nyingmapa (oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Bhuddhism) monastery in western Bhutan. O*vernight Gangtey (B, L, D)*

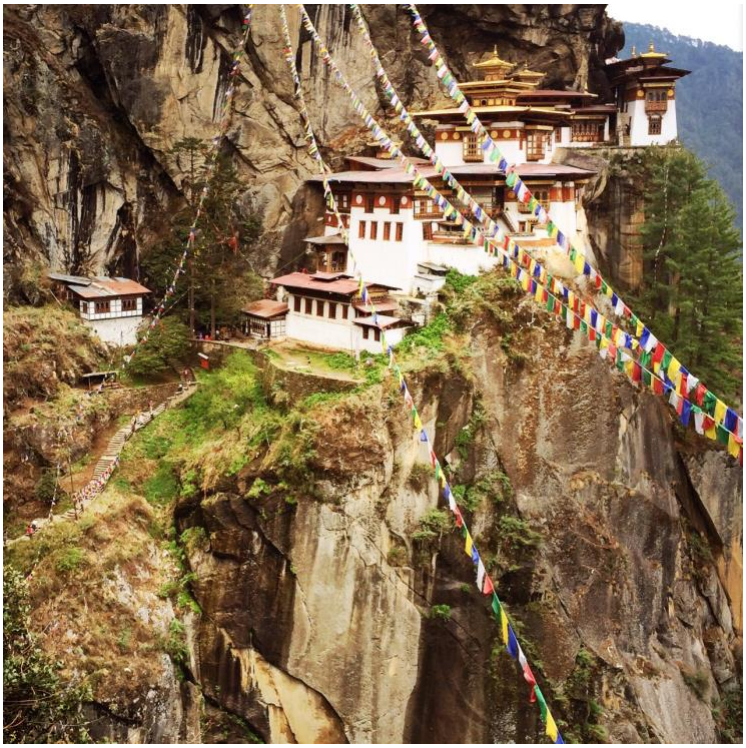
May 2 & 3 Wangdi - Punakha
After breakfast, continue to Punakha, stopping for lunch and photography from a viewpoint of the nearby Wangdiphodrang Dzong. Like many other dzongs, it is situated on a dramatic promontory overlooking the valley, because its first purpose was that of fortress, protecting the valley against potential raids from Tibet. They later took on their second purpose, that of a monastery for the training of monks and places of worship for laymen in the vicinity. In addition to photographing in and around the dzong, you will also take advantage of its setting to photograph this fertile, lowland (4,400') valley, with its quaint houses and terraced fields.

Wangdi sits in the heart of the Punakha Valley, and you will devote a full day today to exploring this valley. The Punakha Dzong dates back to the seventeenth century and was the winter seat of the highest lama in Bhutan until the 1950's. It is spectacularly situated at the confluence of the Mo and Phu Rivers. After lunch walk to the fifteenth century temple of the Divine Madman, walking through rice fields and farmhouses. It will provide opportunity for those wishing to photograph the phallic paintings on the houses; these paintings are believed to keep away the evil spirits and bad luck. *Overnight Punakha (B, L, D both days)*

May 4 & 5 Paro
After an early breakfast return to Paro, arriving in the afternoon. Depending on weather and photographic opportunities along the way, you may have time to visit the Ta Dzong, once a watchtower, or the Rinpung Dzong, built in 1646. The southern approach to the dzong has a traditional roofed cantilever bridge called a Nemi Zam. A walk across the bridge offers a spectacular view of the architecture and an opportunity to tread the same path as the ancient warriors.

Your last day the group will have a full day walk to the Taktsang Dzong, more commonly known as the Tiger's Nest. At the halfway point is your first viewing of the Dzong. There are usually donkeys at the head of the trail for those who wish to take an optional ride to this point.





Those that continue can enter the Dzong. It was established in the eighth century when Padmasambava, the country's patron saint, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, flew here on the back of his mythical tigress consort to meditate. The main buildings sit astride a sheer rock cliff face more than 2000' above Paro Valley. The most prominent building burned to the ground in 1998 but was rebuilt with no visual architectural differences from its predecessor. Our hike begins at roughly 8,000' and goes to just over 10,000'; return to the valley floor late this afternoon and enjoy a farewell dinner with our local guide this evening. *Overnight Paro (B, L, D both days).*

May 6 Paro - Bangkok
After breakfast transfer to the airport for a morning flight back to Bangkok, arriving at approximately 3:30PM (subject to change by airline). The majority of carriers have flights returning to the States around 10PM (landing May 7 in U.S.). You can choose to stay at the airport until your return flight, return to Novotel via the shuttle or walkway, or travel onward to other destinations. (B)

Please note: We cannot be responsible for miss-connections between Druk Air and your other flights. Careful attention needs to be paid to flight times, and dates of travel.

This itinerary has been carefully constructed to assure participants the best Bhutan has to offer; however, should events arise that are beyond our control, itinerary, activities, and hotel arrangements are subject to change without notice. Be assured that we will make substitutions that are as similar in quality and interest as possible.



General Information

Land cost: $8595, based upon minimum of 8 paying participants. There is a small group surcharge of $400 if 6 to 7 participants. ***This includes estimated cost ($1275) of Business Class airfare Bangkok-Paro-Bangkok and Travel Visa to Bhutan.**

Single room supplement: $695, Single rooms are subject to availability. We try to accommodate single travelers who request single accommodations, as well as single travelers who are looking for a roommate. If a single room is requested, we are unable to find a suitable roommate, or you are in a single for another reason, you will need to pay the single charge.

The land cost includes*:*
- Transportation: All group ground and air transportation within Bhutan. A bilingual driver/guide will escort you.
- Accommodations based on two people sharing a room.
- Meals as indicated in itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner).
- Miscellaneous fees and service charges: hotel taxes, accommodation staff tips, meal tips for those meals included, and entrance fees.
- Predeparture information: You will receive information on all aspects of the tour, including packing recommendations, plus readings on the history and culture of Bhutan.

The land cost does not include: International air fare; transportation and transfers for those not traveling with the group; air tax; foreign airport departure taxes; excess baggage charges; passport fees; meals not listed in the itinerary; personal medical and travel insurance; any activities not specified in the tour itinerary, or those listed as optional; all items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone charges, beverages; film and processing, medical expenses, and room service; tips for meals not included in itinerary, tips to driver/guides.

Please contact Strabo Tours if you would like rates on **International Airfare**, a charge may need to be added for this service. If making your own arrangements, it is important to discuss flight days with Strabo Tours before booking any airline tickets, to avoid paying airline cancellation penalties, or additional fees for private transfers.

Deposits, Cancellations AND Refunds



A deposit of $750 ($500 on domestic tours) per person is required. Specific tours may require an additional deposit due to accommodation bookings or transportation requirements. If applicable these will be noted on your invoice. Payment in full is required when bookings are made less than 120 days before the departure date. Space is subject to cancellation by Strabo if payment is not received when due.

If a passenger wishes to cancel, they must send notification in writing to: Strabo International Tour, Co., P.O. Box 580, Dryden, NY 13053. At the time we receive your notification, the following per person charges apply:

• 120 days or more before departure: $300 cancellation fee, plus Strabo' costs, as well as fees that are charged by the suppliers providing the services included in your tour, and/or the airlines providing the air transportation.

• 91-120 days before departure: $500 minimum cancellation fee, plus Strabo' costs, as well as fees that are charged by the suppliers providing the services included in your tour, and/or the airlines providing the air transportation. Fees may range from 25% to 100% of tour costs.

• 90 days or less before departure or any time after departure: NO REFUND.

Refunds for services that are voluntarily not used by you cannot be made.

Insurance



Each participant must be covered by medical insurance that is valid overseas.
We strongly urge you to evaluate your risk and to take out insurance on your trip. It is vital for you to realize that if you experience a delay or find it necessary to cancel or cut short your trip for any reason, you will lose part or the entire sum you've invested in it (see the section "Deposits, Cancellations and Refunds" in the trip brochure). Travel insurance helps to minimize the risk of monetary losses you would incur in the event of a delay of your departure due to weather, airline strike, missed connection, etc., your inability to travel for reasons such as illness, injury, unforeseen financial complications, and other personal circumstances, or if you were required to cut your trip short for medical or any other reasons.

There are restrictions and limitations on any insurance program. For this reason, please carefully read the enclosed pamphlet, which outlines their program of trip cancellation, baggage, and medical insurance. Trained agents are available to answer your questions, so don't hesitate to call the number in their brochure. It is to your advantage to apply for insurance at the earliest possible time, so don't delay in deciding.