A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ADVENTURE: HIKING IN VIETNAM AND BHUTAN
OCTOBER 8-22, 2018

Ann Highum and Jerry Freund are ready to travel again with a group of adventurous and curious people, in 2018. They are anxious to share their love for SE Asia and its people, culture, history and natural beauty.

Bhutan and Vietnam are fascinating countries--safe for travel, culturally fascinating, and historically important. Bhutan, famous for its “happiness index” has been open for tourism for many years, but not so welcoming. They are working to change that, and since their tourism industry is now highly regulated and well managed, our colleague Lana has negotiated a fascinating tour. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to offer this tour to hardy souls who want a unique adventure in both the northern part of Vietnam and then in Bhutan.

There will, of course, be a focus on learning on this tour, with local guest speakers and excellent local guides who will share their knowledge about each country with the group. The tour is also based on taking hikes in remarkable areas, interacting with different ethnic tribes to learn about their customs and cultures, staying in guesthouses in small villages, and experiencing each country more fully than is possible in other tours. It is important to note that many of the hiking experiences will involve uneven terrain, long uphill climbs and up to 7 miles per hike. Altitude is also a factor, although the highest areas we would visit are in the range of 7-8000 feet. These countries are definitely not ADA accessible, and unless you are used to hiking these distances, this trip is not for you.

That said, we will hike through spectacular mountainous villages in the northwest of Vietnam and throughout Bhutan, as described in the itinerary. For photographers, we are sure there will be plenty of opportunities for stunning photos.

We have worked to make this affordable as well as memorable, and hope you will consider joining us! If you are interested, we would like you to call one of us to discuss the physical demands and determine if this tour is a good match for your interests and abilities. We are only taking 10 people in addition to our guide and the two of us.
Timing and schedule:
Note that meals are noted for each day in Vietnam; almost all meals are included in the tour cost. ALL meals in Bhutan are included.

Oct. 8-9: Leave from the U.S., either Minneapolis or Chicago, to Hanoi.

Oct 9-Arrive in Hanoi in the early evening. Transfer to hotel, May DeVille Old City center. (www.maydeville.com)

Oct. 10: (B, L, D) Trang An National park; an all-day trip to this famous and beautiful national park. (a World Heritage Site) –Bike riding, photography, a short hike on Skull Island and a nap on the way home! Back to the May De Ville Old City center Hotel. Our welcome group dinner will be held at a near-by restaurant in Hanoi.

Oct 11-(B, L, D) Bus drive to Nghia Lo town where Thai tribes reside, with stop to visit Suoi Giang and vast ancient tea plantations. Overnight at the Muong Lo hotel at Nghia Lo town and enjoy the traditional dishes as well as the daily life and cultural aspects of the Thai people. (www.Khachsanmuonglo.vn)

Oct 12-(B, L, D) Bus drive to Tu Le, villages of H’Mong and Dao tribes. 5-6 miles of hiking through the Mu Cang Chai, which is well known as the most beautiful spot for trekking with stunning rice terraces and mountain views. Lunch will be served on the road. Bus drive to Sapa after the hike. Overnight at Sunny Mountain hotel in Sapa. (sunnymountainhotel.com) Group dinner.

Oct 13- (B, D) Free morning to enjoy Sapa town. Lunch on your own. After lunch, the bus takes us to the town of Bac Ha with a stop at China border. (just to look!)
Check in at Sao Mai hotel. (www.saomaibachahotel.com) Group dinner.

Oct 14- (B, L, D) We will start our day at the Bac Ha Sunday market. Sunday Bac Ha market is famous in all of SE Asia for the originality and authenticity that the traders still preserve. It is a blur of colorful plaids and stripes from women of many different ethnic tribes. After lunch, the bus will take us to Sin Man to trek about 5 miles through the village of the La Chi people. Overnight at Tay Con Linh Hotel in Hoang Su Phi.

Oct 15- (B, L, D) Today, the bus will take us approximately 20km where we will start our 7-mile hike to Luoc village. The bus then picks up at the main road at the end of the hike, to transfer to Pan Hou village resort. (panhou-village.com)

Oct 16- (B, L) We will have time to relax at this picturesque resort in the morning, before our bus drive back to Hanoi. We then fly to Bangkok in the early evening, with our overnight stay at a hotel near the airport.

Oct 17: (B) We will have a morning flight to Paro, Bhutan. BKK-PBH  B3701 Departs at 06:30; Arrives at 09:55am.

Bhutan itinerary—all meals are included in Bhutan.

**Cultural Tour of Bhutan (with Punakha) for 6 Days 5 Nights**

**Day 1 (October 17): Arrival in Paro - Thimphu (65kms/1.5hrs)**
Paro (alt. 2200m/7218ft) - The beautiful valley of Paro encapsulates within itself a rich culture, scenic beauty and hundreds of myths and legends. It is home to many of Bhutan's oldest temples and monasteries, National Museum and country's only airport. Mount. Chomolhari (7,314m) reigns in white glory at the northern end of the valley and its glacial water plunge through deep gorges to form Pa Chhu (Paro River). Paro is also one of the most fertile valleys in the Kingdom producing a bulk of the locally famous red rice from its terraced fields.

The flight to Paro is considered one of the most spectacular flight experiences in the world. While flying in and out of Bhutan, one can see Mt. Everest, Kanchenjunga, Makula, and other high peaks such as Jumolhari, Jichu Drakey, and Tsrim Gang. You will be received by a tour guide at Airport.

Paro Valley

After landing at Paro, your tour guide will take you on a short one and half hour drive along the Paro and Thimphu river valleys to Thimphu, Bhutan’s capital, at 2320 meters.

Thimphu Altitude: 2320m. Thimphu is a small, charming capital city nestled in the heart of the Himalayas with a population of about 100,000 people. Thimphu is capital town of Bhutan and the centre of government, religion and commerce. It is a unique city with unusual mixture of modern development alongside ancient traditions. Although not what one expects from a capital city, Thimphu is still a fitting and lively place. Home to civil servants, expatriates and monk body, Thimphu maintains a strong national character in its architectural style.

After checking into your hotel in Thimphu and refreshment visit the following places:

**Memorial Chorten:** This stupa was built in 1974 in the memory of Bhutan’s third King, His Late Majesty the King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, who is popularly regarded as Father of modern Bhutan. The paintings and statues inside the monument provide a deep insight into Buddhist philosophy.

**Buddha Point:** Visit the world’s largest sitting Buddha, an immense statue housing a monastery and visitors center. Enjoy a stunning view of Thimphu city from this point.
**Tashichho Dzong:** Tashichho Dzong has been the seat of the government since 1952 and presently houses the throne room and offices of the king, the secretariat and the ministries of home affairs and finance. Other government departments are housed in buildings nearby.

Local expert talk about the Bhutan Gross National Happiness philosophy.  
(http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com)

**Evening:** Explore Thinphu Town/Handicrafts Stalls/ Local market  
Accommodation: Namgay Heritage Hotel (www.nhh.bt)

**Day 2 (October 18): Thimphu**

**Morning:** Hike to **Cheri Monastery**. Drive to the north end of Thimphu Valley (15kms) and hike to Cheri Monastery for 30 – 45mins. Cheri Monastery was established in 1620 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. The monastery is now a major teaching and retreat center of the Southern Drukpa Kagyu sect. The Monastery serves as the monastic school for study of Buddhist Philosophy, metaphysics, mathematics, poets and many other Buddhist studies. According to legend or history of Bhutan the place was first visited by Padmasambhava in the 8th century. In the 13th century it was visited by Phajo Drugom Zhigpo the Tibetan Lama who first established the Drukpa Kagyu tradition in Bhutan. Zhabdrung spent three years in strict retreat at the monastery and stayed for many years.

Picnic lunch by the riverside.

**School of Thirteen Arts & Crafts:** This is the primary center of learning for Bhutanese artists. Depending upon the student’s interest, one can specialize in any of the thirteen arts and crafts, including painting, weaving, sculptures, blacksmithing, embroidery, etc. It is the best place for visitors to learn about traditional Bhutanese arts and crafts. On a visit, one can see students learning the various skills taught at the school.

**National Takin Reserve:** Hike or drive up the National Takin Reserve where a herd of Bhutan’s national animals reside. Legend has it that the Takin is a cross between a goat and a buffalo, but biologists agree that its nearest relative is the arctic musk ox. This bizarre beast looks as if it was assembled from parts of several...
animals and vaguely resembles an American bison tinged in golden fur. Male Takins have been known to hide by lying spread-eagle on the ground!

Our hotel is the Namgay Heritage Hotel (www.nhh.bt)

Day 3 (October 19): Thimphu-Punakha (3hrs/77kms)

Dochula Pass

Punakha Altitude: 1300m/4265ft. Punakha served as the capital of Bhutan during the time of Zhabdrun Ngawang Namkgyal, the founder of Bhutan. Today it is the administrative and religious center of the district and the winter home of Bhutan’s Central Monk Body. It is blessed with temperate climate, owing to its natural drainage from Pho Chhu (male) and Mo Chhu (female) rivers.

Start your morning by enjoying and taking pictures of the Dochula Pass (3150m/10,000ft) with its panoramic views of the Himalayas. The pass is decorated with 108 Druk Wangyel Chorten, which were built to celebrate the stability and progress, brought to Bhutan by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King.

On the way to Punakha we will visit the following:

Chimmi Lhakhang: take a short hike through the rice field to Chimmi Lhakhang, the 15th-century monastery built by Lam Ngawang Chogyal on the spot where his cousin Lam Drukpa Kuenley (popularly known as “the Divine Madman”) subdued a powerful demon. This monastery is also referred to as the “Abode of Fertility” believing that any couple who gets a blessing from this temple is blessed with a child in the next year or so.

Punakha’s Dzong: The name means Palace of Great Bliss. This dzong stands magnificently on the spit of land where two rivers (Pho chu and Mo chu) meet. Punakha Dzong has special significance in Bhutanese history as the place where Bhutan’s first King, Ugyen Wangchuck, was crowned in 1907. It is also the winter residence for the Je Khenpo (spiritual leader) and the entire central monk body.

Punakha suspension bridge, an exciting bridge for photography enthusiasts.

Accommodation: Drubchhu Resort (http://drubchhu.com)
Day 4 (October 20): Punakha – Paro (137kms/4 - 5hrs)

**National Museum:** Ta-Dzong (the watchtower) was built in the 17th century to guard the Paro Rimpong dzong (fortress) below. It was said that the future first king was kept in this tower as a prisoner for a week. It was the third king who restored the Ta-dzong and converted it into the National Museum. The visit to the museum will familiarize you with the Bhutanese way of life and will also acquaint you with its natural and cultural history.

**Paro Rimpong Dzong:** Regal and imposing, dzongs are arguably among the most distinctive and important structures in Bhutan. This Dzong is the headquarters of the Paro district, housing the head administrator and staff, as well as a monastic body with about 200 monks.

**Kyichu Lhakhang:** It is one of the oldest and most sacred shrines of the Kingdom dating back to 7th century (the other is Jambey Lhakahng in Bumthang). The lhakhang complex is composed of two temples. The first temple was built by Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century and in 1968, H.M. Ashi Kesang, the Queen Mother of Bhutan, built the second temple in original pattern.

**Farm house:** We will have a chance to visit a local family to talk to locals and see how they live.

Accommodation: Naksel Boutique Hotel and Spa (www.naksel.com)

Day 5 (October 21): Paro- Hike to Taktshang, Tiger’s Nest (3-4hrs)

Bhutan’s most scenic icon and the most important landmark, Takshang the Tiger’s nest, clings to the side of a steep cliff 300 meters above the Paro valley. The place was first visited by Guru Rimpoche, founder of the tantric form of Buddhism in Himalayan countries, in the 8th century. It was said that he meditated there for about three months. The original temple was built in the 17th century, but tragically, it was consumed by fire in 1998. Like a phoenix, the temple was rebuilt to its fullest glory in 2003. Takshang is considered to be the 10th-holiest site in the Buddhist world. You can visit three different temples inside the main Takshang complex. Riding Ponies provided upon request; the hike is approximately 3-4 hours up, a bit shorter down.

Afternoon: relax and enjoy the Manchu spa at Naksel Resort.

Accommodation: Naksel Boutique Hotel and Spa (www.naksel.com)

Day 06 (October 22) Departure: After breakfast, we will transfer to the Paro airport for our return to Bangkok.
PBH-BKK B3701 Departure 10:35; Arrival 5:05pm.

Flight from Bangkok back to the U.S. that evening.

Ann and Jerry plan to spend another 5-6 days in Thailand, including a trip to Chieng Mai, an interesting city north of Bangkok and/or perhaps some beach time in the south. We would welcome company from the program participants, but the tour is officially over on October 22nd. We would work together on the itinerary for this visit to Thailand.

Cost:

The cost for this 15-day tour is highly dependent on the expenditure rules from the Bhutan Tourism department, who not only provide all services for tourist groups but require a generous daily expenditure by each person to provide it. In addition, current cost of the round trip flight from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan and back is almost $800. Given this, the cost of the tour, including everything mentioned above (transportation, guides, meals, hotel, entrance into all sites, and tips) and the flights from Hanoi to Bangkok, Bangkok to Paro, and Paro to Bangkok is $3600. We can help you find and purchase your flights from the U.S. to Hanoi, and from Bangkok back to the U.S.; we estimate that will cost approximately $800-1000/person.