



PO BOX 659 ASPEN, CO 81612  
970-925-6618



# Eastern Bhutan – Merak & Sakteng Yeti Trek

## *“Cultural journey into Bhutan’s Land of the Brokpas”*

September 26th-October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012



### Introduction

The new trekking route into Merak and Sakteng is a truly incredible cultural journey and nature trek into a region closed to foreigners for the past 30 years. Until now only a handful of scientists, researchers and tourists have been granted permission to enter this area. Merak and Sakteng has been closed to protect the unique cultural heritage of the Brokpa people and in part to give the mythical Yeti some peace, whose tales of wandering in the valley is very popular among the locals. The Brokpas (highlanders) of the Merak and Sakten regions of eastern Bhutan are semi-nomadic yak herders who speak a unique dialect and wear clothing unique to this isolated region of Bhutan.

Our 6 day trek visits both Merak and the Sakteng valleys and enters the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary. It is one of nine protected areas in Bhutan. It also forms part of the Bhutan Biological Conservation Complex. The Sanctuary protects the easternmost temperate forest ecosystems in the country with endemic species like eastern blue pine, black-rumped magpie and many others found only in the east. The Sanctuary was set up to protect the elusive *Megay*, or yeti. Other wildlife includes snow leopard, red panda, Himalayan black bear, barking deer and Himalayan red fox. Fauna and birds include the hoary-bellied Himalayan squirrel, Assamese macaque, blood pheasant, grey backed shrike, grey-headed woodpecker, common hoopoe, rufus-vented tit and dark breasted rosefinch. The Sanctuary is typical of the diversity of Himalayan terrestrial ecosystems, combining alpine meadow, temperate forest and warm broad leaf forest. According to the surveys conducted by the World Wildlife Fund some 203 species of plants, 119 species of birds and 18 species of mammals have been confirmed. The snow leopard and red panda have been classified internationally as “highly endangered” species.

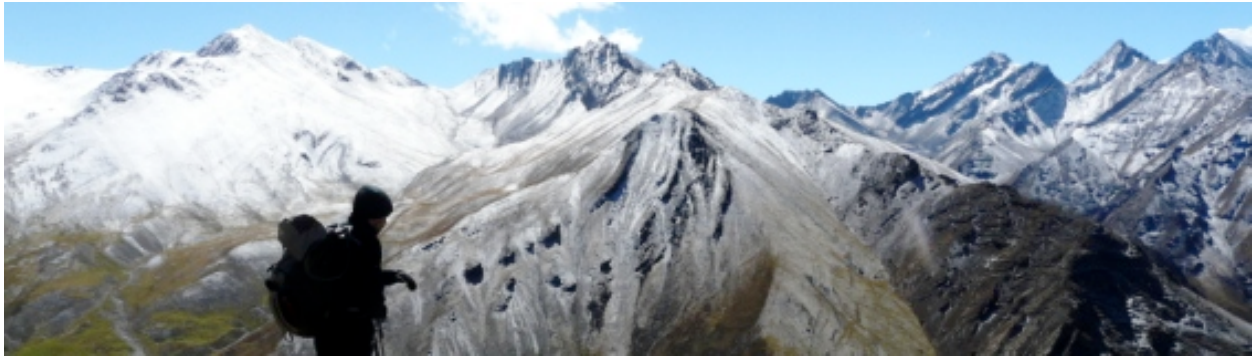
The people of Merak and Sakteng have their ancestral roots southern Tibet. Around the 15th century, Aum Jomo and Lama Jarepa led the inhabitants of Tshona Village in Tibet, with all their belongings, scriptures, yaks and sheep, further south in search of a new home. After several months, crossing snowcapped mountain passes, raging rivers and through dense forest, they arrived at the foothill of a very high mountain pass. The stronger and younger nomads along with the animals managed to climb over the pass and settle in a beautiful meadow covered valley, with shrubs and rhododendron forests. They set the shrubs on fire and made that valley as their new home, which is now Merak meaning “set on fire”. The weaker group who could not go beyond the pass turned back to settle in a beautiful wide valley covered with bamboo forests, which is now Sakteng meaning “meadow covered with bamboo”.

The people of Merak and Sakteng are known as the Brokpa (highlander) to the people living on the lowlands and have maintained their own unique traditions and customs. Similar to the people of Laya, Lingshi and Lunana, the Brokpa live a semi nomadic lifestyle, primarily depending on yaks for their livelihood. Merak and Sakteng fall under the Trashigang Dzongkhag, which is the furthest eastern province in Bhutan. People from Merak and Sakteng come to Trashigang during winter to trade their yak products for rice and other goods. They barter yak butter and cheese with corn and other grains. One prized Brokpa product is a fermented cheese. They put fresh cheese into leather bags and leave it to ferment. The longer it is kept the better it tastes and actually tastes better than it smells!

The valleys of Brokpa are inseparable with the existence of Yeti, or Abominable Snowman. As it is believed and many stories are told about the existence of this elusive creature, the Brokpas' name for Yeti is Megay. Most of the stories are told by the yak herders who have encountered the Yeti, while searching for their lost yaks in deep forests in isolated areas at high altitudes. Some yak herders have said that it is white in color and others said it is light reddish. The footprint is one foot long and the distance is about four foot between them. They say that it emits a strong odor like that of garlic and it feeds mainly on bamboo shrubs. They believe that should one see him, it should be treated with respect for it is believed to be the guardian deity of these remote areas. It does not attack humans unless it is provoked. Some tried to follow the footprints but in vain and so far this creature has continued to elude us.

Bhutan is situated in a hidden corner of the eastern Himalaya, sandwiched between China (Tibet) to the north, Sikkim to the west, and the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal to the south and Arunachal Pradesh to the east. The country within these borders forms a giant staircase, from a narrow strip of land in the south, at an altitude of 1,000 feet, up to some of the highest of Himalayan peaks in the north, rising to over 20,000 feet. A sparsely populated country, Bhutan is often compared to Switzerland because of its small size, jealously guarded isolation and stunning mountain scenery. More than 90% of the population are hill farmers who live in small villages spread over some 18,000 square miles of rugged mountain country. Buddhist teachings and philosophy are influential throughout the kingdom, as they have been since the 7th century and a deep and traditional reverence for nature has led to Bhutan imposing some of the strictest standards of environmental preservation in the world. More than 65% of the land is still under forest cover and some of the rarest of Himalayan wildlife, such as the blue sheep, takin and golden langur, are quite common. It is often said that even the most experienced trekker will find Bhutan to be a revelation. In this country known as Druk Yul, “the Land of the Thunder Dragon,” the fortunate visitor will find a rare combination of harmony and accord, among incredible natural beauty. The air is clean and unpolluted, the mountains are magnificent and the architecture is inspiring.

We will begin this special departure in Delhi, India in order to take advantage of the daily flights between Delhi and Guwahati.



## Daily Itinerary

### **Day 1: Arrive in Delhi. Met upon arrival and transfer to our group hotel.**

We arrive at Delhi International Airport and transfer to a hotel close to the airport.

### **Day 2: Fly from Delhi to Guwahati and drive to Samdrup Jongkhar. Hotel.**

We will need to transfer to the domestic terminal of the Delhi Airport for the onward flight to Guwahati in Assam. We will meet our vehicles here and make the 3 hour drive across the border at Samdrup Jongkhar. We'll check in to our hotel for a restful night. Depart Delhi at 10:20a and arrive in Guwahati at 12:45p.

### **Day 3: Drive to the Trashigang Valley. Hotel/Lodge.**

This morning we continue our drive north to Trashigang. The 112 mile/180K Trashigang - Samdrup Jongkhar road was completed in 1963 and the journey north from the Indian border will take about 6 hours. Along the way we'll pass through the forested foothills of the Himalayas, as we zig-zag up the hillsides through a variety of vegetation, climate and landscape. Along the way, we pass by Deothang, which is remembered in history as the site of a famous 19th century battle fought during the Duar Wars, in which the forces of Jigme Namgyal defeated the British. Further down the road, we can stop at the weaving center in Khaling and the Karma Theksum Dechenling Monastery in Bartsham. Sherubtse College in Kanglung, which was founded in 1978 and was the first institution in Bhutan to offer schooling up to Class 12, and later the first to award degrees. If there is time and energy in the afternoon, we will visit Trashigang Dzong, standing at the extreme end of a rocky outcrop far above the river gorge. The Dzong serves as the administrative seat for the district and is occupied by the local monastic community. Trashigang is the principal township of Bhutan's most populated district.

### **Day 4: The trek starts! Drive to the trailhead at Chaling (6,955 feet / 2,120 meters) and trek to Damnongchu (10,290 feet / 3,137 meters). 7 to 7.5 hours of hiking. Camping.**

An hour's drive from our hotel via Rangjung, on a sometimes bumpy farm road, brings us to Chaling village. We hope to get an early start in order to make it all the way to Damnongchu. If for some unforeseen reason we get a late start, there is the option to camp at Shatimi. Today's trail is gradually up and we will cover almost 3,000 feet in altitude gain if camping at Domnonchhu. To camp here we need to cross the Mindru La Pass at 10,950 feet / 3,338 meters. Today we will hike through deciduous and temperate forest and during a spring trek see lots of magnolias and rhododendron species. Even at the higher altitudes the rhododendrons stay in bloom until late July.

Look out for Himalayan black bears and beautiful pheasants! 7 miles / 11 km, total accumulated ascent of 4,590 feet / 1,400 meters.

**Day 5: Trek to Merak (11,435 feet / 3,486 meters). 5 hours of hiking. Camping.**

Today's trek is shorter so we are able to make a leisurely departure from camp. We will pass through yak meadows today as we enter an area whose famous legacy pre-dates Buddhism in Bhutan. From the fir and spruce vegetation we climb to alpine meadows. Merak is a high altitude village inhabited by semi-nomadic people. The farmers keep permanent houses in Merak, but move between high meadows and grazing areas with their yaks, Dzos and sheep. Dzos are cross breed from yaks and domestic cow. These creatures are strong, evenly-tempered and are used as beast of burden. The people of Merak are devout animists and nature worshippers, with Aum Jomo being the highest deity. Aum Jomo is considered as the protective deity of fauna. Given that people's livelihood is made from sheep, cows and yaks it is vitally important that deities such as Aum Jomo are worshiped and offered gifts of Ara (distilled alcohol from corn). Our afternoon is free to explore around Merak Village. 5.5 miles / 8.8 km, total ascent of 1,405 feet / 428 meters.

**Day 6: Over the Nakchung La Pass (13,585 feet / 4,142 meters) to the forested camp of Miksa Teng (9,975 feet / 3,048 meters). 6 hours of hiking. Camping.**

The trek from Merak to Miksa Teng passes over the beautiful Nakchung La Pass at (13,585 feet / 4,142 meters), the highest point of our trek. The climb up to the pass involves a 2,150-foot ascent on a moderate grade. At these higher altitudes the vegetation mainly consists of shrubs of rhododendron species. Gaining the summit of the pass we will all feel the altitude and sudden drop in temperature. The top of the pass can be quite chilly even in the spring and summer months, so we must make sure to pack a warm hat, gloves and jacket in our daypacks. The pass affords us spectacular panoramic views of the Himalayas. After some time to soak it all in from our lofty perch, we'll start the steep 3,600-foot descent to our campsite at Miksa Teng. The name Nakchungla is locally translated as "the pass where men and horses cry". We'll set up camp in a beautiful meadow by a stream. 8 miles / 13 km, total ascent of 2,300 feet / 700 meters.

**Day 7: The nomads of Sakten (9,545 feet / 2,910 meters). 5 hours of hiking. Camping.**

An easier hiking day as we make our way through more picturesque woodlands to the village of Sakten at 9,545 feet. Sakten is larger than Merak. The center of the village is the Sakten Nagtsang, which is the biggest house in the village where local ceremonies are conducted. After lunch at camp, we have the rest of the day to mingle with the Sakten villagers and take a walk over the ridge beyond the village. 3.5 miles / 5.4 km, total ascent of 888 feet / 271 meters.

**Day 8: Magnolias and bamboo to JyonkharTeng (5,750 feet / 1,752 meters). 7 hours of hiking. Camping.**

Farewell to the colorful nomads of Sakten as we start our return to Trashigang. Today's trail is mostly downhill and on trails well maintained by the Sakten people. Today we walk through forests of magnolias and bamboos that grow so tall that solitary walking can be little eerie. There have been instances of tiger sightings on this section of trail. We will trek for close to 7 hours before reaching our campsite at Jyonkhar Teng. After

tea we can venture into the village and visit the local school. 8.5 miles / 13.7 km, total ascent of 1,295 feet / 395 meters and total descent of 5,095 feet / 1,553 meters.

**Day 9: Trek to Phongmey (6,015 feet / 1,834 meters) and drive to Trashigang. Hotel/Lodge.**

The last day of the trek takes us through forest along trails busy with mule caravans to the road-head at Phongmey. This region is the Rice Bowl of Eastern Bhutan and paddy fields cascade spectacularly down the steep slopes on both sides of the valley. Rejoining our vehicles near Phongmey, we have a picturesque ride back to Trashigang, through Radhi which is famed for its bura, or raw silk, weaving, and Rangjung where a fine new monastery dominates the town. 5.6 miles/ 9.1 km.

**Day 10: South to Samdrup Jongkhar (6 hour drive). Hotel.**

Today we make the return drive to the border town of Samdrup Jongkhar stopping at any interesting sites along the way.

**Day 11: Drive to Guwahati Airport and fly to Delhi. Evening departures from Delhi.**

This morning, we drive for 3 hours to Guwahati, the capital of Assam. We'll go straight to the airport to check in for our 3:30p flight to Delhi. Arriving at Delhi's Domestic Airport at 6:15p, we will either remain at the airport to catch our international return flights or transfer to a nearby hotel and have the use of shared 'day rooms' to freshen up before dinner and transfer to the International Airport for our departing flights.

Total Distance: 37.7 miles / 60.83 km

**Please note:** this beautiful trek into the recently-opened Merak and Sakten region of eastern Bhutan lies in a very remote and difficult to reach region of the Himalayas. We have opted to begin this trip in Delhi, India and access Bhutan through its southeastern border at Samdrup Jongkhar. Even after arriving in Delhi, we still have two full days of plane and car travel before we actually set foot on the trail. We then, of course, need to retrace our journey back to Delhi. This is a lot of travel time for a relatively short six day trek. The only other option is to begin the trip in Paro, and then drive for four days across Bhutan to Trashigang. Although this option does offer a more diverse experience in Bhutan, it does add to the length and significantly to the cost of the trip without offering much in the way of additional acclimatization. If you would prefer to begin the trip in Paro, Bhutan, please contact our office and we will be happy to provide you with a price quote.



## **Trip Grading and Costs**

**21 days. (4 nights hotels, 16 nights of tented camping, 15 days MODERATE to STRENUOUS trekking). Trip's maximum altitude – 13,320 feet at Dhephyudonma Gompa.**

**Land Only Per Person Price:**

**3 to 12 people: \$3880**

**Hotel room and tent single supplement: \$545.00 per person**

**Delhi / Guwahati / Delhi airfare included in trip price.**

**Bhutan Visa Fee: \$20.00 (included in trip price)**

**To reserve your space for this incredible trek, contact Aspen Alpine Guides via email [international@aspenalpine.com](mailto:international@aspenalpine.com) or 970-925-6618.**