

Bhutan, a Himalayan kingdom known for its pristine nature, vibrant traditions, and focus on Gross National Happiness, welcomes travelers seeking authentic cultural experiences. With its 'High Value, Low Volume' tourism policy, Bhutan emphasizes sustainable and respectful travel. To fully enjoy your journey and connect meaningfully with locals, it's essential to understand the country's customs and etiquette. This guide outlines the key do's and don'ts to help you travel responsibly and respectfully.

1. General Cultural Dos and Don'ts

Do —

Greet respectfully: A gentle bow with hands folded in a prayer gesture (similar to the Indian 'Namaste') is a respectful greeting. The Dzongkha word 'Kuzu Zangpo La' means 'Hello' and is appreciated when spoken by visitors.

Be modest and humble: Bhutanese culture values modesty and humility. Politeness, patience, and a soft tone of voice go a long way.

Follow your guide's instructions: Licensed guides are not only knowledgeable about Bhutan's culture and history, but also help ensure that visitors behave respectfully in sensitive areas. Always listen to their advice, especially at religious or government sites.

Show interest in Bhutanese traditions: People appreciate travelers who ask questions and show genuine curiosity about their customs, festivals, and heritage.

Use both hands when offering gifts or money: If you are giving or receiving something, use both hands as a sign of respect.

Stand up when a lama, monk, or elder enters the room: Showing respect to religious figures and elders is an important part of Bhutanese etiquette.

Respect local schedules and pace: Life in Bhutan moves at a slower, more relaxed rhythm. Be patient with service times and enjoy the unhurried atmosphere - it's part of the charm!

Don't —

Touch people on the head: In Bhutanese culture, the head is considered sacred, so avoid touching it, especially for children.

Point your finger at people or sacred objects: Use your whole hand if you need to indicate something.

Raise your voice or display anger: Public arguments or aggressive behavior are considered very inappropriate.

Haggle for discounts: Bargaining is generally not practiced or exercised. Customers generally request and do not demand discounts.

Litter: Littering is strictly not allowed, and is punishable by a hefty fine. Dispose your waste in designated areas.

Enter homes or sacred places uninvited: Always ask for permission.

Feed animals: Refrain from feeding animals on highways, parks and in other places.

2. Dress Code and Temple Etiquette

Do —

Wear long sleeves and long pants or skirts when visiting Dzongs (fortresses), temples, monasteries, and other religious sites.

Remove hats, sunglasses, and shoes before entering temples and monasteries.

Dress conservatively in sacred places: Tank tops, shorts, and revealing clothing are not appropriate.

Don't —

Enter religious places in inappropriate attire: You may be denied entry to Dzongs or temples if you are not properly dressed.

Touch or climb on religious monuments like stupas (chortens): Walk clockwise around them instead.

3. Photography and Drone Usage

Do —

Ask for permission before photographing people, especially monks and children.

Capture the beauty of nature and landscapes while being discreet and respectful.

Check with your guide if photography is allowed at specific religious sites or ceremonies.

Don't —

Photograph inside temples and Dzongs. Photography is strictly prohibited inside most religious buildings.

Use drones without prior approval. Drones are tightly regulated in Bhutan. You need permission from the authorities to even carry it into the country.

4. Tipping Etiquette

Most of your tips listed below are included on this tour but you are always welcome to add to the pot if something is extraordinary.

Do —

Tip your tour guide and driver at the end of your trip as a gesture of appreciation for their service.

Tip hotel staff and porters if you feel the listed service has been exceptional.

Don't —

Feel obligated to tip in restaurants—though appreciated, it's not a common practice among locals. Service fees are generally included in the price.

5. Respect for Religion and Spiritual Practices including Festivals

Do —

Walk clockwise around religious objects like chortens and mani walls.

Spin prayer wheels in a clockwise direction.

Observe silence and reverence when visiting temples or attending religious festivals. Follow the lead of the locals..

Don't —

Climb onto or lean against religious structures.

Sit with your feet pointing toward a painting or image.

Touch religious statues or offerings.

6. Social Customs and Local Interactions

Do —

Accept invitations to homes or celebrations - it's a great honor and a chance to experience Bhutanese hospitality.

Bring small gifts like local food items or handicrafts from your home country if visiting someone's home.

If seated on the floor, it's advisable to sit cross-legged.

Don't —

Refuse food or drink outright - it's considered impolite. You may take a small bite or sip if you cannot consume it all.

Criticize or make fun of the Royal Family or Bhutanese traditions - the monarchy is deeply respected, and such comments are unwelcome.

Bhutan is more than just a destination - it's an experience steeped in spirituality, tradition, and harmony with nature. By observing these cultural etiquettes and demonstrating sensitivity toward local customs, travelers can ensure their visit is not only enjoyable but also respectful.

And remember: when in doubt, consult with your guide—they are your bridge to Bhutanese society and are always happy to help you navigate its customs.

Happy travels! Tashi Delek!