

Bhutan Travel Essentials: Visa, Costs & Entry

Requirements

Planning

10 min read

Bhutan's entry policy is unique, revolving around its "High Value, Low Impact" tourism philosophy. The process remains streamlined and digital, but it requires careful financial planning. Here is the essential guide to Bhutanese Visas and Entry Requirements.

Know Before You Apply

RequirementDetailVisa Cost\$40 USD (Non-refundable)SDF Cost12+ yrs: \$100/night | 6-11 yrs: \$50/night | 5 & under: FreeProcessing TimeUsually **5 working days**ValidityMaximum 90 days from the date of entryGuidesA licensed guide is mandatory

The Two-Step Visa Process

Unlike most countries, you cannot simply apply for a visa and pay later. Your visa is tied directly to your travel dates and the payment of a daily government fee.

- **Step 1: Pay the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF)**
International tourists must pay an SDF based on age: \$100/night for ages 12+, \$50/night for ages 6-11, and free for children 5 and under. This fee supports Bhutan's free healthcare, education, and environmental conservation.
- **Step 2: Complete the Visa Application**
Once your SDF and a one-time \$40 USD visa fee are paid, your visa is processed. You will receive a **Visa Clearance Letter** via email, which you must show at the airport to board your flight.

Required Documents

You will need the following documents ready.

1. Copy of Passport
2. Passport must have a minimum validity of six months from the intended date of departure from Bhutan.
3. Recent passport size photo.

Special Categories & Discounts

Bhutan offers specific concessions to keep travel accessible for families and regional neighbors.

- **Children aged 5 and under: SDF Exempt** (\$0)
- **Children aged 6 to 11: 50% Discount** (\$50 USD per night)
- **Indian Nationals:** Do not require a "visa" but must apply for a **Permit**. The SDF for Indian citizens is **Nu. 1,200** (approx. \$15 USD) per person, per night. A valid Passport or Voter ID is required.
- **Bangladesh & Maldives:** Citizens of these countries can process their visa/permit on arrival but are still required to pay the age-based SDF (\$100 for 12+, \$50 for 6-11, free for 5 and under).

Important Note for 2026

GST Update

Starting January 1, 2026, a **5% Goods and Services Tax (GST)** will be applied to tour components (hotels, transport, and guides). However, the **SDF remains tax-exempt**.

How to Apply

Byways Tours and Travels will handle the entire visa process on your behalf. You provide your documents, we will submit the application, collect payments, and send you the Visa Clearance Letter.

Arrival at Paro Airport

Here's what to expect when you land at Paro International Airport:

- **Documents Ready:** Have your passport and printed Visa Clearance Letter ready. Immigration officers will verify your details.
- **Visa Stamp:** Your visa will be stamped into your passport at the immigration counter. This typically takes 5-10 minutes.
- **Customs Declaration:** Fill out the arrival card on the plane. Declare any items over the duty-free allowance.
- **Meet Your Guide:** Your guide will be waiting outside arrivals with a signboard. They'll assist with luggage and transport.
- **SIM Cards:** TashiCell and B-Mobile counters are available in the arrivals hall for purchasing local SIM cards.

Cancellation & Refunds

Understanding the refund policy before booking:

- **Visa Fee (\$40):** Non-refundable under any circumstances.

- **SDF Refund:** The Sustainable Development Fee is refundable if you cancel before arrival, minus bank charges. Contact the Department of Immigration or your tour operator.
- **Shortening Your Trip:** If you leave Bhutan earlier than planned, unused SDF nights is refundable. Bank charges will be deducted from the total refundable amount. Notify your operator immediately.
- **Tour Operator Fees:** Cancellation policies for hotels, transport, and guide services vary by operator. Review their terms before booking.
- **Travel Insurance:** Strongly recommended to cover unexpected cancellations, medical emergencies, and trip interruptions.

Entry by Land

Bhutan can also be entered overland from India at designated entry points:

- **Phuentsholing:** The most popular land crossing, bordering the Indian town of Jaigaon in West Bengal. It's a 4-5 hour drive from Bagdogra Airport (IXB) or a 6-hour drive from Siliguri.
- **Gelephu:** Located in south-central Bhutan, accessible from Assam, India.
- **Samdrup Jongkhar:** Eastern entry point bordering Assam, convenient for those exploring eastern Bhutan.
- **Visa Requirements:** The same visa and SDF requirements apply for land entry. Your Visa Clearance Letter must be obtained before arrival at the border.
- **Indian Nationals:** Can obtain permits at the border immigration office with valid ID (Passport or Voter ID).

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need a visa to visit Bhutan?

Yes, all international visitors (except Indian, Bangladeshi, and Maldivian citizens) need a visa. The visa is processed through your licensed tour operator like Byways Tours and Travels.

What is the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF)?

The SDF funds free healthcare, education, and environmental conservation in Bhutan. Rates: Adults 12+ pay \$100/night, children 6-11 pay \$50/night, and children 5 and under are exempt (free).

Do Indian nationals need a visa?

Indian nationals do not require a visa but must apply for a Permit. The SDF for Indian citizens is Nu. 1,200 (approx. \$15 USD) per person per night. A valid Passport or Voter ID is required.

How far in advance should I apply?

Apply at least 2 weeks before travel as processing takes about 5 working days. For festival periods, book 4-6 months in advance.

Can I apply for the visa myself or do I need a tour operator?

Both options are available. You can apply directly through the Department of Immigration portal (immi.gov.bt) or have a licensed tour operator handle the process for you. Direct application is ideal if you only plan to visit Thimphu and Paro.

What payment methods are accepted for the visa and SDF?

Visa, Mastercard, and American Express are accepted on the official portal. Tour operators may also accept bank transfers. All fees are charged in USD.

Is the SDF refundable if I cancel my trip?

Yes, the SDF is refundable if you cancel before arrival, minus bank charges. The \$40 visa fee is non-refundable. Contact the Department of Immigration or your tour operator for refund requests.

Can I enter Bhutan by land from India?

Yes, Bhutan has three land entry points from India: Phuentsholing (most popular), Gelephu, and Samdrup Jongkhar. The same visa and SDF requirements apply. Indian nationals can obtain permits at the border.

What happens when I arrive at Paro Airport?

Have your passport and Visa Clearance Letter ready. Immigration will stamp your visa (5-10 minutes). Your guide will meet you outside arrivals. SIM card counters are available in the arrivals hall.

Need More Information?

Contact our Bhutan travel experts for personalized advice.

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