Dos and Don'ts in Bhutan: Driglam Namzha & Etiquette Guide

Culture 7 min read

> Bhutan is a deeply spiritual country where Buddhist tradition and an official code of etiquette — Driglam Namzha — shape daily life. None of it is difficult, and Bhutanese are extraordinarily forgiving hosts, but travellers who know a handful of do's and don'ts are received differently: doors open, conversations deepen, and the kingdom feels less like a destination and more like a place you've been welcomed into. Here is everything that actually matters, from dzong etiquette to dinner-table customs.

What Is Driglam Namzha?

Driglam Namzha is Bhutan's official code of etiquette and conduct — a living system that governs how Bhutanese dress, speak, eat, and behave in formal settings, from the wearing of the gho and kira to how one enters a dzong or receives a gift. Its roots go back to **Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal**, the 17th-century unifier of Bhutan, who set out rules of conduct for monastic and civil life; in 1989 it was formally adopted as national policy, which is why you'll see Bhutanese in national dress at schools, government offices, and dzongs.

For visitors, Driglam Namzha is not a set of rules you must master — Bhutanese are famously forgiving hosts — but understanding its spirit transforms how the country receives you. The do's and don'ts below distil what matters most in practice. For the deeper cultural context, see our guide to Bhutanese culture and traditions.

Good to know

- Searching for a Driglam Namzha book? Much of the tradition is oral and taught in schools; this guide plus our culture guide cover the essentials travellers actually need.

The Do's

- **Do greet with "Kuzuzangpo la"** — the "la" is an honorific that makes any sentence polite.
- **Do give and receive with both hands** (or the right hand supported by the left at the elbow) — money, gifts, cups of tea, everything.
- **Do walk clockwise** around chortens, temples, prayer wheels, and mani walls — always keep sacred objects on your right.
- **Do remove shoes and hats** before entering any temple or the shrine rooms of a dzong.
- **Do dress modestly** — shoulders and knees covered at religious sites (details in the dress-code section below).
- **Do accept refreshments graciously** — it's customary to politely decline once or twice before accepting; your host expects the dance.

- **Do ask before photographing people** — most Bhutanese are happy to be photographed if asked first.
- **Do use your guide** — questions about religion, the monarchy, or customs are welcomed when asked with genuine curiosity.

The Don'ts

- **Don't photograph inside temples and shrine rooms** — courtyards are fine; interiors are not, unless your guide confirms otherwise.
- **Don't point at people or sacred objects** with a finger — gesture with an open palm, and never point your feet at an altar, monk, or another person.
- **Don't touch anyone on the head**, including children — the head is considered sacred.
- **Don't climb on chortens, mani walls, or prayer flags**, and never step over religious objects or books.
- **Don't smoke in public places** — tobacco rules have relaxed since 2021, but smoking near temples, dzongs, and offices remains prohibited and frowned upon everywhere.
- **Don't buy antiques or religious artifacts** — exporting them is illegal; buy newly made handicrafts instead (our shopping guide shows where).
- **Don't swim in sacred lakes** — many high-altitude lakes are home to protective deities.
- **Don't haggle aggressively** — gentle negotiation is fine at markets; hard bargaining is not part of the culture.

Temple & Dzong Etiquette

Dzongs are working monasteries and government offices, not museums — you are a guest in an active sacred space:

- Remove shoes and hats before shrine rooms; leave umbrellas and large bags at the entrance.
- Speak in low tones; put phones on silent.
- Walk clockwise through courtyards and around any shrine.
- A small offering on the altar or in the donation box is appreciated but never required; if you make one, a monk may pour holy water (drubchhu) into your palm — sip and smooth the rest over your head.
- Sit with legs crossed or feet tucked away — never with soles pointing at the altar.
- Follow your guide's lead on which rooms may be entered; some are restricted during ceremonies.

Dress Code for Visitors

Driglam Namzha prescribes the gho (men) and kira (women) for Bhutanese in formal settings. Visitors are not expected to wear national dress — modest, tidy clothing is what's asked:

- **Temples and dzongs:** long trousers or a long skirt, sleeves past the elbow, no hats. A scarf over the shoulders works for warm days.

- **Around towns:** smart-casual is ideal. Shorts and sleeveless tops draw stares outside tourist spots.
- **Festivals:** tshechus are religious occasions and locals arrive in their finest — dress as you would for the dzong, and enjoy standing out less.
- **Trying a gho or kira:** welcomed, not appropriative — hotels and guides love arranging it, especially for festival days.

Photography Guidelines

- **Always allowed:** landscapes, architecture from outside, dzong courtyards (confirm with your guide), festivals from public areas.
- **Ask first:** portraits of people, monks, and market vendors — a smile and a gesture with the camera is usually enough.
- **Never:** temple and shrine interiors, ceremonies where your guide indicates restraint, and military or royal-family sites.
- **Drones require a permit** arranged well in advance — flying near dzongs or airports without one is a serious offence.

Social & Dining Customs

- Add **"la"** to names and sentences for politeness ("thank you, la").
- Handshakes are common now, but a slight bow with palms together is always graceful.
- At meals, wait for the eldest or the host to begin; a little food left on the plate signals you've had enough.
- Eating with the right hand is traditional in villages and farmstays — cutlery is everywhere in hotels.
- Ara (rice spirit) toasts are part of farmhouse hospitality — the decline-twice-then-accept custom applies here too.
- Public displays of affection are uncommon; a hand-hold passes, more than that embarrasses your hosts.
- Punctuality matters less than patience — "Bhutan Stretchable Time" is a national joke; smile and let the day unfold.

Need More Information?

Contact our Bhutan travel experts for personalized advice.

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