Into the East: Exploring Bhutan's Untouched Valleys in 2026

Destinations 12 min read

> While Western Bhutan is famous for its iconic landmarks, 2026 is the year of the Eastern Frontier. With the recent operational expansion of **Gelephu International Airport** and regular domestic hops into **Yonphula (Trashigang)**, the "Wild East" is no longer just for the intrepid. This is a guide to the valleys where time has stood still, and the heart of Bhutanese tradition beats loudest.

Lhuentse: The Ancestral Cradle

Lhuentse is the ancestral home of the Royal Family and arguably the most spiritually significant valley in the East.

- **Khoma Village:** Known as the "Textile Capital," this is where the world-renowned Kishuthara (intricate silk brocade) is woven. In 2026, you can join local weavers in their homes to learn the delicate art of the loom.
- **The Takila Guru:** Visit the world's largest statue of Guru Padmasambhava (173 feet tall) perched on a ridge overlooking the valley. It is a masterpiece of modern Bhutanese devotion.
- **Lhuentse Dzong:** One of the most dramatically situated fortresses in the country, clinging to a rocky outcrop over the Kuri Chhu river.

What should I buy in eastern Bhutan?
Kishuthara silk textiles from Lhuentse (finest in Bhutan), raw silk from Radhi village, wooden bowls (dapa) from Trashiyangtse, and cane/bamboo crafts. Prices are often better than Thimphu, and you're buying directly from artisans.

Trashiyangtse: The Valley of the Arts

Trashiyangtse is a haven for nature lovers and traditional craftsmen.

- **Chorten Kora:** This massive white stupa is modeled after Nepal's Boudhanath. Visit during the Chorten Kora Festival to see thousands of pilgrims from Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (India) circumambulating the shrine.
- **Zorig Chusum:** Explore the Institute for 13 Traditional Arts and Crafts, where students specialize in Dapa (wooden bowl carving), a craft synonymous with this district.
- **Black-Necked Cranes:** While Phobjikha is famous, the Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary in Trashiyangtse is the quietest place to see these sacred birds during the winter months.

Sakteng & Merak: The Highlands of the Brokpas

For a truly "untouched" experience, head to the high-altitude moorlands inhabited by the Brokpa people, semi-nomadic yak herders with a unique language and distinct dress.

- **The Yeti Myth:** The Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary was specifically created to protect the habitat of the Migoi—Bhutan's version of the Yeti.
- **Cultural Immersion:** Staying in a Brokpa homestay offers a rare look at a lifestyle that revolves entirely around yaks, high passes, and ancient shamanic rituals.

Who are the Brokpa people?
Semi-nomadic yak herders living in Merak and Sakteng villages above 3,500m. They wear distinctive black felt clothing and yak-hair hats. Visiting requires a special trek permit and 3-4 days of trekking.

Trashigang: The Jewel of the East

Trashigang serves as the "urban" hub of the East, but it remains wonderfully rugged compared to Thimphu.

- **Trashigang Dzong:** Once the defensive bastion against Tibetan invasions, this fortress overlooks the Gamri Chhu river. It is the center of the Trashigang Tshechu, a vibrant festival of masked dances.
- **Radhi Village:** Often called the "Rice Bowl of the East," Radhi is famous for its lush terraced fields and high-quality raw silk (Bura) weaving.

Getting There: The 2026 Logistics

Exploring the East used to require a grueling three-day drive from the capital. In 2026, you have much faster options.

- **The Fly-In:** Take a domestic flight from Paro to Yonphula (Trashigang). It's a 40-minute scenic flight that saves you 48 hours of driving.
- **The Southern Entry:** Fly into **Gelephu International Airport** from Kolkata, India. From Gelephu, you can drive through the scenic southern foothills to Trashigang in about 7–8 hours.
- **The Lateral Road:** If you have time, the drive from Bumthang to Mongar over the Thrumshing La Pass (3,800m) remains one of the most spectacular mountain journeys in the world.

How do I get to eastern Bhutan?
By road from Bumthang (6-7 hours to Trashigang) or domestic flight from Paro to Yonphula/Trashigang (seasonal, weather-dependent). Most visitors drive, combining sightseeing with the journey. A cross-country trip takes 14-21 days.

Why 2026?

As Bhutan moves toward a more digital and modern future (exemplified by the Gelephu Mindfulness City), the Eastern valleys offer a necessary counterbalance. It is here that the "High Value, Low Impact" philosophy feels most authentic—where you aren't just a tourist, but a truly welcomed guest in a landscape that remains pure and wild. Is eastern Bhutan worth the long journey?
For adventurous travelers seeking authenticity, absolutely. The east offers pristine landscapes, genuine cultural encounters, world-class weaving, and virtually no tourists. It's not for those wanting comfort and efficiency.

What makes eastern Bhutan different?

Distinct ethnic groups (Sharchop, Brokpa), different languages, warmer climate, raw silk weaving traditions, remote monasteries, and authentic village life unchanged for centuries. It feels like a different country within Bhutan.

Frequently Asked Questions

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What's the accommodation like in the east?

> Basic but improving. Expect simple guesthouses and homestays rather than luxury hotels. Hot water may be limited. This is part of the adventure - you're trading comfort for authenticity and genuine hospitality.

Need More Information?

Contact our Bhutan travel experts for personalized advice.

bywaysinquiry@gmail.com | +975 77973131 | www.byways.bt