



The Happiness Journey to Bhutan – Pre-trip Planning Meeting

March 23, 2026

Attendees

Jayson Antonoff
Patricia Chase
Paul Manheim
Vivienne Manheim
Kristie Maxim
Jim Duncan
Ellen Ferguson
Debi Frausto
Bob Giles (remote)
Maria Mackey (remote)
Tshering (remote)

Overview

This meeting was a detailed planning session for an upcoming Happiness Journey trip to Bhutan, where participants discussed the itinerary, logistics, and practical considerations with Patricia, Jayson and Tshering (the lead guide).

The meeting began with introductions and an overview of the upcoming trip. Participants shared their backgrounds and experiences with the group. The group discussed the trip itinerary, with Patricia and Jayson noting that while the plan was solid, there was still some flexibility for adjustments based on participant feedback and research. They mentioned the possibility of adding optional hiking opportunities and incorporating suggestions from participants who had done their own research on the route or destinations.

Bhutan Trip Logistics Planning

The team discussed logistics for the trip. Tshering explained that the trip would be supported by a crew of four, including himself, senior tour guide Rinzi, bus driver Haber,

and van driver Kinga. On May 4th, there will be an optional biking program in Bumthang Valley with an additional crew of three, bringing the total number of support staff to 6-7. Patricia described their travel arrangements, including staying at the Hyatt hotel near the airport the night before their 6 am flight, with breakfast provided for the early departure. Tshering noted that fewer than 20 pilots worldwide are qualified to fly into Bhutan's airport, highlighting the challenging nature of the flight.

Bhutan Travel Logistics Discussion

Tshering provided information about luggage allowances for flights to Bhutan, explaining that carry-on allows 7 kilos and checked baggage allows 30 kilograms. He confirmed that trekking poles are not an issue for flights to Paro, though international airlines may have different regulations. Tshering offered to arrange hiking poles locally for the group's use during their trip, and Jayson reassured the group that the Tiger's Nest hike is manageable even for slower hikers, with others willing to accommodate different paces.

Bhutan Elevation and Travel Planning

The group discussed elevation details for an upcoming trip to Bhutan, with Tshering confirming elevations ranging from 7,300 to 10,000 feet. Jayson explained that the itinerary is designed to ensure proper acclimatization before rapid ascents, and they reviewed the planned route through Bhutan's high valleys, including the cultural heartland area where Tshering is from. The discussion highlighted Bhutan's restrictive tourism policies, including limits on backpackers and a fee system that supports sustainability projects, resulting in a different travel experience compared to other countries in the region.

Bhutan Trip Payment Planning

The group discussed payment methods and currency for their upcoming trip to Bhutan. Tshering advised bringing US dollars in cash, as not all establishments accept credit cards, especially in rural areas, and recommended approximately \$100 US for local expenses. It's also useful to have about \$100 in the local currency for small items like temple offerings, bar tabs, etc. There are two banks at the airport in Paro where we can exchange money. Tshering noted that while most art galleries in Paro accept credit cards, the guides will also carry local currency and can cover the cost of things like art purchases in rural areas. You will simply settle with them at the end of the trip. The discussion also touched on the planned itinerary, which includes optional yoga, cultural learning about Bhutan's Happiness Index, and visits to local craft centers, with activities taking place both in the bus and on foot.

Bhutan Education and Elevation Discussion

Tshering explained that modern education in Bhutan, including sciences, geography, history, and English, has only been in place for about 50 years, building on a previous monastic education system. He noted that education and healthcare are now provided free by the government, with English being the medium of instruction in schools alongside the national language. Jayson and Tshering then discussed the elevation variations during our planned activities. We will experience significant elevation changes between valleys and passes, with the highest passes being just over 12,000 feet. Tshering clarified that we will be passing only briefly through those higher altitudes, so you should generally not feel any adverse impacts. If you do decide to bring altitude sickness pills (Diamox) you can start taking them when you arrive in Paro, which will be 2 to 3 days before we begin to approach the higher areas. Interestingly, the highest elevations often won't seem that high visually due to the presence of much taller surrounding peaks.

Bhutan Trip Itinerary Planning

The group then discussed aspects of the itinerary planned by Patricia and Tshering. They explored the history of a 15th-century saint known as the Divine Madman and discussed plans to visit a black crane sanctuary in the beautiful Phobjikha valley. Tshering confirmed that the group would have the opportunity for a home-cooked meal and possibly meet his family in Bumthang. The itinerary includes options for hiking or visiting villages, with flexibility built in to accommodate any interesting opportunities that arise, such as a village festival. In general, we will not be doing long distance hiking or trekking – we will, however, be doing lots of shorter walks to visit temples, villages and other sites.

Tiger's Nest Hike Planning

The trip will conclude with a hike to Tiger's Nest, described as steep in portions, but safe and well-traveled. Tshering explained that it takes 6-7 hours round trip with 3-4 hours of moving time, and described it as a pilgrimage trail with good support from local guides. He noted that the weather in late April/early May will be pleasant with daytime temperatures around 75°F, though mountain weather can be unpredictable, and recommended layered clothing for the trip.

Bhutan Trip Logistics Planning

Jayson discussed logistics, focusing on entry requirements and travel arrangements. He clarified that participants need to complete an online entry pass for Thailand 3 days before travel, which must be done in both directions – both for arrival and departure. The group will meet in Bangkok before traveling to Paro, with an early morning departure of 6am to avoid afternoon turbulence that can build up in the mountains. Participants can book any

hotel in Bangkok if they arrive early, but everyone will stay at the Hyatt Regency at the airport the night before our departure., with the option to coordinate through a WhatsApp group.

Bhutan Trip Logistics Planning

Tshering addressed concerns about luggage space, confirming that as far as buses are concerned, participants can bring as much as they can carry. He also explained that the main road is well-maintained. He advised on travel insurance, particularly for those over 70, and recommended taking altitude medication starting three days before arrival.

Tshering confirmed that he has received, and will accommodate, everyone's special dietary needs, and clarified that food would be slightly toned down in spiciness for non-Bhutanese guests. He also confirmed that bottled water would be provided, with tap water being safe for washing but not drinking. In most places the tap water is sterilized but is highly chlorinated, which can cause stomach distress for those not accustomed to it. The discussion covered dress code requirements for temples, which involve covering arms and ankles but not heads, and confirmed that insect repellent and ice would be available at accommodations. The group also discussed bringing school supplies as donations, as they would be appreciated in rural areas. Tshering assured participants that Wi-Fi would be available at accommodations though not always reliable. You should ideally view this as an opportunity to largely unplug from external distractions.