

# 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

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