What to Buy in Bhutan: 15 Souvenirs, Their Prices and Where to Find Them

Shopping 12 min read

> Bhutan is not a shopping destination in the way Bangkok or Delhi are, and guests who arrive expecting bargains and bazaars tend to leave with less than they hoped. Guests who know what the country makes well leave with a hand-woven textile, a bowl turned from a burl in Trashiyangtse, a packet of dry incense, or a kira they will wear once a year for the rest of their lives. This guide lists the things worth buying, what they cost in ngultrum and dollars, which shops and towns sell the real thing, how to tell handmade from imported, and what you cannot take out of the country. Prices are typical ranges from Thimphu and Paro shops, not quotes.

Is Bhutan a Good Place to Shop?

Bhutan makes a small number of things extremely well and imports almost everything else. The thirteen traditional arts and crafts, the Zorig Chusum, are still taught at state institutes: weaving, painting, wood carving, sculpture, paper-making, bamboo and cane work, blacksmithing, silversmithing, embroidery, masonry, casting, woodturning and carpentry. Everything worth carrying home comes from one of those thirteen.

The Authentic Bhutanese Crafts Bazaar on Norzin Lam, Thimphu: eighty stalls run by the makers.
What this means in practice: the best buys are textiles, wooden bowls and masks, bamboo baskets, handmade paper, incense, silver, and food from the valleys. Fridge magnets, printed T-shirts, singing bowls and most "Tibetan" jewellery on the tourist stalls are made in Nepal, India or China, and a shopkeeper will tell you so if you ask. Prices in proper shops are fixed and fair; the handmade pieces are not cheap because they take weeks, and they do not need to be haggled down.

Thimphu has nearly all the shopping. Paro has a smaller version of the same. Elsewhere you buy at the source: yathra wool in Bumthang, silk in the east, phallus carvings in the village below Chimi Lhakhang.

Good to know

- Your guide knows which shops are family-run and which are stocked with imports. Ask before you buy anything over a few hundred ngultrum.
- Shops open about 9 am and close by 8 pm, and Thimphu's craft bazaar runs daily.

What to Buy in Bhutan: 15 Things Worth the Luggage Space

Listed roughly in the order guests end up buying them, with prices at about Nu 95 to the US dollar. The ngultrum follows the Indian rupee one to one.

1. Hand-woven textiles

The national art. A rachu (the ceremonial scarf women wear over one shoulder) or a table runner is the practical buy: Nu 1,500 to 8,000 (US$15 to 85) for a hand-woven piece, from Nu 500 machine-woven. A full hand-woven kira runs from about Nu 15,000 (US$160) to several hundred thousand for silk-on-silk kishuthara from Khoma village in Lhuentse, which can take a year on the loom. Buy at the Gagyel Lhundrup Weaving Centre or the Royal Textile Academy shop in Thimphu, or in the east at source. Hand-woven cloth has slight irregularities; a perfectly even repeat is from a mill.

Kishuthara silk from Khoma: the pattern threads are laid in by hand, row by row.2. Yathra wool from Bumthang

Thick, hand-woven wool in red, orange and black geometrics, made on back-strap looms in the Chumey valley. A bag or cushion cover is Nu 2,000 to 6,000 (US$20 to 65); a jacket or blanket Nu 8,000 to 20,000. The roadside weaving sheds at Zugney in Bumthang are the source; Thimphu shops carry a selection at a mark-up.

Yathra from the Chumey valley, woven from sheep and yak wool.3. Thangka paintings

Scroll paintings of Buddhas, mandalas and protector deities, brocade-mounted. Printed thangkas are Nu 1,000 to 3,000 (US$11 to 30); hand-painted ones start around Nu 8,000 and run past Nu 100,000 (US$1,050) for fine mineral-pigment work with gold. Ask what pigments were used and whether the painter trained at the National Institute for Zorig Chusum. New thangkas export freely; the shop gives a receipt that says so.

Thangkas being mounted in brocade at Rangjung in Trashigang.4. Wooden masks

Carved and painted masks of the deities and animals from the tshechu dances. Small ones from Nu 1,500 (US$15), large dance-size masks Nu 8,000 to 15,000. Carved in Thimphu and in Trashiyangtse; the craft bazaar and the Handicrafts Emporium carry a wall of them.

Carved masks for sale: the small ones pack, the dance-size ones need a box.5. Dapa and dza wooden bowls

Lidded bowls turned from burl wood and lacquered, from Trashiyangtse in the east. Bhutanese carry their lunch in them. A small bowl is Nu 1,500 to 4,000 (US$15 to 40); a large burl set Nu 10,000 and up. The grain of real burl is wild and never repeats.

Dapa bowls turned from burl wood and lacquered, the Trashiyangtse speciality.6. Bamboo and cane: bangchung baskets

The round, two-piece lunch baskets woven so tightly they hold water, from Kheng in Zhemgang. Nu 500 to 2,500 (US$5 to 25) depending on size and pattern. Light, nested, and the easiest gift to pack. Laya bamboo hats and cane quivers are the same craft.

Bamboo and cane baskets: light, nested, and the easiest gift to pack.7. Handmade paper (deh-sho)

Made from daphne bark at the Jungshi factory in Thimphu, where you can watch the sheets being pulled. Notebooks, cards and lampshades Nu 300 to 1,500 (US$3 to 15). Insect-resistant and used for Buddhist texts for centuries.

Deh-sho paper products at the Jungshi factory shop in Thimphu.8. Prayer flags and prayer wheels

A set of five-colour lungta flags is Nu 200 to 800 (US$2 to 8); a hand-held wheel Nu 800 to 5,000 depending on the metalwork. Buy the flags from any shop along Norzin Lam. Strung at home they are a blessing, not decoration, so hang them high and let them fade.

Prayer flags are a blessing, not decoration: hang them high and let them fade.9. Dry incense

Bhutanese incense is stickless, rolled from juniper, sandalwood and high-altitude herbs, and pressed in Thimphu. Nu 150 to 600 (US$2 to 6) a packet; the Nado Poizokhang brand is the standard. Airlines allow it in checked bags; it scents the suitcase for a month.

Stickless Bhutanese incense drying at a Thimphu workshop.10. Silver jewellery and the koma

Bhutanese silversmiths work filigree and set turquoise and coral. The koma, the pair of brooches that fasten a kira at the shoulders, joined by a chain, is the characteristic piece: Nu 3,000 to 30,000 (US$30 to 320) in silver, far more in gold. Chain bracelets and rings from Nu 1,500. Dzi beads sold as ancient are modern; buy them for the look, not the provenance.

Jewellery at the Thimphu craft bazaar: ask what is silver and what is set with real stone.11. Tea, honey and red rice

Food is the lightest way to take the valleys home. Tsheringma herbal tea and Bhutan Tea Company leaf Nu 150 to 500 a box; wild honey from Bumthang or the south Nu 300 to 800 (US$3 to 8) a jar; Paro red rice about Nu 150 a kilo; Bumthang buckwheat flour; ezay chilli paste in jars Nu 150 to 400; dried chugo cheese on a string Nu 200 to 500. The OGOP shops (One Gewog One Product, a royal initiative selling village produce) sell all of these with the origin on the label.

Tea leaves drying: tea, honey and red rice are the lightest gifts to carry.12. Cordyceps

The caterpillar fungus collected above 4,000 m in June, sold by the gram at several hundred ngultrum each and legal to export when bought from a licensed dealer. Buy only from a licensed shop with a receipt, and check your home country allows it in.

13. K5 whisky, ara and Red Panda beer

K5 is the Bhutanese blended whisky named for the fifth King, about Nu 1,000 to 1,500 (US$11 to 15) a bottle at the Paro airport duty free; Red Panda is the unfiltered wheat beer from Bumthang; ara is the home-distilled rice spirit, bottled in a few Thimphu shops. Your home duty-free allowance applies.

14. Personalised postage stamps

At the Bhutan Postal Museum in Thimphu your photograph becomes a sheet of legal stamps in about ten minutes, around Nu 500 (US$5) for twelve. Bhutan's stamps, including the 3D and CD-ROM issues, are also collected in their own right and the museum shop sells the sets.

15. Phallus carvings

The painted wooden phalluses hung at doorways against the evil eye, in the tradition of the Divine Madman whose temple, Chimi Lhakhang, stands above Sopsokha village in Punakha. The village stalls sell them from Nu 300 to 3,000 (US$3 to 30). They raise more conversation at home than any other souvenir.

The painted phallus of the Divine Madman tradition, on a house wall near Chimi Lhakhang.

Good to know

- Textiles, bowls and incense pack flat or light. Masks, thangkas in their brocade and large baskets do not; buy them last and carry them on.
- For a gift under US$10 that is unmistakably Bhutanese: a packet of incense, a set of prayer flags, a bangchung, or a sheet of stamps with your own face on it.

- Junction Bookstore and DSB Books in Thimphu stock Bhutanese writing not sold abroad: Kunzang Choden's novels, folk tales for children, and the photographic books on textiles and dzongs, Nu 500 to 4,000.

Buying a Kira or a Gho

The gho is the men's knee-length robe, belted with a woven kera and worn with knee socks; the kira is the women's ankle-length wrap, fastened at the shoulders with the koma and worn with a wonju blouse and tego jacket. Both are everyday dress for Bhutanese, required in dzongs and offices, and visitors are welcome to wear them, especially at a tshechu, where your guide will be pleased to help you dress.

The gho, belted at the waist with the white cuffs folded back.The kira with a tego jacket and a koma at each shoulder.

A ready-made machine-woven gho or kira set costs Nu 3,000 to 8,000 (US$30 to 85) in the shops on Norzin Lam and takes a tailor on the same street two to three days to fit; order on your first day in Thimphu and collect before you leave. Hand-woven ghos and kiras are another world: Nu 15,000 to 50,000 for cotton with supplementary weft patterns, and from Nu 50,000 into the hundreds of thousands for silk kishuthara, which is bought as a wedding piece or an heirloom rather than a souvenir.

If you want to see the weaving before you buy, the Gagyel Lhundrup centre in Changzamtok has weavers at their looms, and the Royal Textile Academy museum next to its shop explains the regional patterns. The culture guide covers how the dress is worn and the etiquette guide what to wear where.

Good to know

- A half kira, worn with a blouse and jacket, is easier for first-timers and cheaper than the full wrap.
- The kera belt and the kabney or rachu scarf are sold separately. Ask the shop to show you the full set so nothing is missing at the festival.

Where to Shop in Thimphu

Almost everything on this page is for sale within a ten-minute walk of the clock tower. Start with the fixed-price places to learn what things should cost, then the bazaar and the market.

A family stall at the craft bazaar; the stallholders tell you what is made where if you ask.

- **Authentic Bhutanese Crafts Bazaar**, Norzin Lam. About eighty bamboo-hut stalls in a row below the main street, run by the craftspeople and their families, open daily. The widest choice of masks, baskets, textiles and wooden bowls in one place, with light bargaining expected.
- **National Handicrafts Emporium**, Norzin Lam. Government-run, fixed prices, a good benchmark for textiles and thangkas before you buy elsewhere.
- **Centenary Farmers' Market** (Kaja Throm), by the river. Produce downstairs, and across the footbridge a handicraft section for prayer flags, incense, dried cheese, chilli and brass. The best place for food gifts.
- **Gagyel Lhundrup Weaving Centre**, Changzamtok. Weavers at work and a showroom of what they make; prices are fair for the hours in each piece.

- **Royal Textile Academy**, Chubachu. The museum of Bhutanese weaving, with a shop that sells museum-grade pieces and good scarves.
- **Jungshi Handmade Paper Factory**, below the town. Watch the sheets being made, then buy from the shop at the door.
- **OGOP outlets**. One Gewog One Product shops on Norzin Lam and at Paro airport departures, selling honey, tea, rice, oils and crafts labelled by the village that made them.
- **Simply Bhutan**, the living museum, has a small shop; **Junction Bookstore** and **DSB Books** are the bookshops; the **Bhutan Postal Museum** does the personalised stamps.

Good to know

- Thimphu is where to buy, not Paro: the choice is wider and the prices lower. Plan your shopping afternoon in Thimphu even if you fly out of Paro.
- Most shops here take Visa and Mastercard; the bazaar and the market are cash. ATMs along Norzin Lam dispense ngultrum. See the money guide.

Where to Shop in Paro, Punakha, Bumthang and the East

Paro

The one main street has a dozen handicraft shops with roughly Thimphu's stock at slightly higher prices; Chencho Handicrafts is the one guests mention most for textiles. The stalls at the Tiger's Nest trailhead sell imported trinkets and are fine for a Nu 100 fridge magnet, not for anything else. Paro airport departures has the OGOP shop and duty free, where K5 and the local beers are cheapest.

A handicraft shop: hand-woven pieces are folded on the counter, machine-woven ones hang behind.Punakha Sopsokha, the village below Chimi Lhakhang, is the place for phallus carvings and paintings. Bajo town in Wangdue has a weekend market with cane work and dried produce.

Bumthang

The yathra weaving sheds line the road at Zugney in the Chumey valley on the way into Jakar; buy there rather than in Thimphu. In Jakar, the Swiss farm sells Red Panda beer, cheese and apple products, and the small shops stock buckwheat and honey.

The east

Khoma village in Lhuentse is where kishuthara silk is woven and where a kira that costs Nu 300,000 in Thimphu costs less from the weaver. Radhi, in Trashigang, weaves bura raw silk; Khaling has the National Handloom Development Centre; Trashiyangtse is the home of the dapa bowls and of the Zorig Chusum institute. These are week-two destinations on an eastern itinerary, and the shopping is the reason some guests go.

Weavers at their back-strap looms in Khoma, where kishuthara is bought from the loom.

Good to know

- At source, the weaver sets the price and it is the price. Bargaining there is not the custom.

How to Tell Handmade from Imported

- **Textiles.** Turn the cloth over. Hand-woven supplementary-weft work shows the pattern threads floating on the back; a printed or mill-woven copy does not. Small irregularities in the repeat are the signature of a loom, not a fault.
- **Thangkas.** Mineral pigments sit matte on the cotton; printed thangkas have a uniform sheen and perfect symmetry. Ask the shop who painted it.
- **Wooden bowls.** Real burl grain is chaotic and the lacquer slightly uneven. Two identical bowls are machine-turned.
- **Jewellery.** Most turquoise and coral on tourist stalls is dyed howlite or resin. Buy silver by weight from a silversmith's shop, not a stall, and treat "ancient" dzi beads as new.
- **Singing bowls, Buddha statues, yak-wool shawls.** Nearly all imported from Nepal and India. There is nothing wrong with them, but they are not Bhutanese.
- **Labels.** OGOP, the Handicrafts Emporium and the weaving centres label origin. In the bazaar, ask; the stallholders are honest when asked directly.

Natural plant dyes at Radhi, Trashigang: the colours are slightly uneven, which is how you know.

> **Good to know**
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> - For anything over about Nu 10,000, ask for a receipt that names the item, the maker or shop, and the price. It is your export paperwork and your insurance claim.

Prices, Bargaining and Paying

Boutiques, the Emporium, the weaving centres and OGOP are fixed price. In the craft bazaar and the markets a polite request for a better price is normal and usually brings 10 to 15 percent off; more than that is not expected and the hard haggling of other Asian markets reads as rude here. Craftspeople price by the hours in the piece, and the hours are real.

Fixed-price shops and the weaving centres set fair prices for the hours in each piece.
Pay in ngultrum. Indian rupees are accepted at par in most shops (the Nu 500 and 2,000 rupee notes were once refused; small notes are easier). US dollars are taken in the bigger shops at a poor rate. Visa and Mastercard work in most Thimphu and Paro shops and in hotels, with a surcharge of 2 to 3 percent in some; the bazaar, markets and villages are cash only. ATMs in Thimphu, Paro and Punakha take foreign cards. A reasonable souvenir budget for a week is Nu 5,000 to 15,000 (US$55 to 160) a person before any textile or thangka, which is where the money goes if you want it to.

> **Good to know**
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> - Change rupees or dollars at the bank or your hotel rather than carrying large ngultrum notes home: the currency is not convertible abroad.

What You Cannot Take Out of Bhutan

Antiques are the rule to know. Anything more than a hundred years old, and any religious object of heritage value, cannot be exported, and airport customs may ask to see your paperwork for anything that looks old. New religious items such as thangkas, statues, prayer wheels and masks export freely; the shop's receipt or a note saying it is newly made is enough, and the Department of Culture will certify a piece for a small fee if a shop suggests it. Reputable shops do not sell antiques to visitors.

Religious objects of heritage value stay in Bhutan. Newly made statues and thangkas export freely with a receipt.

Also controlled: wildlife products of any kind, and plants and seeds. Cordyceps is legal with a receipt from a licensed dealer. Tobacco is heavily taxed on the way in rather than out. Your own country sets the other limits: Australia and New Zealand restrict honey, seeds, untreated wood and bamboo, so declare them; the United States, the United Kingdom and the EU allow the foods on this page in personal quantities; everyone limits spirits to a litre or two duty-free.

Good to know

- Keep receipts for anything you would be sad to lose at the airport. It is the question customs ask, and the answer that ends it.

Getting It Home: Packing, Shipping and a Last-Day Plan

Most purchases fit in a suitcase. Textiles fold flat; roll a thangka in its brocade around a cardboard tube and carry it on; masks travel in a box, wrapped in the textile you bought; wooden bowls and baskets go in checked luggage inside clothes. Honey and ezay jars go in a sealed bag. The Paro flights allow 20 to 30 kg checked depending on class, so weigh the suitcase before the farmhouse buys of rice and buckwheat.

For anything bigger, Bhutan Post's general post office in Thimphu ships parcels worldwide at reasonable rates in two to four weeks, and the larger shops will pack and post for you. DHL has an office in Thimphu for anything valuable or urgent.

If you have one afternoon, make it the last full day in Thimphu: the Emporium to learn the prices, the craft bazaar for masks, baskets and small textiles, the farmers' market for food gifts, and the Postal Museum for stamps. A tailored gho or kira ordered on day one is ready by then. Your guide carries the bags.

Good to know

- Our tours leave the final Thimphu afternoon free on request. Say so when you book and the guide plans the route around the shops.

Frequently Asked Questions

Where are the best places to shop in Bhutan?

> Thimphu has nearly all of it within a short walk: the Authentic Bhutanese Crafts Bazaar and the National Handicrafts Emporium on Norzin Lam, the Centenary Farmers' Market, the Gagyel Lhundrup Weaving Centre and the Royal Textile Academy shop. Paro's main street has a smaller selection. For yathra wool

go to Bumthang, and for silk to Khoma in Lhuentse.

Can you bargain in Bhutan?

Lightly, and only in the craft bazaar and the markets, where a polite request usually brings 10 to 15 percent off. Boutiques, the Emporium, the weaving centres and OGOP shops are fixed price, and craftspeople selling at source set the price themselves. Hard haggling is not the custom.

How much should I budget for souvenirs in Bhutan?

Nu 5,000 to 15,000 (US$55 to 160) a person covers a week of incense, prayer flags, baskets, paper, food gifts and a scarf. A hand-woven textile adds Nu 15,000 and up, a hand-painted thangka Nu 8,000 and up, and silk kishuthara starts around Nu 50,000.

Can I take a thangka or a Buddha statue out of Bhutan?

Yes, if it is newly made. Keep the shop receipt; airport customs may ask for it on anything that looks old. Antiques over a hundred years old and religious objects of heritage value cannot be exported, and reputable shops do not sell them to visitors.

Can I pay by card or in Indian rupees in Bhutan?

Visa and Mastercard work in most Thimphu and Paro shops and hotels, sometimes with a 2 to 3 percent surcharge. The bazaar, markets and villages are cash only in ngultrum. Indian rupees are accepted at par in most shops, small notes most easily. ATMs in Thimphu, Paro and Punakha accept foreign cards.

Can tourists buy and wear a gho or kira?

Yes, and Bhutanese are pleased when visitors do, especially at a festival. A machine-woven set costs Nu 3,000 to 8,000 on Norzin Lam in Thimphu and a tailor there fits it in two to three days. Your guide or hotel will help you put it on, which takes practice the first time.

Need More Information?

Contact our Bhutan travel experts for personalized advice.

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